



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

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For completion by the student:		
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The Narratio de Fundatione of Fountains Abbey

1. Preface

To the reverend father and lord John, abbot of Fountains, brother Hugh, monk of Kirkstall, greetings now and for ever. It has pleased your excellency, venerable father, that I should tell in a brief account by those whose authority and in what way our mother house, that is the holy church of Fountains (over which you now, by God's will, preside) was founded, how that blessed vine of the Lord grew in a place of horror and solitary waste, and thus enlarged, extended its branches to the sea and its seeds to the furthest nations. You have advised me that for greater information I should search the memory of our aged brother Serlo for his recollections, in order that he might make certain what is in doubt, both these events at which he was present and what he heard from others of our order. I have asked the old man about these things which were in doubt. He told me, 'it is 69 years since my conversion, and I was then, as I recall 30 years old when I entered Fountains to become a member of the convent. I could not be ignorant of what had happened. I myself was present at the egression of the monks from the monastery at York; I knew those who left by face and name from my childhood; I was born in that region; I was brought up among them; I was related in the flesh to not a few of them. And although I am (as it seems to me) advanced in years, nevertheless I give thanks for my old age because my memory is still with me. Therefore I will tell you of the origin of the monastery of Fountains as you order, which I saw with my own eyes or was told of by my elders with undoubted faith.' Therefore I have written down in order what I heard from the mouth of the old man, taking care to preserve the sequence of events.

2. The foundation of Rievaulx

This chapter is translated separately

3. Concerning the monastery of York and our first fathers

There were at that time a monastery of York which is called St Mary's religious men waking in the ways of the fathers, following without quarrel the Institutes which were accepted by the majority. They lived in the ways and customs after the fathers, honestly, under a rule and an abbot, but far from the precepts of the Rule, far from the vow of their profession, from the perfection of the discipline of the Cistercians. Several of them hearing of the purity of our order were led by a pious instinct to emulate it (their consciences accused them greatly, saying that they were fulfilling their professions less than they should; they saw their own imperfections from the perfection of others). They began to be ashamed of their torpor, to blush and to damn their imperfection and to scorn their free and easy ways.

It embarrassed them that they lived this side of perfection, to have dwelt so long in the land of Moab and to have accepted a heritage beyond the river Jordan. The tumult of the world and the clamour of the city shamed them. They longed with great longing for the desert, for the labour of their own hands, for the ways of the prophets.

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The structure of the document is formulaic, using direct speech to document the truth and has biblical references to establish the credibility and right of the community to live out their call as a member of the Cistercian Order. It draws on the *Exordium Parvum* the history of the Cîteaux, the first community as its model for its history detailing the struggles and hardships overcome by the grace and will of God. Purported to be written to preserve the truth of the calling as seen by those that were there at the beginning. Following the example of the founding community with supporting evidence of letters of pleading on their behalf and permissions.

The extract above is the opening statement to document the history, authenticity and the legality of the foundation of Fountains Abbey as a community in the Cistercian Order. The document forms one part of a chartulary which includes letters and charters in support of the status of the abbey.¹

The abbot referred to, John of York was the eighth abbot between 1203-1211 entered Fountains as a novice, was made abbot at Louth Park a daughter house, before returning as abbot after the death of Ralph Haget. Brother Hugh (c1165-1227), monk of Kirkstall and known to be a chronicler was at Fountains from c1184 under abbot Ralph.² He goes on to the community at Kirkstall, a daughter house which was founded in 1152. Serlo is an ageing brother whose education was at St Mary's York from where the monks of Fountains originated, he is identified as an eyewitness to the events concerning the foundation of the abbey.

