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THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF THE CISTERCIANS IN NORTHERN ENGLAND, c. 1300–1540

by

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BREPOLS

CONCLUSION

Historians and art historians have, for the most part, judged the Cistercians in the late Middle Ages through the prism of a perceived twelfth-century golden age. In contrast, this book has sought to provide a more balanced and empathetic interpretation of the buildings and possessions of the late medieval Cistercians.

There were five aims: (i) to show that study of late medieval Cistercian art and architecture is rewarding and profitable; (ii) to ask whether art and architecture could provide any insights into the Order's vitality in the late medieval period; (iii) to determine the religious identity asserted in the art and architecture of the Cistercians; (iv) to make a contribution to debates among historians about the condition of monasticism in the late Middle Ages and the causes of the English Reformation; (v) to inspire research focusing on the art and architecture of the Cistercians elsewhere in the British Isles and Europe. The extent to which these aims have been met will be examined in turn.

1. Is Cistercian Art and Architecture in the Late Middle Ages a Viable and Rewarding Area of Scholarship?

This study has shown that a wide range of extant material, and also documentary and antiquarian evidence is available for the study of the art and architecture of Cistercian monks and nuns in the late Middle Ages. Although much of this evidence was already known to scholars, for the most part, it had never been the subject of detailed analysis. The sumptuously illuminated breviary of Abbot Huby, his magnificent tower at Fountain, the mourning vestment of Abbot Thornton of Jervaulx, the striking monument of Abbot Chamber at Holm Cultram, and the early sixteenth-century screens at Swine Priory were among the artefacts to have received their first systematic analysis in the research that contributed to this book. Much previously unknown material —

including three copies of a printed missal from the same edition — has also been uncovered.

The reinterpretation of some well-known artefacts also shows that the study of late Cistercian art is rewarding. For instance, since the turn of twentieth century an abbatial monument in the choir at Fountains has been widely accepted as that of Abbot Swinton, the indent of a mitre elevated above the head interpreted as evidence of his resignation. However, it has been possible to show that the mitre was in fact elevated to show a doctoral cap, and that the monument in all probability commemorates the scholarly Abbot Greenwell, a Doctor of Divinity, whose acquisition of the *pontificalia* and good services as a patron earned him burial in such a prestigious location. Clearly, therefore, evidence is available for the study of the Order's art and architecture in the late Middle Ages and its exploration can afford new insights into the buildings and possessions of the Cistercians and the nature of Cistercian monasticism in the two or so centuries before the Suppression.

2. *Does the Study of Art and Architecture Tell Us Anything about the Vitality of Cistercian Monasticism in the Late Middle Ages?*

The Order's art and architecture during this period has often been interpreted as evidence of its decline, spiritual malaise, and deviation from its early ideals and austerity. However, there was a constant process of development, adaptation, and change taking place in Cistercian monasteries. The world of the late medieval patrons discussed in this study was radically different from that of the twelfth century, and it is important to emphasize that the Order's legislation on matters artistic (which was not, in any case, as prescriptive or monolithic as previously thought by scholars) had ceased to apply by the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Cistercian patrons used heraldry to advertise their patronage. But there was much more to their patronage than a fondness of luxury objects and self-aggrandizement. Patronage was an abbatial duty, a rite of passage and the contributions of individual abbots were enshrined in the institutional memories of their houses. Above all patronage was an act of piety. Abbot Huby was deeply conscious of his Cistercian identity and was an energetic reformer, motives for his extensive patronage. The Cistercians also considered their investment in art and architecture as a path to salvation. This is made explicit in the biblical text, 'Iustorum autem animae in manu dī sunt' (The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God), embroidered on the mourning vestment of Abbot Thornton.

The Cistercians also continued to benefit from external patronage, though it must be acknowledged that this was on a modest scale, and that the most important contributions from this class of patron were largely historic, their grants of estates in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries providing the income which funded the activity of late Cistercian patrons. The antiquarian 'heraldic ornament in the Furness cartulary shows that the Cistercians remained conscious of their early benefactors. Nevertheless, family traditions of patronage were maintained at Jervaulx, Newminster, Rievaulx, and many of the nunneries. This can be interpreted as evidence of confidence in the health of Cistercian monasticism and the efficacy of the prayers of intercession offered by the monks and nuns.

3. *Does Art and Architecture Provide Insights into the Religious Identity of the Cistercians?*

Even though the Order's restrictive legislation on art and architecture had long ceased to apply, it is arguable that the Cistercians remained aware of their older traditions. The use of architectural ornament shows restraint, as can be seen when the towers at Fountains and Kirkstall are compared with the contemporary tower at the Augustinian priory of Bolton. The inscriptions with texts from the liturgy on Abbot Huby's tower were appropriate to its liturgical function and significance. There is clear evidence that the Order's long tradition of Christ-centric piety found material expression in the late Middle Ages, be it the miraculous image of Christ Crucified at Meaux, the inscriptions expressing devotion to the Holy Name at Fountains, or shields emblazoned with the Wounds of Christ at Hampole. The location of the images of saints on Huby's tower display a relationship with the ranking of feasts in the Order's liturgical calendar and there is abundant evidence that the Cistercians remained deeply devoted to the Virgin and her image. Enduring veneration of twelfth-century saintly abbots found expression in art and architecture and the Order also appropriated the cults of Anglo-Saxon monastic saints.

