

Cistercian Popularity in England and Wales both Before and After 1152

The Cistercian Order of Monks was founded sometime in the early twelfth century, the founding of the Cistercian order is a controversial topic, the Cistercians developed a highly advanced propaganda machine which they used to validate the founding of the chapter houses of their order.¹ According to themselves, the Cistercians were founded by monks who were leaving the monastery of Molesme, because of the decadence, and the amount of money that the monastery had, they believed that the rule of St. Benedict should be followed in a highly specific way, a way that they claimed was much closer to the original intent, this new way of following the rule made it impossible to live and handle as much wealth as they had at Molesme. The Cistercians themselves claim that this new founding happened in 1098.² From this new foundation, the Cistercian order exploded across Europe. This more humble way of monastic living captured the imagination and fervour of the medieval population and started a spiritual revolution in Europe. Cistercian monasteries were founded all over Europe from Spain to Norway. This explosion was difficult to contain, especially because the Cistercians were supposed to be a more centralized Order, with the Abbots all assembling in Citeaux yearly. This system of centralisation was crucial for the Cistercian Order to function. With all the new foundings the Order was unable to properly cope, and so in 1154 just fifty-six years after the order was started the abbots at the General Chapter Meeting banned the founding of new monasteries. This however did not have the anticipated result, the foundings did not stop as intended. There are many factors to the popularity of the Cistercian Order, both before and after this event in the British Isles.

¹ Webster, Harriet, "The Rule of St. Benedict" (lecture, The University of Wales Trinity St. David, February 20, 2024).

² Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica . [n.d.-b]. 'Cistercian | Definition, History, & Facts', Encyclopedia Britannica <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cistercians>>

The astounding success of the Cistercian order in such a comparatively short time is perplexing, there had been other orders founded in the medieval era whose success was far less impressive. One of the main factors that helped the success of the Cistercian Order was the writing and influence of the first abbot of Clairvaux, Bernard. Bernard of Clairvaux joined the Cistercian order in 1112 after being raised by minor Burgundian nobility he had been imparted with a deep reverence for God by his mother.³ He spent his time as a novice perfecting his theology and understanding of God, and by 1115 he was one of the most exemplary monks at Cîteaux. In 1115 he and a few others were selected to go found the abbey Clairvaux, an abbey that would eventually come to eclipse the founding abbey in importance. Bernard of Clairvaux was sent to be an abbot, only 3 years after joining the Cistercian Order. Bernard of Clairvaux was absolutely crucial for the development of the Cistercian Order's early image and identity. He was a prevalent writer of letters and travelled extensively.⁴ Notably, he spent a huge portion of his life as a monk, if not the majority, travelling to meet various nobles and prominent churchmen.⁵ But it was his letters, of which there are more than three hundred that kickstarted the popularity of the order. He wrote in a highly poetic style that referenced the early church fathers and the rule of St. Benedict often. He adapted his style for the audience. Of note for the popularity of the Cistercian order in England and Wales is the letter that Bernard of Clairvaux wrote to King Henry the First. This letter was sent with the Cistercians who intended to explore the idea of settling more monasteries in England.

³ John Meyer. 2019. 'Saint Bernard of Clairvaux | Biography, Legacy, & Facts', Encyclopædia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Bernard-of-Clairvaux>

⁴ Webster, Harriet, "The Rule of St. Benedict" February 20, 2024)

⁵ Bernard, of Clairvaux, Samuel J. Eales, and Francis Aidan Gasquet. 1904. Some Letters of Saint Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, Internet Archive (London : John Hodges)
<<https://archive.org/details/SomeLettersOfSaintBernard/page/n139/mode/2up>>

There is in your land a property belonging to your Lord and mine, for which He preferred to die rather than it should be lost. This I have formed a plan for recovering and am sending a party of my brave followers to seek, recover, and hold it with strong hand, if this does not displease you. And these scouts whom you see before you I have sent beforehand on this business to investigate wisely the state of things, and bring me faithful word again. Be so kind as to assist them as messengers of your Lord, and in their persons fulfill your feudal duty to Him. I pray Him to render you, in return, happy and illustrious, to His honour, and to the salvation of your soul, to the safety and peace of your country, and to continue to you happiness and contentment to the end of your days.⁶

This rather short letter serves to illustrate how Bernard of Clairvaux would modify his language to the audience, to the notably warlike Norman King of England Henry the First he used militaristic language, and the language of feudal obligation, a theme that Henry the First would struggle with concerning his vassals, and their many rebellions.⁷ This ability of the Cistercian order through Bernard of Clairvaux to use the language that would be most effective to their readers and hearers is one of the factors that helped with their astronomic success. Bernard of Clairvaux's prominence in the order at such an early time in its development was absolutely crucial for the success of the order at a time in its development when many other orders would have struggled to grow in the early stages of Cistecian order, it was in fact so successful they had to ban the founding of new houses in 1152.

