

Assignment Two – Essay 2500 words - From Desert Myths to Sheep Tales: The Cistercians in the Middle Ages (HPHI5911) - Heidi Wyldewood (2100492)

Were the Cistercians distinctive in the operation of their economy?

The Cistercians were highly successful in the management of their monastic houses and lands. They have been seen as ground-breaking 'forerunners of capitalism'.¹ Certainly, they had a need to balance the requirements of seclusion and spiritual diligence with the issue of economically supporting their closed communities and necessary interactions with the wider world.² They found ways around their rules and regulations, but their methods and resulting wealth drew criticism at the time, and still does.³ Eventually, their problem solving led to high levels of commercial enterprise, and finally, their demise.⁴ This paper discusses the various ways in which the Cistercians resolved their economic needs; the likelihood of an overall plan for financial success from the outset; and whether their economy was different to other contemporary religious orders or the management and size of secular landed estates. It demonstrates that they were distinct from other economic operations of the period by way of scale, networking, and approaches rather than technology outright, and that their humble industrious beginnings had transitioned into full blown industry by the time of the order's peak expansion, but that the variety of methods did not belong to a top-down 'Cistercian economic model'.⁵ The only consideration made of official Cistercian rule, that of Saint Benedict, is adjunct to either its implementation or its being disregarded resulting in a successful economic practice.

Manual labour was intrinsic to the Cistercian mindset from their foundation in AD 1098 and was one of the reasons for their breakaway from the Benedictines, along with the idea of a self-sufficiency not beholden to the feudal system.⁶ The priority though was the sacred practice enabled by the internal reliance, peace, and solitude, rather than a focus on the work itself. To free the monks up for the many hours of their daily Divine Office, the Cistercians introduced a lay brotherhood in the early days of the Order.⁷ These *conversi* took vows of obedience and illiteracy, took part in a reduced liturgical practice, and their focus was working the land.⁸ With less restriction placed upon them, this coexisting community solved the problem of a much-needed workforce, and they provided an interface between the monks and the secular world.⁹ With the role of a *conversus* originally garnering a similar

¹ Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe 1090-1500*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), p. 184.

² Giles Constable, *The Reformation Of The Twelfth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 219.

³ Margaret Sinex, 'Echoic Irony In Walter Map's Satire Against The Cistercians', *Comparative Literature*, 54.4 (2002), 275-290 (pp. 276-287). For criticism by their pope see Constable, *The Reformation Of The Twelfth Century*, p. 226.

⁴ Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, p. 183.

⁵ Ibid., p. 184.

⁶ Janet Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2011), p. 15. For the feudal system see Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, p. 183.

⁷ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 151.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 151-152.

respect to that of a monk, it drew men from all walks of life, including knights, nobility and skilled craftsmen.¹⁰ Although the monks still partook in daily labour, the lay brothers took on the industrial and pastoral duties as their contemplative prayer practice, and it proved key to the Cistercian success. By the mid-thirteenth century the combined number of monks and lay brothers totalled around sixty thousand.¹¹

Evidence shows that many Cistercian settlements in the early years of the order and early on in their individual evolution were small holdings comprising a wooden chapel and a handful of domestic buildings, and undoubtedly both the monks and lay brothers worked hard to transform the land they had into productive places.¹² With the expansion of numbers and the construction of stone buildings, the original precincts were unsuitable for sustaining the community needs of bread, beer, fish, wool for clothing, leather for belts and shoes, and parchments.¹³ It is estimated that the weekly consumption per British Cistercian in bread and beer alone approximated ten loaves and seven gallons.¹⁴ Acquisition of more land was thus vital to their survival and expansion.¹⁵ Most Cistercian monasteries demonstrate this second phase of developing granges, separate farmed fields, beyond the primary boundary, not including the incorporation of entire complexes belonging to other orders.¹⁶

Although they were not the first religious group to have granges, they were the first to do so on such a large scale via the consolidation of smaller parcels of land.¹⁷ The Cistercian land grab to create these granges has been well documented in their own records, albeit carefully worded. Monasteries initially received financial donations and land grants, from wealthy patrons eager to establish a good name socially and to gain a good standing with God. The monks then systematically and actively sought parcels of land adjacent to their existing farms or small holdings with potential for amalgamation from less wealthier families too, capitalising on people's needs and fears.¹⁸ From the twelfth century onward many knightly families became donors or sellers of land, either to gain entry to the order or to raise needed funds.¹⁹ In areas of border troubles, giving land to the Cistercians was preferable to losing it to an enemy, or conversely, helping or founding a monastery was used to gain a foothold in

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 153-157.

