

Decline of the Cistercians: Unraveling Factors and Timelines

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From Desert Myths to Sheep Tales: The Cistercians in the Middle Ages
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The decline of the Cistercian Order, a significant monastic movement in medieval Europe, unfolded gradually over several centuries, beginning in the late Middle Ages and continuing into the early modern period. Founded in 1098 by Robert of Molesme and a group of monks seeking a return to the austerity and simplicity of the original Benedictine Rule, the Cistercians quickly rose to prominence, establishing monasteries across Europe and exerting considerable influence on both religious and secular matters. However, several factors contributed to their eventual decline.

Cistercians faced internal challenges that weakened their cohesion and effectiveness. Over time, as the Order grew in size and wealth, it became susceptible to corruption and internal strife. The original spirit of austerity and simplicity became compromised as some monasteries amassed wealth and privileges, leading to criticism from both within and outside the Order. This departure from their founding principles eroded the credibility and appeal of the Cistercians, contributing to their decline.

The internal challenges faced by the Cistercians played a significant role in their decline, as they grappled with issues of corruption, wealth accumulation, and internal discord. Initially founded with a commitment to austerity and simplicity, the Cistercian Order experienced remarkable growth and expansion across Europe, attracting numerous recruits and amassing considerable wealth through donations of land and resources. However, as the Order flourished, it became increasingly susceptible to the temptations of wealth and privilege.

One of the primary internal challenges confronting the Cistercians was the gradual departure from their founding principles of poverty and simplicity. As some monasteries accumulated vast wealth and possessions, they deviated from the original ethos of the Order, leading to criticism from both within and outside the Cistercian community. Critics argued that the pursuit of material wealth compromised the spiritual integrity of the monastic life and undermined the credibility of the

Cistercians as a beacon of piety and devotion.

One of the foundational principles underlying the concept of reform from the Carolingian era to the fifteenth century was the necessity to eliminate the distractions of worldly possessions to enable monks to fully focus on their spiritual development. Precise adherence to the monastic rule, the accurate execution of liturgical rituals, maintaining discipline, and ensuring uniformity of practice were central to the twelfth-century reform movement, in which the Cistercians played an integral role. Since the middle of the tenth century, reform efforts articulated their rhetoric, justifying change by framing it as the eradication of corruption and a return to an original state of perfection. While reformers naturally sought to rationalize their actions, contemporaries often viewed even minor adjustments to the evolving landscape as significant transformations.

Contrary to contemporary connotations of progress and innovation associated with the term 'reform', in the medieval context, 'reform' signified a process of reverting to an original, flawless state of affairs that either had existed previously or should have. In practice, however, at both the organizational level of the Order and within individual abbeys, the late medieval discourse on eliminating 'corruption' and returning to an original model intertwined with the introduction of novel practices. These alterations, particularly if imposed externally, frequently encountered resistance from the Cistercian monks who perceived them as introducing non-Cistercian elements into the Order.

Among these reform initiatives, some were internally motivated and implemented by Cistercian leaders, often, though not exclusively, abbots of Cîteaux. Others were intentionally localized, involving specific communities rather than the entire Order. Additionally, reforms driven by papal decrees, enforced through papal bulls, formed part of a broader reform agenda affecting numerous monastic and mendicant orders across the ecclesiastical landscape. These constant reforms led to a

lack of conformity and consistency within the group and helped with hastening their demise.[1]

The disorganization within Cistercian houses in Ireland serves as an early indicator of the challenges that would eventually contribute to the decline of the monastic order. The unique structure of the Cistercian Order, with its abbots convening annually for a general chapter to assess adherence to the Rule, provides valuable insights into the state of the Order in Ireland during this period. The records from these chapters paint a rather bleak picture, revealing significant issues plaguing the Irish Cistercians.

By the time of Stephen Lexington's visitation in 1228, it was evident that the Irish Cistercian houses were in a state of disarray. Discrimination based on nationality was rampant in some monasteries, with Irish monks barring entry to English brethren and vice versa. This division not only fractured the unity within the monastic communities but also hindered the pursuit of the Order's spiritual goals. Lexington's actions, though perhaps intended to uphold the international standards of Cîteaux, resulted in further upheaval. The resignation of the Irish abbot of Mellifont, a prestigious institution founded by the revered Malachy, and the dissolution of its filiation dealt a severe blow to the reputation and stability of the Order in Ireland.

