

Strata Florida

The definition of Catholic religious orders seems straightforward: they are communities committed to religious life who take solemn vows. However, when looking between the Cistercians and Benedictines during the Middle Ages, it is clear that they distinguished themselves in far more specific ways. A major point of difference is the Cistercian system of organization; rather than many houses in the orbit of a central abbey, a top-down model was developed where each daughter-house was under the direct supervision of its mother-house. This simultaneously allowed for a greater deal of autonomy and a closer level of oversight, contributing to the rapid success of the order.¹ The Cistercians defined themselves by a desire to escape worldly structures – where the Benedictines were supported by rents, tithes, endowments, and services to the laity, the early Cistercians rejected these revenues and sought out unsettled land on the frontiers of Europe.²

It may have been this principle that, in 1164, led a colony of Cistercians from Whitland Abbey to travel more than 50 miles to found a monastery at Strata Florida (*Ystrad Fflur*), 'the Vale of Flowers', by the banks of the River Teifi. Lying on the western edge of the Cambrian Mountains, 40 miles upriver of the Norman stronghold at Cardigan, and seven miles from the nearest market at Tregaron, Strata Florida satisfied the Cistercian need for pristine agricultural land free from secular distractions. It was the gift of the Cambro-Norman lord, Robert fitz Stephen, who was constable of Cardigan. To landlords such as Robert, the Cistercians 'were eminently suitable as organizers of large tracts of land of uncertain loyalty.'³ Robert's role as founder of the original

¹ C. H. Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn. (London and New York: Longman, 1984), p. 187.

² R. W. Southern, *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 253–255.

³ *ibid*, p. 261.

site has been somewhat written out of the abbey's history; Strata Florida came to be associated with The Lord Rhys, who captured Cardigan Castle in 1166 during a successful campaign to drive Norman influence from Ceredigion.⁴

Rhys assumed patronage of the abbey, and it became closely tied to the princes of Deheubarth; 11 members of Rhys' dynasty were buried there including his brother, son, and daughter-in-law. The Cistercian house presumably offered Rhys the same advantages it had offered Robert, however under Rhys' patronage, Strata Florida became a symbol of Welsh identity, earning it the present-day moniker of 'the Westminster Abbey of Wales.'⁵ Work on a new church began in 1184, and Rhys' descendants granted the abbey granges in the surrounding lands as well as in Carmarthen and Powys.⁶ These pastures – mainly used for sheep-rearing – generated a great deal of wealth, as noted by Gerald of Wales who stayed at the abbey in 1188 while travelling with Archbishop Baldwin:

Another fine river which rises in the Plinlimmon is the Teifi. This flows down from the upper part of Cantref Mawr and Cardiganshire, not far from the pasturelands of the rich monastery of Strata Florida.⁷

The Cistercian principle of colonizing wild frontiers in order to avoid secular entanglements had in fact involved them deeply with local politics, and their rejection of traditional revenues (and frivolous expenditure) had, by the end of the 12th century, made them rich. 'These

⁴ Huw Pryce, *Rhys ap Gruffudd (1131/2–1197), prince of Deheubarth*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. (Oxford University Press, 23 September 2004), <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-23464>> [accessed 7 November 2024].

⁵ World Monuments Fund, *Strate Florida* (April 2023), <<https://www.wmf.org/project/strata-florida>> [accessed 7 November 2024].

⁶ Castle Wales, Cadw, *Strata Florida Abbey* (2009), <<https://www.castlewales.com/strata.html>> [accessed 7 November 2024].

⁷ Gerald of Wales, *Gerald of Wales: A Journey through Wales and a Description of Wales*, trans. by Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1978, re-issued 2004) p. 175.

puritans of the monastic life incurred the penalty of puritanism; they became rich because they renounced the glory of riches, and powerful because they invested wisely.⁸

In addition to royal patronage and economic success, Strata Florida became a symbol of revitalised Welsh culture and a centre of scholarship. Annals were kept from the late 12th century onward, and it is likely that the original Latin manuscript of the Chronicle of Princes (*Brut y Tywysogion*) was compiled at Strata Florida.⁹ During this period, a preoccupation with Wales emerged among English and French writers, in particular the miracles said to have taken place there.¹⁰ In *Exordium magnum cisterciense*, Conrad of Eberbach refers to 'a certain servant of God who lived in a house of the Cistercian Order in Britain called Strata Florida.'¹¹ This young monk received a vision of an angel in the choir who plucked a glowing coal from its censer and threw it into the monk's mouth as he was breathing in. Thereafter, the monk was gifted with the ability to see the demons that would continually invade the monastery in order to distract the brothers from their duties.

In 1238, the prince of Gwynedd, Llywelyn ap Iowerth, summoned a meeting of the princes of Wales to swear fealty to his son, Dafydd. With its relatively central location and historic links to Welsh kingship, Strata Florida was the obvious place to hold such a meeting. This cultural significance also made Strata Florida a target, and the abbey suffered damage from Edward I of England's forces in 1276 and again in 1282, for which Edward awarded the abbey £78

⁸ Southern, *Western Society and the Church*, p. 260.

⁹ Huw Pryce, 'Curating the Past in a Conquered Land, 1282–1540', *Writing Welsh History: From the Early Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: online edn. Oxford Academic, 21 April 2022), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198746034.003.0005>> [accessed 8 November 2024].

¹⁰ Huw Pryce, 'Saints, Kings, and Princes: Welsh Pasts in an Age of Conquest, c.1070–1282', *Writing Welsh History: From the Early Middle Ages to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: online edn. Oxford Academic, 21 April 2022), <<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198746034.003.0004>> [accessed 8 November 2024].

¹¹ Konrad, trans. by Paul Savage, and Benedicta Ward, *The Great Beginning of Citeaux: A Narrative of the Beginning of the Cistercian Order*, ed. by E. Rozanne Elder, (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2012) p. 460.

compensation, however it was burned down by royalists 10 years later (which Edward claimed no responsibility for).

Strata Florida's fortunes declined under English rule, and little is known of the state of the abbey during the 14th century. Its era of prosperity was long over by 1401, when Henry VI occupied the monastery with his forces during the Glyndŵr uprising. The monks were displaced, and the monastery came under attack by Owain's forces in addition to being stripped by the English. Henry's soldiers were billeted at the abbey until the rebellion failed in 1415. It seems that the monks were eventually allowed to return, however by 1445 the abbey was in a state of desolation. The community persisted in some form, as its income was assessed in *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (c. 1535) at £118 7s 3d, making it eligible for suppression on 21 February 1539.¹² John Leland visited the abbey around this time, and he noted in *Itineraries* that the refectory and infirmary were already in ruins.¹³

The abbey was largely forgotten until Stephen W. Williams, an engineer and architect, developed an interest in the site and began excavations in 1848, uncovering most of what can be seen today. Williams' work reignited interest in Strata Florida and helped to restore its provenance as an important part of British history.

¹²Monastic Wales, *Strata Florida (Abbey)* (no date given), <<https://www.monasticwales.org/browsedb.php?func=showsite&siteID=32>> [accessed 7 November 2024].

¹³ Stephen W. Williams, *The Cistercian Abbey of Strata Florida: Its History, and an Account of the Recent Excavations Made on Its Site* (London: Whiting & Company, 1889, digitized by Harvard University 7 September 2005) <https://books.google.com/books?id=7nWvWHJyLewC&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false> [accessed 8 November 2024].

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