

Assessment 3
Section B
Fountains Abbey,
from the south west

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From Desert Myths to Sheep Tales: The Cistercians in the Middle Ages
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Standing southwest of Fountains Abbey, along the banks of the river, one is greeted with a picturesque scene that embodies the tranquility and majesty of England's countryside. As you gaze across the landscape, your eyes are drawn to the imposing silhouette of Fountains Abbey itself, a magnificent testament to medieval architecture rising proudly amidst the verdant surroundings.

Beyond the abbey, the lush greenery of the surrounding countryside unfolds in a patchwork of fields and woodlands, dotted with grazing sheep and wandering wildlife. The gentle flow of the river adds a soothing frontage to the scene, its waters glimmering under the sunlight as they meander their way through the landscape.

From this vantage point, you can appreciate the harmonious blend of man-made and natural beauty that defines the abbey's setting. The abbey's architecture, with its graceful arches and towering spires, contrasts beautifully with the rugged beauty of the Yorkshire landscape that surrounds it. It's a scene that invites contemplation and reflection, a timeless tableau that speaks to the enduring spirit of human endeavor and the enduring power of nature. As you take in the view, you can't help but feel a sense of awe at the sight before you. Whether bathed in the golden light of sunrise or the soft hues of twilight, Fountains Abbey from the southwest exudes a quiet grandeur that captures the imagination and leaves a lasting impression on all who behold it.

In theory, all Cistercian houses were supposed to look similar due to the principles of the Cistercian Order, which emphasized simplicity, austerity, and uniformity in their architecture. These principles stemmed from the Rule of St. Benedict, which guided the practices and lifestyles of Cistercian monks.[1]

Cistercians believed in leading a simple and humble life, focused on prayer, labor, and self-sufficiency. This philosophy extended to their architecture, where they favored functional structures

over ornate decoration. This meant that Cistercian houses typically featured plain, unadorned designs, with minimal decorative elements while also valuing uniformity and standardization within their order. This was partly practical, as it facilitated the replication of their monastic model across different locations. By adhering to a standardized architectural plan, the Cistercians could efficiently establish new monasteries and ensure consistency in their organization and operation.

Furthermore, the Cistercians believed in the importance of community and collective identity. By constructing their monasteries according to a standardized template, they reinforced a sense of unity and cohesion among the various houses of the order. This architectural uniformity served as a physical manifestation of their shared values and common purpose.

However, while there was a general template for Cistercian architecture, variations and adaptations did occur over time and across different regions. Local building materials, topography, and available resources often influenced the specific design and layout of individual monasteries.[2] Additionally, as architectural styles evolved and new techniques were developed, Cistercian houses sometimes incorporated elements from contemporary trends while still maintaining the overall simplicity and functionality characteristic of the order.

The decision of the Cistercian order to build their monasteries, such as Fountains Abbey, near rivers can be understood through a metaphorical comparison to the care of a baby. Just as a river provides essential nourishment and sustenance for life, so too did rivers offer practical benefits and spiritual symbolism for the monks.

To begin with, rivers served as a vital source of sustenance and livelihood for the inhabitants of monasteries. Rivers offered a consistent supply of fresh water for drinking, cooking, and sanitation, essential for sustaining the community's health and daily activities. At Fountains Abbey, the River

Skell was ingeniously channeled to serve various purposes within the monastery's infrastructure.

Specifically, it was canalized to facilitate the disposal of waste from the monastery's toilet blocks, which were strategically positioned along the river's path as it traversed from west to east through the cloister. Each latrine block had a branch of the river running through it, allowing waste to be flushed away through chutes into the flowing water below, effectively removing it from the precinct. This innovative use of the river showcased the practical ingenuity of the monks in managing their sanitation needs while maintaining cleanliness within the abbey.[3]

Moreover, beyond sanitation, water power derived from the River Skell played a crucial role in powering various industrial activities within Fountains Abbey. For instance, the river's flow was harnessed to drive the abbey's forges and mills, including the corn mill situated in the outer court. The fertile soil and access to water made riverside locations ideal for agriculture, enabling the monks to produce food to sustain themselves and support their charitable works.

Fountains Abbey's remarkable preservation amidst the dissolution upheaval of Henry VIII's reign can be understood through a multifaceted lens. Firstly, its status as one of England's wealthiest and most influential Cistercian monasteries endowed it with a certain resilience against immediate dissolution compared to lesser-known or less affluent houses. Situated in a remote expanse of Yorkshire, the abbey enjoyed a degree of isolation from the political machinations of urban centers, shielding it from early dissolution efforts. Moreover, its strategic connections to influential patrons, including the powerful Percy family, likely afforded it additional protection during the turbulent period of religious upheaval.

Beyond its historical context, the enduring allure of Fountains Abbey's architecture and landscape played a crucial role in its preservation. Even in its active years, the abbey's picturesque setting and grand ruins attracted admiration and fascination from visitors and scholars alike. This admiration

likely contributed to a certain reverence for the site, sparing it from total destruction during the dissolution. After the dissolution, the abbey's transition into a source of building materials and a romantic ruin within the landscape ensured that many of its structures endured, albeit in varying states of preservation.

Footnotes

- [1]Benedict, Saint and Timothy Fry, *RB 1980 : The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982), 54.
- [2]Historic England, “FOUNTAINS ABBEY, with ANCILLARY BUILDINGS, Lindrick with Studley Royal and Fountains - 1149811 | Historic England,” historicengland.org.uk, 1986, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1149811?section=official-list-entry>.
- [3]Janet E Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, Uk ; Rochester, Ny: Boydell Press, 2016), 70.

Bibliography

- Burton, Janet E, and Julie Kerr. *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, Uk ; Rochester, Ny: Boydell Press, 2016.
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