

Throughout the 11th to the 16th century the Cistercians had been created and risen to become very prominent figures throughout the Catholic church and although they were meant to remain out of the secular world they had played a big part in the economy of the time. Although they played this massive role in establishing Catholicism and wool exportation in Europe, they still had their struggles throughout their time as a monastic order. They had rose to a very well regarded and popular standard which, after facing many problems, had eventually caused a massive decline of the order.

The Cistercians were founded in 1098 by Saint Robert of Molesme who had different ideas of how a monastery should be run compared to those at Molesme. He went off and founded Cîteaux, which was the first Cistercian abbey in France. The entire goal of Cîteaux was to “adhere...more strictly and more perfectly to the Rule of blessed Benedict,”¹ since he believed the monks of Molesme had begun to slack off and were not performing the duties as monks properly. Though he was eventually sent back to be the abbot of Molesme, Alberic had taken his place as the second abbot of Cîteaux and after that came Saint Stephen Harding. Stephen Had taken great care into making Cîteaux an even stricter abbey.

Even though Cîteaux was meant to counteract Molesme’s and the Benedictines methods, Stephen still thought that there were some problems surrounding the Rule. He had noticed the abundance of material goods that were present in the abbey and had decided to “keep no crosses of gold or silver but only painted wooden ones,”² so that there would be no distractions from praising the lord. This strictness allowed the monks to begin attempting to resist their temptations and find out that “what they deared impossible in the observance of the Rule was, indeed, possible,” allowing them to fight back their fears and resistance. Others who witnessed this began wanting to experience it for themselves and Cîteaux became more popular.

Although the Cistercians had started out as a new, stricter order, they had their share of monks who did not follow the Rule how they should have. In one instance, a monk by the name of Robert who was given as a child oblate to the Clunys, he eventually joined the Cistercians when he became old enough but “he must have found the life too austere,”³ and had left it. Bernard had been furious, calling Robert a “foolish boy,”⁴ since he had broken his vows and left the order. Another example had been the monastery of York. Many monks were unsatisfied with the way that the monastery was performing, claiming that they had the same customs of the Cistercians but lived “far from the precepts of the Rule, far from the vow of their profession, from the perfection of the discipline of the Cistercians,”⁵ which was everything the Cistercians were against. Even when something had been designed to be a perfect example, there is no stopping cracks from forming in strict regimes.

The Cistercians had been exempt from paying taxes “on the grounds of austere poverty and alienation from all business ties,”⁶ so that they could continue being separated from society and do not have to worry about going into debt. They were very serious about their exemptions and came into trouble when the King John needed a change. King John, being in debt and having his territory invaded by France, had went to York and “Demanded

¹ *Exordium parvum*, trans. J. Burton, p.1.

² *ibid.*, p.8.

³ Bernard of Clairvaux, ‘The Letter of St. Bernard to his Nephew Robert’, in *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and trans. M. Chibnall, (Oxford, 1973), p. 53.

⁴ Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Letter of St. Bernard to His Nephew Robert*, p. 54.

⁵ Hugh of Kirkstall, *The Narratio de Fundatione of Fountains Abbey*, trans. J. Burton, p. 76.

⁶ Sister James Eugene Madden, CSJ, ‘Business Monks, Banker Monks, Bankrupt Monks: The English Cistercians in the Thirteenth Century’, in *The Catholic Historical Review*, (Brentwood: 1963), p. 341.

money from certain abbots of the Cistercian order... and also from the rest,"⁷ which was very unusual for a King to demand and was rejected on the basis of having to discuss with the other abbots of the order which was met with the King ordering his sheriffs to do them harm. This was not taken lightly by the King who went and complained "loudly to the overseas abbots about the response of the abbots in England,"⁸ after the archbishop denounced him from the church for his cruel treatment of the monks.. Though this caused some turbulence for the Cistercians, the King had shown the monks mercy and the problem was resolved.

There were many abbots who were very bad at handling the finances of the monasteries they ran. This had become an issue during the late 12th century and they had to make a rule in 1182 stating that "it is known that through excess debt not only danger but also ruin threatens many of our monasteries,"⁹ continuing on stating that monasteries should not buy lands or build new buildings. The need to have to put this rule into place shows that debt had become an issue in the order and it continued on with three more rules being put into place, all adding onto this rule and becoming more strict with the monks. Then in 1191, the frustration had built up enough for the rule stating "in order to temper cupidity in our order and the reputation for always acquiring things - by which we ought to be repelled,"¹⁰ showing that certain abbots could not resist the need to spend more money to acquire unnecessary things for the monastery.

