

MODULE CODE: HPHI5911/6911

From Desert myths to sheep tales: THE CISTERCIANS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

ASSESSMENT TYPE: PORTFOLIO (50%). COMPONENT WEIGHTING: 50%

WORD COUNT: 2500 Words

Student: David C. Roberts #2108135

[The first commentary is due on 11 November, second commentary is due on 25 November, essay is due on 13 January]

Commentary 2: Image option

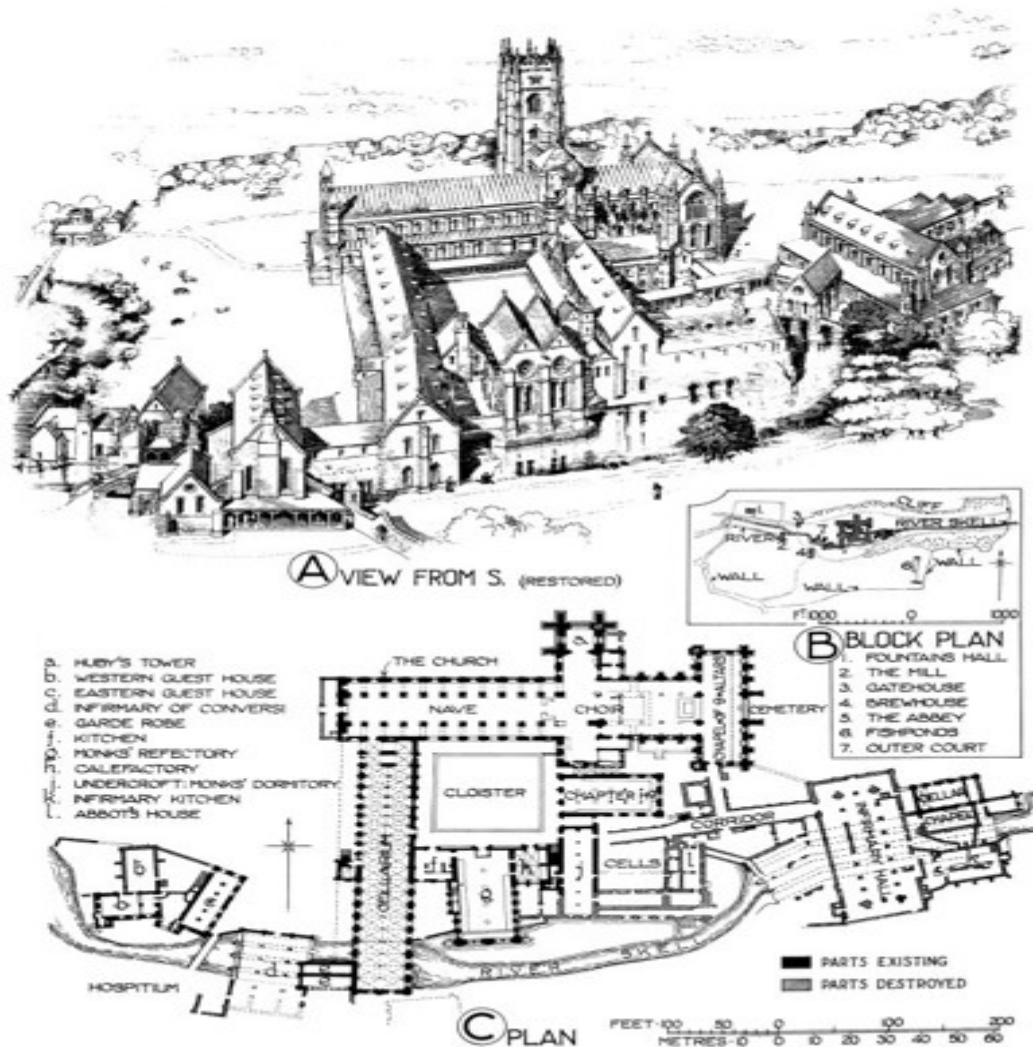
Comment on one of the following images (1250 words)