The repercussions of Lexington's visitation were profound and long-lasting. The reorganization led to most Irish monasteries being placed under English superiors, exacerbating tensions and feelings of mistreatment among the Irish monks. This imposition of foreign leadership persisted for nearly half a century, during which the central organization of the Cistercian Order experienced a noticeable weakening. While the filiation of Mellifont was eventually reinstated in 1274, by that time, the Cistercian Order as a whole had already begun its gradual decline.

The disarray within the Irish Cistercian houses serves as a microcosm of the broader challenges

facing the Order during this period. Internal divisions, discriminatory practices, and disruptions in leadership not only undermined the unity and effectiveness of individual monastic communities but also weakened the overall cohesion and vitality of the Cistercian Order. These early problems foreshadowed the difficulties that would eventually contribute to the decline of the Order in the centuries to come.[2]

As monarchs sought to consolidate their authority and assert control over their territories, they often clashed with the Church, including monastic institutions like the Cistercians. Conflicts arose over issues of land ownership, taxation, and jurisdiction, as secular rulers sought to limit the autonomy and wealth of the Church within their domains. This increased scrutiny and regulation placed additional pressure on the Cistercian monasteries, which had previously enjoyed considerable autonomy and privileges. The sheer amount of wealth that an order supposedly founded on a vow of poverty further undermined their character.

The Cistercian Order, despite its commitment to poverty and simplicity, amassed immense wealth and influence across Europe through its highly organized network of monasteries. While the Cistercians deliberately sought out remote and wooded locations for their monastic establishments, these seemingly isolated communities were integral parts of a sophisticated organization that controlled vast swathes of land and resources. From Ireland to Norway to Poland, the Cistercians wielded considerable power and influence, not only in religious matters but also in economic and social spheres.

One of the key methods through which the Cistercians accumulated wealth was through the acquisition of large grants of territory, often encompassing thousands of acres. Upon receiving these grants, the Cistercians would establish their monasteries and initiate extensive land development projects, such as drainage initiatives, to optimize agricultural productivity. Additionally, they played

a pivotal role in urban development, planning and constructing villages with meticulous precision, including symmetrical layouts and organized agricultural fields. Many towns owe their origins to the strategic interventions of the Cistercian Order, with examples such as Heiligengrabe, Chorin, and Lehnin emerging as thriving centers of commerce and culture.[3]

The Cistercian Order's accumulation of wealth extended beyond land holdings and agricultural endeavours to encompass industrial activities, particularly in iron production. Despite their professed vows of poverty, Cistercian monasteries engaged in the extraction and processing of iron ore, often through donations of iron deposits and forges or purchases of such resources. While the primary purpose of iron production was to meet the needs of the monasteries themselves, the Cistercians soon began to exploit their surplus iron for commercial gain.

Throughout the mid-thirteenth to the seventeenth century, the Cistercians emerged as the predominant iron producers in the Champagne region of France, leveraging their resources and organizational capabilities to dominate the industry. Their involvement in iron production not only brought substantial financial returns but also contributed to the region's economic development and prosperity. However, the juxtaposition of their burgeoning wealth with their professed vow of poverty raised questions about the consistency of their religious ideals with their economic pursuits. [4]

The Cistercians' accumulation of wealth through extensive land development projects and involvement in commercial activities posed a significant challenge to their spiritual integrity, despite their outward vows of poverty. While they may have chosen remote locations for their monasteries, their economic pursuits contradicted the notion of renunciation of worldly possessions inherent in their professed ideals. As the Cistercians amassed wealth and influence through diverse economic ventures, doubts arose regarding the sincerity of

their commitment to asceticism and simplicity. The immense wealth acquired by the Cistercians not only questioned the authenticity of their vow of poverty but also elicited criticism from contemporaries who viewed their opulent lifestyles and economic endeavours as contradictory to the principles of austerity and simplicity central to the monastic life.

Moreover, the accumulation of wealth within certain Cistercian monasteries gave rise to internal strife and conflicts over resources and power. Competition for control over lucrative estates and resources often led to tensions and divisions within the Order, eroding its cohesion and effectiveness as a unified religious community. These internal disputes further undermined the credibility and appeal of the Cistercians, as the ideal of fraternal harmony and communal living gave way to rivalries and power struggles.

Another major factor was the changing socio-political landscape of Europe. As the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the power dynamics within society shifted, leading to a decline in the authority and relevance of traditional monastic orders like the Cistercians. The rise of nation-states and the centralization of power in the hands of monarchs and secular authorities meant that the Church, including its monastic institutions, faced increased scrutiny and regulation.