Their issues with finances were not helped by the greed some abbots had shown after purchasing and being donated more land than necessary for their monasteries. The land was used for producing wool and food production and since they had become big factors in economic areas, many had wanted to gain more land in order to gain more money. One monastery which had been granted a lot of land was Rievaulx, which had for example been given one carucate of land by Walter Engelram, the whole of Hoveton by Ralph Beler, and the meadow of Waterholm by Odo 'de Nes',¹¹ just to name a few. Their reputation had begun to fade and they had begun to be criticism for their since they had "such a reserve of wealth accruing from their wealth that they could enter the ark in the same spirit of security as Noah who had nothing left outside to look to,"¹² even though they were meant to remain in poverty and not concern themselves with secular notions. This would remain a constant hypocrisy and criticism for the Cistercians since they had the funds to afford much more than was the Rule had said they should have.

The Cistercians were well known for their exportation of wool since they were able to raise so many sheep. This was a big reason why they came to make so much money and since they did not get taxed for this exportation they were able to make a lot of profit. They had done such a good job of marketing their wool that it was "regarded as a superior product,"¹³ and the Cistercians were able to keep raising the price. This had caused a lot of people who wanted to buy their wool which meant that the monks eventually started to take orders over one year in advance since "they were in a position to make long-term contracts,"¹⁴ and knew they were able to produce quality wool for a long time. Though at the

⁷ *The Chronicom Anglicanum of Coggeshall Abbey, Essex*, trans. H. Webster, p. 1.

⁸ *The Chronicom Anglicanum of Coggeshall Abbey, Essex*, p. 2.

⁹ *Some Ruling of the General Chapter on Economic Matters*, trans. J. Burton, p.105.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.105.

¹¹ *Benefactions to the Cistercian Abbey of Riveaulx*, (1189), p. 73.

¹² Walter Map, *De Nugis Curialium-Courtier's Trifles*, ed. and tr. M. R. James, rev. C. N. L. Brooke and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1982), p. 87.

¹³ Coggeshall Museum, *Wool in Coggeshall*, <https://coggeshallmuseum.org/wool/> [Accessed 9 October 2025].

time it appeared to be a smart financial decision, there were factors that caused a lot of issues for the Cistercians. The minute they were not about to produce what they had promised, their reputation had been altered and people began to be very angry at the Cistercians. They would also run into debt because of this which had been a problem for the Cistercians for many years.

One big factor that caused issues with the Cistercian's wool was diseases that affected the amount of sheep. One disease that caused a major halt in wool production was scab, which killed a lot of sheep from all over but "seems to have been particularly devastating on large sheep farms in the north, with some flocks being nearly or entirely wiped out,"¹⁴ which had very negative impacts on those that were affected more since they had orders promised to buyers and no sheep to shear. Another huge factor in the mortality rates of sheep was the Black Death or Plague. This had affected the people as much as it had affected the sheep and played a part in killing most of the livestock, causing a huge lack of resources for the Cistercians.

The Black Death was a devastation that killed 75% of Europe's population throughout the 14th century and which caused a massive loss for the Cistercians. It was a disease that was transferred to a person by a flea that had bitten an infected rat. The mortality rate varied anywhere from 50-100% and came with many side effects that could create lasting effects even after surviving. The abbey of Rievaulx had been "the most prominent of the Northern English homes,"¹⁵ throughout the Middle Ages until the Plague hit the monastery and by the Fourteenth century there were only fourteen monks, three lay-brothers, and an abbot. This was a common occurrence that happened to multiple monasteries and made it difficult for them to raise their numbers. Since it occurred throughout all of Europe, the amount of people still financially supporting the Cistercians had also dwindled and since there were so few people left the amount of people wanting to join the order had begun to dwindle.