Initial remarks

Although the photograph gives an attractive view of what is essentially a ruined structure, a more complete appreciation and understanding of form and function can be seen in the following alternative ariel perspective and accompanying floor plan. The complexity of the site is obviously immediately apparent reflecting the extent of the Cistercian activity on what was once level open land with good access to water from the adjacent River Skell. This kind of site would seem to be ideal in that apart from the usual needs for water supply, technological progress would have been uppermost in the minds of the builders in the sense of harnessing the benefits of hydropower by way of waterwheel designs. Crucially, this kind of technology requires a reliable constant flow without too much risk of excessive flood.

FOUNTAINS ABBEY: YORKSHIRE



[1]

Planning processes: form and function, compact self-sufficiency

Referring to the ground plan schema, it is immediately apparent that the site forms around the central area, the cloister. This in effect acts as a communal space for various functions such as study and exercise but also a portal to sections of the building, in a way a kind of compact functionality:

. 'in their general layout the Cistercian monasteries weren't very different from those of Cluny for they continued repeating their same distribution. The great abbey of Clairvaux, founded by St. Bernard himself in 1115 about 70 km north of Dijon, was insufficient to accommodate all the monks of the Order and in 1133 a new immense construction began. These buildings had the same general layout of other Benedictine monasteries, with its central cloister, the church on one side, the chapter house on the other, the refectory, and the outbuildings for agricultural purposes' [2]

In the case of Fountains Abbey, the founding monks were in fact from the Benedictine Order at Saint Mary's, York. The central cloister 'core' had corridors running east and west to the monks' Infirmary and another for the 'conversi' or 'lay-brothers' on the opposite side. Fitness for the lay brotherhood was vital in respect of maintaining effective agricultural production.

From a self-sufficiency aspect, sites such as Fountains had food production well organized to include the logical incorporation of fishponds running off from the river. The freedom to produce their own cereals and to use for bread and beer was part of the staple diet as seen in the Mill and Brewhouse under 'B' , BLOCK PLAN above [4 and 2], Together with the main buildings, all were enclosed within the curtilage wall. A three-dimensional view of the ruined site is given as follows [3]



Industrial aspects: optimising the labour-pool, efficiency of means, technological progress

A comprehensive appraisal of the Cistercian aptitude towards industry and productivity is perhaps seen in Michael Novak's view, and quoting authors such as Jean Gimpel. . .

'Being few in number, the Cistercians needed labor-saving devices. They were a great spur to technological development. Their monasteries "were the most economically effective units that had ever existed in Europe, and perhaps in the world, before that time," Gimpel writes. They dominated iron production in central France and wool production (for export) in England. . . "the Protestant ethic without Protestantism." [4]

Whether this is capitalism according to the Marxist model is debatable. The Cistercian 'system' could possibly conform to either of the following at different times:

. . . direct form of the circulation of commodities is C-M-C, the transformation of commodities into money and the re-conversion of money into commodities: selling in order to buy. But alongside this form we find another form, which is quite distinct from the first: M-C-M, the transformation of money into commodities, and the re-conversion of commodities into money: buying in order to sell. Money which describes the latter course in its movement is transformed into capital, becomes capital, and, from the point of view of its function, already is capital."

[5]

The phenomenon of the Cistercian expansion is perhaps best partly summarised by the American academic and author John L. Lienhard in his 'Engines of Our Ingenuity' series when he suggests the following:

'By the middle of the 12th century the cistercians had reached the cutting edge of hydro-power and agricultural technology. . . these monasteries were, in reality, the best organised factories the world had ever seen' [6]

Industrial aspects of the Cistercian Order are perhaps most comprehensively described and analysed by Jean Gimpel in his landmark volume *The Medieval Machine* . Summarising the author's contribution to this particular literary aspect of the Middle Ages, the 'History Books Review' bureau goes perhaps even further than Lienhard. . .