¹¹ Richard Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Washington, 2009), p. 8.

¹² Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2011), p. 64. For monks working hard on the land in early settlements see Constance Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians: A Study Of Forty-Three Monasteries', *Transactions Of The American Philosophical Society*, 76.5 (1986) pp. i-xiv+1-179 (p. 7-8) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1006411>> [accessed 15th January 2023].

¹³ Constable, *The Reformation Of The Twelfth Century*, pp. 221-222.

¹⁴ Glyn Coppack, *The White Monks: The Cistercians In Britain 1128-1540*, (Stroud: Tempus Publishing Ltd, 1998), p. 105.

¹⁵ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 160.

¹⁶ Coppack, *The White Monks*, p. 105. For the incorporation of other religious houses see Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 81.

¹⁷ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', p. 62. For the consolidation of the granges see p. 40.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 43-45.

¹⁹ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 163.

enemy territory.²⁰ Offerings or counter-gifts, such as prayers for the soul; burial plots; admission to the Order; an assured place within the walls during old age; some form of commemoration; animals; or monetary amount, for either the donor or a family member, were used to persuade a donation or seal a deal, and the written word often disguised an outright sale, although many of those were documented as well.²¹ Records show that monks arrived at death beds to elicit bequeathals; repeatedly pressured peasants for their land; and disappeared whole villages into their granges.²² With the larger land acquisitions came the problem of existing tenants. Because rent collection and an external workforce were initially prohibited to the Cistercians, the only option left for the majority of peasants was to become a lay brother or face eviction.²³ Thousands chose the economic and spiritual security of a monastic life for themselves, and sometimes for their wives too, who entered nunneries.²⁴ Abbeys also traded pieces of land with lords or other abbeys to gain desired locations.²⁵ By the mid-thirteenth century an average abbey grange was the sum acquisition of approximately 'thirty peasant farms all located within two or three parishes'.²⁶ Most abbeys accrued more than ten granges, the extremely wealthy abbeys had thirty or more, and many held substantially more land per grange than the average local nobility, sometimes four or five times the total acreage.²⁷

Granges varied in size and function, but commonly each one enclosed fields, barns or granaries, essential workshops and domestic buildings within a wall, moat, or ditch.²⁸ Whilst the Cistercian narrative was the development of wasteland, many acquisitions were cultivated land, and each abbey re-organised the land to best suit its needs and optimise productivity.²⁹ As internal boundaries and hedges were removed, larger fields meant less time ploughing or sowing for greater crop yield or less fencing for keeping in animals, thereby reducing man-hours or cost.³⁰ The Cistercians obtained a further advantage by having the space to be able to match location and soil suitability to a specific type of farming or industry,

²⁰ Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, p. 53.

²¹ Emilia Jamroziak, 'Making And Breaking The Bonds: Yorkshire Cistercians And Their Neighbours', *Perspectives For An Architecture of Solitude: Essays On Cistercians, Art And Architecture In Honour Of Peter Fergusson*, ed. by Terry Kinder (Belgium: Brepols, 2004) pp. 198-206 (pp.202-205). For intercessory prayers and commemoration see Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, p. 53.

²² Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention Of A Religious Order In Twelfth-Century Europe*, (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), pp. 162-163. For 'peasants who were urged for several years' see Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', pp. 58-59. For the incorporation of villages see Heather Para, *Monastic Development And Dissolution In Wales: Continuity Or Change For Uchelwyr? A Case Study Of Strata Florida's Blaenaeron Grange*, (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, 2020), pp. 93-95.

²³ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', pp. 53-54. For evictions see R. A. Donkin, 'The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England', *Geographical Review*, 59.3 (1969), 403-416 (p. 412) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/213484>> [accessed 12th January 2023].

²⁴ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', pp. 53-54.

²⁵ Para, *Monastic Development And Dissolution In Wales*, p. 93.

²⁶ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', p. 64.

²⁷ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 162. For land size comparison and average number of granges see Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, p. 185.

²⁸ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, pp. 173-175.

²⁹ Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, p. 185.