During the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, Europe underwent profound socio-political transformations that significantly impacted traditional institutions like the Cistercian Order. The rise of nation-states marked a shift away from the feudal system, where power was dispersed among various lords and nobles, towards centralized authority under monarchs and secular governments. This centralization of power meant that the once influential role of monastic orders in governance and administration began to diminish.

Furthermore, the spread of Protestantism during the Reformation further weakened the position of the Cistercians and other Catholic religious orders. The Protestant Reformers, critical of what they saw as corruption and excess within the Catholic Church, targeted monasticism as a symbol of religious decadence and superstition. Monasteries were dissolved, their lands confiscated, and their members dispersed or forced into secular life. While the impact of the Reformation varied across Europe, it dealt a significant blow to the Cistercian Order, particularly in Protestant territories where their monasteries were suppressed or destroyed.

One of the key justifications for the closing of monasteries put forth by Henry VIII (and echoed by other Protestant rulers) was his desire to consolidate power and assert royal supremacy over the Church in England. Dissolving the monasteries allowed Henry to seize control of their vast wealth and properties, thereby strengthening the authority of the crown and diminishing the influence of the Catholic Church. By transferring the assets of the monasteries to the crown, Henry sought to bolster his financial resources and reduce his dependence on ecclesiastical revenues, enabling him to pursue his political ambitions more independently.

Furthermore, Henry VIII sought to undermine the power and influence of the monastic orders, which he viewed as potential sources of opposition to his rule. By disbanding the monasteries and dispersing their members, Henry aimed to eliminate potential centers of resistance and dissent, consolidating his control over the religious landscape of England. The dissolution of the monasteries also served to redistribute land and wealth among the nobility and gentry who supported Henry's policies, thereby consolidating their loyalty to the crown.[5]

Henry VIII justified the dissolution of the monasteries on religious grounds, citing allegations of corruption, immorality, and laxity among the monastic communities. He portrayed the monasteries

as centers of decadence and moral depravity, citing reports of misconduct and abuses within their walls. This narrative of corruption provided Henry with a pretext for justifying the suppression of the monasteries and portraying himself as a reformer intent on purifying the Church of England. Additionally, the perception of corruption and decadence within certain Cistercian monasteries alienated potential recruits and supporters, contributing to a decline in vocations and dwindling resources. As reports of lavish living and indulgence among certain Cistercian communities spread, many individuals became disillusioned with the Order, opting instead for alternative forms of religious devotion or secular pursuits. This loss of faith and support from both within and outside the Cistercian community weakened the Order's ability to sustain itself and adapt to changing circumstances.

On top of the previously mentioned moves toward centralization and splinting of the faith the intellectual and cultural shifts of the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods also contributed to the decline of the Cistercians. The revival of classical learning and the emergence of humanism emphasized individualism, rational inquiry, and secular knowledge, challenging the authority of religious institutions and the dominance of traditional religious practices. As Europe embraced new ideas and modes of thought, the appeal and relevance of monastic life waned among the broader populace, leading to dwindling numbers of recruits and diminishing support for monastic communities.

However in some areas that remained Catholic like France the Cistercian monasteries maintained and even increased their accumulation of wealth over the centuries, largely due to France remaining Catholic and not undergoing the Protestant Reformation. Unlike Protestant regions where monasteries were dissolved and their assets redistributed, the Catholic Church in France retained its influence and power, allowing Cistercian monasteries to continue their economic activities largely uninterrupted.

With the support of the Catholic Church and the monarchy, Cistercian monasteries in France expanded their land holdings, engaged in agricultural production, and participated in various commercial ventures. They accumulated vast wealth through donations, grants of land, and privileges bestowed upon them by the crown and local nobility. This accumulation of wealth enabled the Cistercians to exert considerable economic and social influence within French society, further entrenching their position of privilege.

Despite their professed vow of poverty, the Cistercian monasteries in France became increasingly wealthy and powerful institutions, often amassing vast estates and enjoying lavish lifestyles. The original ideals of austerity and simplicity gradually gave way to opulence and luxury, as the monasteries became centers of wealth and influence. This departure from their founding principles was justified and perpetuated by the Catholic Church's support and the prevailing socio-political climate in France.