'The Cistercians were ruthless in their exploitation of resources. There were 742 Cistercian monasteries in the twelfth century. They were laid out according to a precise formula so that a monk from one would be able to find his way around any other one. These were effectively huge factories, harvesting and processing wool in England or making wine in France or olive oil in the south of Europe. This was to all intents and purpose a multinational corporation producing goods for sale into a money based economy on a huge scale.' [7]

A more sceptical summary

In conclusion, much of this success has to be attributed to the Cistercian inclusion into the monastery life of the 'conversi' or lay-brotherhood as mentioned at the head of this commentary. These brothers lived an existence along the lines of a kind of pre-industrial proletariat, but not necessarily based on any fixed wage agreement. In effect they were a kind of lower-order monk:

'Both the monks and lay-brothers worked and prayed, but whereas the monks' day centred on the celebration of the Canonical Hours in the church, the lay-brothers' time was structured around the workplace and most of their Offices were celebrated here' [8].

In one sense, the Cistercian production system was so successful that from a position of financial strength and security the Order was coming close to disassociating and alienating itself from the ideals of austerity to which the beginnings had been dedicated. When discussing the attitudes of contemporary commentators such as Gerald of Wales or Walter Map to the Cistercian Order, a particular jaundiced view is presented in Dr Brian Golding's paper, 1995, a rather negative ending to this commentary, but of course if a comprehensive view of the Cistercians' activity is called for and its consequences, then it possibly has to be included to complete the overall representation:

'Tithes due from lands the monks cultivated themselves had not been paid, with the result that many parish churches were ruined; the Cistercians pressured and forced their neighbours to give or sell them property; they bought up or leased more land than they needed in order that the surplus might be fanned at profit; their business practices were reprehensible even to the laity. . . The Cistercians were in their first generation ascetic and holy, but they fell from grace through their success, and through ambition and avarice were corrupted. [9]

Notes

1 <http://RIBAarchitecture.com>

2 Cluniac and cistercian Architecture 2' in <https://arsartisticadventureofmankind>

3 Image source: 'YouTube' St Andrews Pics

4 **Novak, M.** in:

<https://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-10-number-3/how-christianity-created-capitalism>]

5 **Marx, K** '*Das Kapital*' p247-248

6 **Lienhard, John H.** [#1311 'The Cistercians' <https://uh.edu/engines>]

7 historybooksreview.co. [admin: author unknown]

8 The Cistercians in Yorkshire: 'Lay-brothers'

https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/cistercian_life/lay_brothers

9 **Golding, B.**, pp 7 - 11

Bibliographic and foundation reading section

Bethell , Denis *The Foundation of Fountains Abbey and the State of St.Mary's York in 1132* in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol.17, no.1 April 1966 , pp. 11 - 27

Fergusson, Peter: Architecture of Solitude: Cistercian Abbeys in Twelfth-Century England (1984 Princeton , University Press)

Golding, B. *Gerald of Wales and the Cistercians*. (1995: University of Reading Medieval Studies)

Gimpel , Jean : *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (1977:Penguin Books)

<https://arsartisticadventureofmankind> 'Cluniac and cistercian Architecture 2'

<http://historybooksreview.co.uk/the-medieval-machine-jean-gimpel> Posted on January 2009 by admin

Lienhard, John H. :- <https://uh.edu/engines>

Marx, Karl, *Das Kapital* chapters-4-8-'surplus-value' in, <https://www.socialist.net/marx-s-capital->

Novak,Michael :-

<https://www.acton.org/pub/religion-liberty/volume-10-number-3/how-christianity-created-capitalism>

Smith, Lindsey : *The Lure of Lucre and the Hurdle of Poverty: the Cistercian Fusion of Spirituality and Monastic Business* [Honours Thesis, Spring 2012, University of Arkansas] <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article>

https://www.dhi.ac.uk/cistercians/cistercian_life/lay_brothers The Cistercians in Yorkshire'