³⁰ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', p. 75.

pioneering monoculture of not just single fields, but entire granges.³¹ The geographical range of land also meant that staggering the sowing or reaping of crops may have been possible, making best use of in-house labour at peak times of the year and eliminated the need for seasonal external labour.³² The variety of livestock and crop farmed across each country, or Europe as a whole, indicates an adaptability and individuality amongst the houses, with a difference between lowland versus highland; coastal versus inland, and wet and cold versus warm and dry climate specialisation.³³ With grange specialisation came the relocation of forges, flour mills and tanneries, or the building of ones additional to the home farm, and the construction of other specialised workshops such as woolsheds; fulling mills; smokehouses; dovecots; sheepcotes; vast bread ovens; smelt houses; glasshouses; tile kilns; saltworks and water-powered metal hammers.³⁴

Another practice afforded the monks, due to the large amount of land available to them, was that of transhumance: the moving of animals from summer to winter pastures. Although granges were supposed to be within a day's ride of the abbey, many were at a further distance, but linked by drove ways used for the movement of animals and goods.³⁵ Transhumance supported healthier, larger flocks or herds, and resulted in plenty of consistently richly fertilised land.³⁶ Whilst the smaller parcels of land or fields with geographical restrictions belonging to their neighbours and contemporaries eventually became depleted, potentially weakening livestock and producing poorer crop over time, the Cistercians strengthened their animals by selective breeding and good pasture, and increased their agricultural yield through fertilisation and irrigation.³⁷ In addition to the sheer sizes of the granges, was the ruthless acquisition of numerous rights, separately or as part of the land contracts, that stood the Cistercians to an advantage. This included water; riparian; hunting; fishing; foraging; grazing; pannage; mill; vine; firewood; and way rights.³⁸

Unsurprisingly, the success of the granges left the monks with surplus products and by-products which they sold to fund the buying of more lands or their ongoing building works, including the hire of specialised craftsmen.³⁹ Marketable goods across the Cistercian reach included cereals; fruit; beer; wine; olive oil; cheese; animals; meat; hides; wool; cloth; and metal objects.⁴⁰ The Cistercians are credited with instigating the French wine industry and

³¹ Para, *Monastic Development And Dissolution In Wales*, pp. 101-102.

³² Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', p.74.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 76. For upland, lowland, coastal and inland variations see Para, *Monastic Development And Dissolution In Wales*, p. 101.

³⁴ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 175-182. For the five-metre bread oven at Fountains Abbey see Coppack, *The White Monks*, p. 109. For other metalwork specialisations see Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, pp. 104-107.

³⁵ Para, *Monastic Development And Dissolution In Wales*, pp. 101-102. For distance of granges and connecting droveways see Coppack, *The White Monks*, pp. 111-113.

³⁶ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', pp. 89-92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.117) For irrigation see Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, p. 108.

³⁸ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', pp.46-100.

³⁹ Coppack, *The White Monks*, p. 95.

⁴⁰ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', p.40. For olive oil see Fabrizio Lanza, *Olive: A Global History*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2011), p. 27. For metal work, fruit and wine see Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, pp. 105-109.

the invention of certain cheeses.⁴¹ They revolutionised the preparation and grading of wool in England and Wales with their end-to-end in-house system, monopolising the markets with their superior quality wool which commanded much higher prices per sack.⁴² It appears that the monks astutely planted certain types of crops with a view to upcoming market demand, including industrial crops such as flax, hemp and plants used in the dyeing of cloth, and were grazing marketable rather than personally useable animals, such as pigs, just because they did not want to waste an acquired grazing or pannage right.⁴³ This willingness to adapt saw the Cistercians develop and increase their output of animal products in favour of agricultural produce when quality cheese, butter, meat and clothing became more popular.⁴⁴ Moreover, the exemption from tithes granted by the pope and the extensive accumulation of pasture, water and passage rights meant that investment in livestock and selective breeding was a highly profitable endeavour.⁴⁵ The Cistercians built a name for themselves and their products were highly sought after, which enabled them to get advance payments in the wool trade specifically.⁴⁶

In addition to harnessing the local lucrative markets and attending fairs, the Order extended their commercial enterprise to urban areas and export via coastal towns. Records show that the Cistercians acquired workshops, storage facilities, domestic dwellings and hospices in cities and towns⁴⁷. Whilst the lay brethren would have conducted the majority of urban business, the Order had still moved away from its original tenet of rural seclusion. They also engaged in another practice originally forbidden to them, that of the agent or middleman for other monasteries and farmers in the wool trade.⁴⁸ Then, as the primary intake of *conversi* aged and recruitment lessened in the thirteenth century, the Order relaxed the rules further to allow renting out of both rural and urban land and buildings, and the sharing of rights to milling, grazing, or fishing.⁴⁹ Some houses exacted a percentage of profits or payment in kind.⁵⁰ It is important to note that all throughout the years of their commercial enterprise the Cistercians, in addition to the papal waiving of tithes, were exempt from taxes placed on others: road tolls and market, shipping, and export taxes.⁵¹ With the annual gross profit

⁴¹ Jean Truax, 'Wine For The Ages: The Abbey Of Pontigny And The Birth Of The French Wine Industry', *Cistercian Quarterly* 53.4 (2018), 405-415 (pp. 405-411). For Wensleydale, Port Salut and Grana Padano cheeses see Patrick F. Fox and others, *Fundamentals of Cheese Science*, 2nd edn. (New York: Springer 2017), p.4 and p.732.