When Arthur Young, an English agriculturalist and writer, visited France in the late 18th century, he witnessed firsthand the wealth and power of the Cistercian monasteries. In his travels, Young observed the extensive land holdings and agricultural enterprises of the monasteries, as well as their opulent lifestyles and accumulation of riches. He wrote "The Benedictine abbey of Saint-Germain [...] is the richest abbey in France; the abbot has 300,000 livres a year (£13,125). I lose my patience at such revenues being thus bestowed; consistent with the spirit of the tenth century, but not with that of the eighteenth. What a noble farm would the fourth of this income establish! What turnips, what cabbages, what potatoes, what clover, what sheep, what wool! Are not these things better than a fat ecclesiastic? If an active English farmer was mounted behind this abbot, I think he would do more good to France with half the income than half the abbots of the kingdom with the whole of theirs." He criticized the Cistercians and other monastic houses for their departure from the vow of

poverty and their exploitation of their vast resources for personal gain.[6]

Young's observations highlighted the contradiction between the Cistercians' professed ideals of poverty and their reality of wealth and privilege. His writings served as a critique of the entrenched inequalities and injustices perpetuated by the Catholic Church and the monastic orders in France. Through his lens, Young portrayed the Cistercian monasteries as symbols of corruption and excess, emblematic of the broader socio-economic disparities and abuses of power in pre-revolutionary France. Perhaps it came as no surprise that when the French Revolution occurred all this wealth and land was seized by the Revolutionary Government.

Napoleon Bonaparte's reign marked a significant turning point in the history of monasticism in Europe, particularly in Catholic nations. Napoleon's policies, driven by his desire for centralization of power and secularization of society, had profound implications for religious institutions, including monasteries.

One of Napoleon's key reforms was the suppression of monastic orders and the confiscation of their properties. In 1808, he issued the Edict of March, which mandated the closure of all monasteries and convents in France and the annexation of their assets by the state. This decree was part of Napoleon's broader agenda to weaken the influence of the Catholic Church and consolidate his control over the French state.

The suppression of monasteries under Napoleon had far-reaching consequences beyond France. As Napoleon's armies swept across Europe during the Napoleonic Wars, they brought with them revolutionary ideals and administrative reforms that often targeted religious institutions. Monasteries in territories under French control faced similar fates as those in France itself, with many being closed down and their properties seized by the state.

Moreover, Napoleon's imposition of secular laws and institutions in conquered territories further marginalized religious orders, including the Cistercians. The Napoleonic Code, which codified civil law and promoted secular governance, undermined the traditional privileges and exemptions enjoyed by monastic communities, hastening their decline. The end of Napoleon's reign did not bring relief to the monastic orders. Although some monasteries were able to resume their activities after his defeat, many had been irreparably damaged or dissolved entirely. The confiscation of their properties and the disruption of their communities left a lasting impact on the landscape of European monasticism and the Cistercian order.[7]

The decline of the Cistercian Order, a significant monastic movement in medieval Europe, unfolded gradually over several centuries, beginning in the late Middle Ages and continuing into the early modern period. Founded with a commitment to austerity and simplicity, the Cistercians experienced remarkable growth and expansion across Europe, amassing considerable wealth through donations of land and resources. However, as the Order flourished, it became increasingly susceptible to the temptations of wealth and privilege, leading to internal strife and departures from its founding principles.

Internal challenges, including corruption, wealth accumulation, and internal discord, eroded the credibility and appeal of the Cistercians, contributing to their decline. Furthermore, the changing socio-political landscape of Europe, marked by the rise of nation-states and the centralization of power, increased scrutiny and regulation of traditional monastic orders like the Cistercians. The spread of Protestantism during the Reformation further weakened the position of the Cistercians in Catholic nations, while Napoleon's policies of secularization and suppression of monastic orders dealt a severe blow to religious institutions across Europe. Despite these challenges, the Cistercians endured and still exist today.

Endnotes

- [1]Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe : 1090-1500* (Routledge, 2016), 275–76.
- [2]Michael Richter, *Medieval Ireland (New Gill History of Ireland 1)* (Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 2005), 159.
- [3]Alexandra Richie, *Faust's Metropolis* (Basic Books, 1999), 92.
- [4]Thomas E Woods, *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* (Washington, DC: Regnery History. ; New York, 2012), 35.
- [5]James Clark, *The Dissolution of the Monasteries* (Yale University Press, 2021), 104–5.
- [6]Arthur Young, *Travels during the Years 1787, 1788, and 1789* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1792), 89–94.
- [7]Lewis Rayapen and Gordon Anderson, “Napoleon and the Church,” *Review* 66, no. 3 (1991): 117–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41882000>.

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- Clark, James. *The Dissolution of the Monasteries*. Yale University Press, 2021.
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