⁶ Bernard, of Clairvaux, Samuel J. Eales, and Francis Aidan Gasquet. 1904. *Some Letters of Saint Bernard*, Abbot of Clairvaux, p. 122

⁷ Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and trans., *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. VI (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), <https://www.deremilitari.org/RESOURCES/SOURCES/bremule.htm>. accessed March 19, 2024

One of the other main factors for the success of the Cistercians as an order was their attitude toward the rule of St. Benedict. The Cistercians frequently wrote about themselves and their exceptional adherence to the rule. They had frequent clashes with the Benedictines and other similar monastic orders. These clashes were in letter form rather than actual physical fights. The Cistercians believed that they were the proper and true adherents to the rule of St. Benedict. Their austere lifestyle and the lack of decoration was certainly an external indicator that they were less interested in the material world than the other monastic traditions that were prevalent in Europe at the time, such as the Benedictines, Cluniacs and others. This desire to adhere to the rule was plain most obvious in the way they dressed, their white, undyed, robes indicating their abhorrence of all things material. Whether this adherence to the rule of St. Benedict ran as deep in the Cistercian monastic tradition as they would like the general population would believe is another question.⁸ But their external appearance to the rule was a major factor in their appeal as a monastic order. As one of my peers commented in class, regarding the Benedictine Monks, that: 'Its hard to pretend to live an austere lifestyle when your roof is made of gold'⁹ This comment surely would reflect not only the attitude of many modern people but also their medieval counterparts. It is one thing to persuade oneself that the cognitive dissonance of this lifestyle, it is another to persuade other people. The Cistercian monks, at least externally, did an excellent job of living in a way that appeared to all that they were in fact adhering to the rule. This was another main draw, despite the fact that the Cistercians had troubles with futures trading. Their external adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict contributed a lot to their early foundings, and the exponential expansion they experienced which led to the 1152 ban on new houses.

⁸ Webster, Harriet, "The Rule of St. Benedict" February 20, 2024

⁹ Oliver Bartle. Personal conversation. February 26, 2024.

Before the 1152 ban on new foundings, there had been a many notable Cistercian houses founded in England, Bernard of Clairvaux was instrumental in the establishment of these monasteries his letter to Henry the First was instrumental in allowing the Cistercians to get a foothold in England. It was in 1128 when the first English Cistercian House was founded.¹⁰ and from this one house, the Cistercian order exploded across England and into Wales at breakneck speeds, this prodigious speed of expansion was a mirror of what had already happened in Europe, in fact, according to R. A. Donkin: In all there were about one hundred houses in the British Isles; seventy-five lay in Engl and Wales, and two-thirds of these were in existence by 1152, less than a quarter of a century after the first introduction [of the Cistercian Order].¹¹ the fact that there were so many houses founded so quickly is a testament to how fast the Cistercian order was able to expand. It is also interesting that despite the ban on new foundings, the Cistercian order continued to grow, this was due to several factors, not only their business savvy nature but their very public combating of the other types of monks and the centralized structure. The English houses had the help of their very own Benedict of Clairvaux style figure, his name was Aelred a monk in the Cistercian order in Britain. He was the Abbot of Rievaulx abbey and was described by Walter Daniel, as an outstanding abbot and Christian.¹² His writings were some of the most important ones to come out of Cistercian England his writings were key in Henry the Second supporting the election of Pope Alexander the Second.¹³ His influence was one of the main factors in helping the Cistercians remain relevant in England despite the many, many monasteries that were present at the time.