⁴² Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, p. 40. For the extent of Cistercian dominance in British wool trade by the late thirteenth century see p. 64.

⁴³ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians'. p. 76. For animals raised purely for market see Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, p. 41.

⁴⁴ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', pp. 96-97.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

⁴⁶ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians In The Middle Ages*, p. 185.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

⁴⁸ Eileen Power, *The Wool Trade In English Medieval History - Being The Ford Lectures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p.28.

⁴⁹ Coppack, *The White Monks*, p. 175.

⁵⁰ Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, p. 36.

⁵¹ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', p. 121.

unchanged by the usual expenses this gave them a huge advantage over secular merchants and enhanced the speed of their economic growth and distribution reach.

Finally, the Cistercians benefited economically from two other practices, both of which stemmed from their aim at overall uniformity and enforcement of The Rule. Firstly, their insistence on the annual meeting of all abbots, the General Chapter, and the regular visitation by abbots from mother to daughter houses.⁵² Secondly, the diligent keeping of records. This connectivity and written memory did not necessarily lead to economic uniformity but did facilitate the sharing of vital information about agricultural and pastoral systems, technology, and breeding, and created a strong network between abbeys, abbots and priors which proved useful to distribution and collaboration.⁵³ Another method of gathering information, which was in turn shared within the Order, was the buying, borrowing, and copying of books, including medicinal and scientific works.⁵⁴

In comparison to other religious orders the Cistercians had lower overheads: the foundation costs for each abbey were less and the ongoing running costs were lower because of the restrictions on the use of gold and silver; decorative buildings and coloured glass; clothing; and diet.⁵⁵ They then consistently reinvested in land, quality livestock and equipment. The upgrading of equipment was often not taken up by local lords or peasants because it was deemed unprofitable.⁵⁶ Although the Cistercians were not the first order to use a lay brotherhood, and their rules on the renting out of land or the collection of tithes eventually came into line with some others, they were certainly the most effective.⁵⁷ Again, they were not the first or the only ones using granges, but they were the only ones to do so on such a grand scale. The Cistercians appeared to appreciate the worldly wise and elected monks with business acumen for their abbots, with a high number of cellarers, supervisors who managed the day-to-day practicalities of the monastery, eventually becoming abbots.⁵⁸ Two other roles emerged in some of the larger Cistercian houses when the task became too much for one cellarer: that of the bursar, who managed and recorded the various incomes of the abbey, and that of the procurator, the legal representation for the abbot.⁵⁹ The importance of these three roles indicate an overall economic focus and a scientific approach to farming within the management of the Order.

They were distinct in their economy, not because of an overall plan from the outset of the Order, as demonstrated by regional variation, but because of their relentless pursuance of what they deemed essential to their way of life, although they later bent or broke some of their own rules to gain it. The evolution from small holding to vast enterprise was born of their long-term goals and the scalability they ensured for themselves. What set them apart from their contemporaries was their fervent, often aggressive, land acquisition and the vision

⁵² Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, pp. 43-47.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵⁴ Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, p. 93.

⁵⁵ Berman, 'Medieval Agriculture, The Southern French Countryside, And The Early Cistercians', pp. 119-120.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁵⁷ Johnston, *An Economic Explication Of Cistercian Directives During The Middle Ages*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order In Medieval Europe*, pp. 67-68.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-57.

they had toward consolidating that land for ease of management; their networking for trade and the sharing of ideas amongst themselves; an in-house labour force; and the maintenance of records. They were also highly adaptable innovators; left nothing to waste; were willing to evolve with the market and engage with the local economy. They minimised their overheads and invested in economic assets. However, their phenomenal results were largely down to capitalising on the opportunity afforded them by unique privilege, which does not necessarily make them entirely distinct in their agricultural or pastoral farming methods, rather that they were able to investigate, fund and systemise existing methods more effectively. Moreover, they were not alone in forgoing their own standards in the face of profit.

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