

Assessment 2 – HPHI 6911 – From desert myths to sheep tales. The Cistercians in the Middle Ages.

Zen Redgrave - 1903175

What factors affected the choice of Cistercian sites?

Introduction

It can be argued that there are a great many factors that affected the choice of location of Cistercian abbeys, from spiritual, to practical, to political and economic. To examine the factors that may have affected the choice of sites for Cistercian houses, this essay will examine evidence from the *Exordium Parvum*, *Exordium Cistercii*, geographical considerations in relation to the locations, economic considerations in relation to the Cistercians generating income, and also to factors that do not appear to have been considered by the Cistercian founders when locating new houses.

Spiritual, economic, and other factors

We can see from the *Exordium Parvum* that the Cistercians were supposed to follow the Rule of St Benedict and set up their monasteries within a desert such that the monks were away from the affairs of men. In chapter iii of the *Exordium Parvum* we can learn that the original monastery at Molesme was in an area ‘inhabited only by wild beasts...because of the density of the woods and thorny thickets’.¹ Whilst we could question the definition of *desert* within this context, if however, we accept this at face value then it is possible to interpret this such that the monks set up and selected their location such that they were away from the affairs of men. It is also possible however to look a little deeper and suggest that if the monks were to build a monastery in this place, that they would need access to building materials, food, water, initial forms of shelter etc just to survive. The next obvious question to then ask is where did these things come from? If again we take things at face value, we could argue from a spiritual perspective that God provided what they required. However, on a practical non-spiritual level we may question just how much aid was provided and how removed from the world they truly were. In chapter xv of the *Exordium Parvum* we find listed the things that the Cistercian monks would accept as land which included

vineyards and meadows and woods and also streams, in order to install mills — but only for their own use — and for fishing, and horses and various cattle useful to the requirements of men.²

With such a list it can again easily be questioned as to what constituted a desert within the minds of the Cistercians when selecting a location for an abbey, a harsh barren place where there is very little water, or what amounts to a functioning farm that is abundant, or perhaps the desert was a metaphorical spiritual desert?

¹ *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercians documents Vol. 1 course Handbook, chapter iii, p.25.

² *Exordium Parvum* Course Cistercians documents Vol. 1 course Handbook, chapter xv, p.30.

If we look at maps of Molesme, we can see that it is located near to a river, in this instance the River Laigne which would have been able to provide them with water for drinking and also for watering crops.³ We can see similar geography if we look at the location of Tintern abbey in south Wales, which is next to the river Wye,⁴ or Fountains abbey near Ripon in Yorkshire which is next to the river Skell,⁵ so it would be reasonable to assume that the monks founding these sites had an eye towards practical survival. There is after all little reason to spend your life in contemplation of God if that life ends very quickly due to starvation or dehydration.

We also know that Christian churches have the main nave aligned east-west such that the light in the morning would come up over the altar.⁶ Again, if we look at maps of Molesme, Tintern and Fountains abbeys, we can find that there is, to a lesser or greater extent, a fairly clear view to the east of the abbeys at these locations.

However, if we look at the locations of Cistercian abbeys from a political perspective, we can start to understand that the purely spiritual and practical considerations of where an abbey was located may not have been the only consideration that was made.

If we look at Tintern abbey as an example, as we have seen, it has access to water, and has a clear view looking east. However, if we look at the history of the site, we can see that the land that the abbey is located on was granted to the Cistercians by Walter de Clare, the then Lord of Chepstow.⁷ In this we have a relationship between a wealthy patron and the Cistercians. We also learn that this was an ongoing generational relationship between the abbey and the Lords of Chepstow. Although the initial donation of land to create the abbey was made in 1131,⁸ the main church was rebuilt in the late thirteenth century and was paid for by Roger Bigod III, the 5th Earl of Norfolk. This marks a considerable time scale of patronage, and it must be then questioned as to exactly what form that relationship took. What is known is that the Cistercians placed the coat of arms of their benefactor within the east window of the main church.⁹ It is also unclear as to what the land was being used for and who, if anyone, inhabited the land before it was given to the Cistercians for the purposes of founding the abbey. However, what is clear from looking at the size of the abbey remains in these locations today, is that the building of these monasteries was a very considerable

³ Google maps, *Molesme Abbey* (2022) < <https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Molesme+Abbey/@47.9324981,4.3489434,15.7z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x47edcdebef82605d:0x3b63ff588115776c!8m2!3d47.9347267!4d4.3559654?hl=en&authuser=0> > [accessed 17 December 2022].

⁴ Google maps, *Tintern Abbey* (2022) < <https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Tintern+Abbey+%2F+Abaty+Tyndryn/@51.6965916,-2.679718,2112m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x487057e73dc9eccb:0x8f16dfefd1b3f23!8m2!3d51.696862!4d-2.677023!5m1!1e4?hl=en&authuser=0> > [accessed 17 December 2022].

⁵ Google maps, *Fountains Abbey* (2022) < <https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Fountains+Abbey/@54.1091696,-1.5780164,15.56z/data=!4m5!3m4!1s0x487eab777f03be83:0x480de744382d3127!8m2!3d54.109512!4d-1.58186!5m1!1e4?hl=en&authuser=0> > [accessed 17 December 2022].