During the late 14th and early 15th century England and France had been supporting two rival popes, which caused some problems between the monks of both countries concerning their leader. This meant that the Cistercian monks located in Britain were "forbidden, by their pope, Urban VI, to acknowledge or obey the abbot of Citeaux,"¹⁶ which caused problems since Citeaux was the mother house of the Cistercians and greatly divided the Cistercians. Along with this the Cistercians of Britain were "prohibited from attending the General Chapter in France,"¹⁷ which meant they did not have direct communication and were at odds. Though in 1409 both England and France had decided that they would follow pope Alexander V which had united them again once more, there is still concern with how the Cistercians were becoming involved with secular issues. Although they were meant to remain out of political affairs or anything pertaining to society, they had ended up having to deal with many things outside of the monastery.

Throughout the reign of King Henry VII, he had come to the decision to divorce his first wife Catherine of Aragon. The Pope had refused to grant his wish, which caused King

¹⁴ R. A. Donkin, 'Cistercian Sheep, Farming and Wool-Sales in the Thirteenth Century', *Agricultural History Review*, (1960), p.2.

¹⁵ P. Slavin, 'Mites and merchants: the crisis of English wool and textile trade revisited, c. 1275–1330', *Economic History Review*, (2020), p. 891.

¹⁶ The Cistercians in Yorkshire Project, *Rievaulx Abbey: Introduction*, <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/rievaulx/history/> [Accessed 9 October 2025].

¹⁷ The Cistercians in Yorkshire Project, *Cistercians in a Changing World*, <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/cistercians-in-a-changing-world/> [Accessed 10 October 2025].

¹⁸ The Cistercians in Yorkshire Project, *Cistercians in a Changing World*.

Henry to create the Church of England and declare himself to be the Supreme Head of the Church. Since the Monasteries of the time were very wealthy and successful, while Henry was not, he enacted the Act of Suppression in 1536 and continued on until 1540 to dissolve all the monasteries of England and receive their money. When the Act of Suppression of 1536 began, it only started out with the smaller more minor monasteries. It was those who made less than £200 with all their money, land, and building taken from them. Three years later, in 1539, was when King Henry went after the larger monasteries and religious houses. They were being confiscated by the King's orders and sold to rich families and by 1540 they were being "dismantled by a rate of fifty a month,"¹⁹ meaning that there was barely any time for the monks to be able to prepare for it.

Many monks refused to follow this order which in turn caused them to be "executed and their monasteries destroyed,"²⁰ meaning that no monks was free to keep their vows or continue their duties as monks. Although there was a rebellion that occurred in Northern England in 1536. An army of over 30, 000 had marched into York to demand the reopening of the monasteries.²¹ This march would be known as the Pilgrimage of Grace. They were told by the king that they would be promised a pardon but they had been tricked and orders went out to arrest and execute the rebels, of which they had killed roughly 200. This essentially ended the economic reign of the Cistercians in England and "led to permanent changes in the kingdom's religion, politics, society, and economy,"²² and ended the reign of the Cistercians in England.

The dissolution of the monastic order ended the careers of many monks, nuns, and lay-brothers, causing them to have to find a different path in life. There were some of those who "welcomed the dissolution of their monasteries and release from their vows,"²³ many of whom had join the Evangelical movement not wanting to leave the church. Although for many others the transition was not an easy one and had uprooted their entire lives. This had caused so much distress that there are reports of monks dying days after the dissolution, including one William Weston, Prior of the Knight Hospitaller in London, who had died of grief.²⁴ Since the order had been their entire source of belief and where they had spent their whole lives, this was a very hard thing to endure and many people were not able to face life outside of the monasteries.

Having risen from nothing into a very popular order had made the Cistercians stand out from other monastic orders, since they had become very distinct compared to others. They had played key parts in the economy and monastic order, but through the diseases and turbulences they were not able to raise their numbers back to what they were in their prime. Their texts and monasteries have helped researchers and historians understand the ways that the Cistercians had lived and the ways in which they had become so prominent.

¹⁹ B. Johnson, *Dissolution of the Monasteries*, <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Dissolution-of-the-Monasteries/> [Accessed 10 October 2025]

²⁰ B. Johnson, *Dissolution of the Monasteries*.

²¹ B. Johnson, *Dissolution of the Monasteries*.

²² M. Carter, *What Became of the monks and Nuns at the Dissolution*, <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/histories/dissolution/> [Accessed 10 October 2025].

²³ M. Carter, *What Became of the monks and Nuns at the Dissolution*.

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