¹⁰ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica . [n.d.-b]. 'Cistercian

¹¹R. A. Donkin, 1963. 'The Cistercian Order in Medieval England: Some Conclusions', *Transactions and Papers (Institute of British Geographers)*: 181 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/621007>>

¹² Walter Daniel, *The Life of Ailred of Rievaulx*, edited and translated by F.M Powicke, Nelsons Medieval Classics (London, 1950).

¹³ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. [n.d.-a]. 'Saint Aelred of Rievaulx | Cistercian Monk | Britannica', *Www.britannica.com* <<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Aelred-of-Rievaulx>>

In Wales the Cistercian Order had an easier time being established, this was largely because the Cistercians were not prominently established in England yet. The Benedictines, although they were present in Wales, never enjoyed the same prominence as the Cistercians did.¹⁴ This is because the Benedictines enjoyed close ties to the English aristocracy. In this era, there was fierce warfare between the Princes of Wales, and the English Marcher lords and Kings, the Welsh princes and rulers wanted to donate to monasteries and be visibly supporters of churches and Christianity. However, they didn't want to support the Benedictines who would most likely align themselves with the English, who had been supporting them for longer, and whose family the various Benedictine abbots were. This meant there was a niche in the spiritual market, so to speak, and this niche was perfectly fit by the Cistercian monasteries. In Wales, these monasteries were the scenes of some of the most dramatic political events. Prince Llewelyn summoned many of the Welsh lords to the Strata Florida abbey, a Cistercian monastery.¹⁵ In Wales this political aspect was important, the Cistercians enjoyed a position of power and prominence in Wales that was more than they enjoyed in the rest of the British Isles, this was due to the fact that Welsh nobles would be far more willing to donate land and wealth to a Cistercian Abbey than they would be to donate land to a benedictine one. The Cistercians arrived in Wales only four years after they arrived in England, with the founding of Tintern Abbey¹⁶, this indicates that Wales was not an afterthought, or some out of the way backwater that wasn't of interest to the Cistercian Order, they went on to found 16 abbeys in Wales¹⁷ these abbeys would be large and powerful until

¹⁴ Webster, Harriet. "Strata Florida Abbey: Field Trip" (lecture, The University of Wales Trinity St. David, March 4, 2024).

¹⁵ Webster, Harriet. "Strata Florida Abbey: Field Trip" (March 4, 2024).

¹⁶ Monastic Wales. [n.d.]. 'Site Details: Tintern', www.monasticwales.org <<https://www.monasticwales.org/site/34>> [accessed 15 March 2024]

¹⁷ Monastic Wales Project. [n.d.]. 'The Monastic Orders: Cistercian', www.monasticwales.org <<https://www.monasticwales.org/order/1>> [accessed 21 March 2024]

the invasion of Edward the 1st, in 1277, Edward wanted to disrupt the legitimacy of the Welsh Princes, and one of the main steps he took was to mistreat Cistercian abbeys.¹⁸ This is a testament to how connected the Cistercians were to a native Welsh idea of Nobility and rule, this connection is part of the reasoning that the Cistercians enjoyed such prominence in Wales. Edward burned down several abbeys and used many of the others as garrison points for this occupation of Wales. In an attempt to delegitimize the Welsh rulers. Cistercianism however remained popular in Wales, as can be seen by the fact that there were still Cistercian abbeys in Wales at the dissolution of the monastery.

The Cistercian Order was one of the two most powerful and influential Order in the history of medieval Europe, they were prominent and popular throughout the 12th century Cistercianism is still practised, and the medieval monasteries remained relevant and popular after the banning of new houses being founded by the 1152 general Chapter because of a number of factors. The Cistercian reliance on the rule of St. Benedict in a visibly external manner was crucial to the public image of the monastic order. The writings of the Cistersicans were crucial in their public image. The presence of famous monastic figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Aelred of Rievaulx among others were crucial for the expansion of the Cistercian way of monasticism. The Cistercians were very prevalent in writing their own histories, which was a big factor in the maintaining of their identity as one of the most zealous religious houses in Europe. In places like Wales, political connections were also important for their longevity as an order. Overall the Cistercians were incredibly successful as a monastic order, and this was due to the many different ways they were perceived and, the ways they presented themselves.

¹⁸ Webster, Harriet. "Strata Florida Abbey: Field Trip" (March 4, 2024).

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<<https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Dissolution-of-the-Monasteries/>>

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