Hugh is commissioned by Abbot John to write the *Narratio de Fundatione* possibly around 1205-6, doing the bidding of the abbot implying that he has no agenda in carrying out the work of recording the history. He is experienced in history writing and historians have connected him to the compiling of the foundation of his own community at Kirkstall.³ Hugh had historical knowledge, understanding of and access to documents and is literate. He had his own experiences to tell as well as recording the words of Serlo who at the time of the request was now at Kirkstall, and was possibly in his late nineties. It is not made clear when Serlo gave this account to Hugh. Uncertain times could also have prompted the need for the history to be written. At the beginning of the thirteenth century the relationship between King John and the church was challenging, he was imposing

¹ Trinity Cam., Gale MS O.179

² <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15678> [accessed 27 Nov 2020]

³ Kirkstall Abbey, West Yorkshire. Was founded c.1152 by Henry de Lacy (c.1152 -1311), dedicated to the Virgin Mary after he had survived from a serious illness.

intolerable taxes and spreading discontent within the church.⁴ Compiling the document at this time would be a way of securing the future of the abbey and its land against any challenges.

The first section lays out the credibility of the document using eyewitness accounts to the events to provide proof beyond doubt of the truth and the efficacy of the statement. Serlo's direct speech is used to this purpose, which almost bears an oath to the truth, '... my memory is still with me.', to give authentication. The purpose of the document was also to align the events with that of the first Cistercian order but the difficulties with the Fountains history is that its beginnings did not conform exactly to that of the original birth of the order at Cîteaux, the first Cistercian community, which was seen as fundamental to its legitimacy.

The original reason for leaving St Mary's was fundamental to the founding of Fountains and to gain credibility as a member of the Cistercian order it was necessary to align the foundation of the abbey as far as possible with that of the original history of Cîteaux in the *Exordium Parvum*. The opening statement of which is 'We Cistercians, the first founders of this church, by the present document ...with what great authority and by whom ...took their beginning.' The document possibly written sixty to seventy years after its foundation, describes the struggles and emphasises the desires of the original group at a time when founder members were still alive. Fountains needed to document their history in the same manner aligning it with the founding fathers. Mirroring the *Exordium Parvum*, Hugh using the words of Serlo who some sixty nine years earlier was an eyewitness, he draws on the scriptures stating the desire to return to the Rule of Saint Benedict. To find a place 'of horror and solitude', a search for a desert place, to be a vine in that place and to 'extend

⁴ King John 1166-1216, needed to raise taxes to fund the wars in France and the crusades

and enlarge its branches' and in particular for those unsettled at St Mary's to return to '... the perfection' offered by '...the disciplines of the Cistercians', to the Rule. Although the monastery in York was Benedictine and followed the ways of the fathers it was far from the ways of St Benedict, a repeat of the history of the founding of Cîteaux. The life had become too easy and that brought shame and imperfection to the enlightened group of what became thirteen in number who wished to reform their ways. Thirteen being the original who founded Cîteaux and a biblical number.⁵

It is of no coincidence that the foundation of Rievaulx is also described as part of the foundation documents. In 1132 at the same time as the monks at Fountains were going through the 'egression' Bernard of Clairvaux, from a daughter house of Cîteaux, had been given permission and the blessing of King Henry to found the monastery at Rievaulx in the province of York. These at St Mary's sort permission to leave but unlike those at Cîteaux it was not granted. Not wanting to break their vow of submission sought permission and help from Thurstan the archbishop of York. He tried to settle the affair but ultimately was unable to bring reform and the group were not allowed to return. Thurstan was then instrumental in finding a location for the monks to form their community. Letters were exchanged with St Bernard and visits made and Fountains were accepted into the Cistercian order with Bernard as the father of the community and Clairvaux as the mother house. Geoffrey of Amayo was sent from Clairvaux to give instruction to the monks documented in the *Exordium Cistercii*.⁶ Now Fountains could be a branch rooted in 'the vine' and a mother house that could 'extend its branches to the sea and its seeds to the furthestest nations'. Fountains had supervisory links to Lisa a monastery in Norway and other daughter houses were established.

⁵ To establish a new monastery it was the custom to send thirteen monks plus an abbot mirroring the twelve disciples going with Jesus.

⁶ *Exordium Cistercii*, a summary of the the *Exordium Parvum* and includes the Charter of Charity a book of rules set out by 3rd abbot of Cîteaux, Stephen Harding to give unity to Cistercian order.