However, by the late Middle Ages, Christ-centric piety and intense devotion to the Virgin were so mainstream that it is impossible to find anything that was truly distinctive in their manifestation at the abbey's and nunneries discussed here. Moreover, for the most part there was nothing unusual about the identity or iconography of the saints represented by images at Cistercian monasteries. Nor was there anything distinctive about the liturgical, para-liturgical, and devotional use of images by the Order. Viewing an image of St Christopher was

believed to provide a protection against an unshriven death or tiredness, and this explains why his image was located close to the night stairs at Rievaulx, and in all probability several other northern abbeyes, his image being readily visible to the monks as they entered the church to sing the night office. St Michael's image had its usual association with high places and external benefactors at several monasteries and nunneries requested burial before images of Our Lady of Pity. The Cistercians were very much part of the religious mainstream of late medieval England. Even if this was a mainstream they had helped shape, their religious art and architecture had little that expressed an explicitly Cistercian identity.

Nor can any claims about distinctiveness be made about funeral monuments in Cistercian abbeyes and nunneries. The full range of commemorative options available in late medieval England would have been encountered in a Cistercian context. However, the monuments of abbots and monks were arguably somewhat more restrained than those of their Benedictine and Augustinian contemporaries. It is notable that the lavishly sculpted tomb chest of Abbot Chamber, which was most likely located in his chantry chapel, has no surviving Cistercian parallel in the British Isles. External benefactors were rewarded with burial within monastic churches, with the most important securing interment within the choir and presbytery. The base of the ruined chantry chapel at Roche Abbey, and the magnificent alabaster tombs in the Hilton chantry at Swine Priory, can leave little doubt that the monuments of the laity had a significant impact on the planning and appearance of the churches of Cistercian abbeyes and nunneries. The bequests accompanying requests for burial also materially enriched the monasteries, especially the nunneries.

4. *What Does the Study of Cistercian Art and Architecture Reveal about the Suppression?*

Cistercian abbeyes and nunneries remained well integrated into the religious and social fabric of the late medieval north. There is no evidence that the Cistercians and their patrons had any inkling of the cataclysmic events that extinguished Cistercian monasticism in northern England. A screen from Jervaulx Abbey is carved with the initials of Abbot Adam Sedbar and the date 1536, just one year before the house was brutally dissolved for its participation in the Pilgrimage of Grace. The accounts of Whalley Abbey record the purchase of building materials until the very end. Just two days before its Suppression, Kirkstall Abbey benefited from a bequest and the community's prayers of intercession were sought.

There is overwhelming evidence that Cistercian monks and nuns remained dedicated to their Order and retained traditional religious beliefs until the Suppression and beyond. They salvaged books, vestments, and liturgical plate from their monasteries. Personal profit was far from being their only motive. In the case of Byland and Kirkstall, substantial portions of the monastic libraries were kept safe by former monks, the will of John Heptonstall, a member of the community at Kirkstall, making clear his desire that the books he had salvaged should be restored to the monastery should it 'go up again', and during the reign of Mary former monks of Roche and Rufford apparently hoped for the restoration of their houses and assumed their monastic titles.

Vestments from Whalley and Jervaulx, together with many other monastic possessions, were saved because they passed into the hands of local gentry. Their motives included affection for the monasteries, conservative religious beliefs, and sheer opportunism. Regardless of the precise reasons, the writing of this book would have been so much harder had it not been for their actions. Scholars owe a debt of gratitude to all those who have acted as custodians of the art and architecture of the Cistercians over the past five hundred years.

5. *Avenues for Further Research*

This book was based on evidence from thirty or so northern monasteries, a third of the total number of houses of Cistercian monks and nuns in medieval England and Wales. Indeed, comparative evidence from Cistercian monasteries beyond the geographical parameters of this study was frequently called upon, showing that developments in the art and architecture of the Order in northern England, a heartland of the Cistercians, had clear parallels elsewhere in the British Isles, indeed Europe.

However, the late medieval evidence from southern England and elsewhere is clearly worthy of study in its own right. It would be rewarding to explore how the social, political, and devotional conditions prevalent in other regions impacted on the art and architecture of the Cistercians. The patronage of Abbot Chard at Forde and Abbot King at Thame was referred to on more than one occasion. The motives for this patronage could profitably be investigated, especially as scholars have often viewed it so negatively. It has already been shown that the retrospection present in the art and architecture of several northern houses was also present at Hailes, and that abbots were active patrons of the art and architecture of this house, which also attracted generous external benefaction.¹

¹ Carter, 'Abbots and Aristocrats'.

It is therefore to be hoped that this book will act as a spur, and that the late medieval art and architecture of the Order's monasteries elsewhere in the British Isles and Europe will receive the scholarly attention it undoubtedly deserves.

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