⁶ Thomas Coomans, *Life Inside the Cloister. Understanding Monastic architecture: Tradition, Reformation, Adaptive Reuse*, (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2018), p. 28.

⁷ Castlewales.com, *Tintern Abbey* (2022) < <http://www.castlewales.com/tintern.html> > [accessed 17 December 2022].

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

undertaking that would have required more resources than a group of monks would have had from within their own ranks. So, what sort of resources might these have required? It would appear obvious that the Cistercians would have required access to skilled labour to be able to construct such large buildings, in the form of stone masons and carpenters. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that if the monasteries were truly built in a desert, that the Cistercian monks would not have had access to the skilled trades people required for such tasks. We must then question whether the Cistercians located their new sites near to existing areas of habitation from where they could access such people, or if there were sufficient transport routes along which the trades people could come to the new abbey sites. Angela Petyt, citing Donkin, notes that the abbeys of Rievaulx and Kirkstall were both located on lands where an existing population were already resident, and goes further to suggest that this led to a depopulation of the area as the incumbent inhabitants were removed to create a desert away from the world of men, as required by the *Exordium Parvum*.¹⁰ Within this Petyt also notes that Donkin is citing evidence from charters and chronicles, presumably recorded at the time, that in the area of Kirkstall abbey people were ‘granted freedom of toll to all men who remain on the lands that I have given to them [the monks]’.¹¹ From this, we can see that in this instance, the Cistercian monks did not move to a desert area, but took the land that was gifted to them even though it was previously occupied by others. We could surmise that these existing inhabitants then either moved to new locations, or perhaps remained in the area of the abbey and became the workforce for the Cistercians, perhaps running the granges that provided for the monks.

We must also consider the economic aspect of the location of new abbeys. As has already been noted, to construct such large buildings would have required access for skilled workers, and also access to bring building materials to the site. However, all of these people and materials would have needed to be paid for. Whilst the Cistercians certainly had wealthy benefactors, it is also known that they were wealthy as an order within their own right. Eileen Power, in her piece on the wool trade in medieval England, notes that the Cistercians were important sheep farmers and generated income from the sale of fleece.¹² To facilitate this we can presume that the monks would have wanted the grazing land to be not too far away from the abbey itself, whilst still maintaining a suitable distance such that the monks were away from the affairs of men. We can then question as to whether the accessibility of suitable sheep grazing pasture was a factor for the Cistercian monks when deciding where to locate a new monastery. The final aspect of the economic factors to consider is raised by Frank Lacopo, a Ph.D student from Pen State University, in his article *Reform and the Welsh Cistercian Houses: Colonialism and Postcolonialism* states that although a lot of Cistercian houses built in Wales were completely new, others houses took over existing church sites ‘in visible displays of dominance’.¹³ Lacopo notes the recognition that Constance Berman gave to the Cistercian Order taking over existing church sites as part of their expansion but goes

¹⁰ Angela Petyt, *To what extent did the Cistercians in Yorkshire have a policy of depopulation?* (2001) < <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~petyt/genealogy/cist3.htm> > [accessed 29 December 2022].

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Eileen Power, *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History being The Ford Lectures*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p.22.

¹³ Hortulus-journal.com, *Reform and the Welsh Cistercian houses: Colonialism and postcolonialism* (2018) < <https://hortulus-journal.com/reform-and-the-welsh-cistercian-houses-colonialism-and-postcolonialism-by-frank-lacopo/> > [accessed 30 December 2022].

further to suggest that these new sites in Wales became important to the papacy in Rome as a source of income with which to finance their own expansion, whilst at the same time 'replaced native Welsh centres of learning'.¹⁴ In this we can perhaps see more reasons other than purely spiritual, perhaps more political and expedient, for the location of Cistercian houses within Wales.

It is also interesting to note that Power states that the Cistercians located their abbeys in Wales and Yorkshire not only due to the need to be away from others, but also due to the Midlands region already being occupied by other orders.¹⁵ If we compare this with statements made by Walter Map, cited in the work of Petyt which states that the Cistercians 'raze villages and churches, turn out parishioners, destroy the alters of God',¹⁶ we could be led to the understanding that although the Cistercian Order was powerful, and did expand at a prodigious rate, that they also recognised that there were some areas that it was perhaps not worth trying to colonise, maybe due to the existing density of other religions. Indeed, we can also see that the proximity of other abbeys could present a problem for the monks. Petyt notes that Byland and Kirkstall abbeys were originally located very close to the site of Rievaulx abbey, and created sufficient problems for the monks at Rievaulx, that Byland and Kirkstall were relocated to another site. Was this perhaps a case of too much competition between the different abbeys that could then have created a problem? It is stated in the *Exordium Cistercii* that the original Cistercian house at Citeaux and the house from which it split at Molesme, would not take monks from each other,¹⁷ so that peace could be maintained between them. There may perhaps have been a fear in the instance of Rievaulx and Byland, that one abbey may have taken monks from the other if it were offering a slightly less harsh way of life.

There is one other factor that can be noted due to its apparent absence from consideration when locating new abbey sites, and that is the need for the abbots to travel. We know from the *Carta Caritatis*, that the abbot of a monastery was required to visit Citeaux for the general chapter meeting every year.¹⁸ If we look at a map showing the spread of Cistercian houses throughout Europe, shown in appendix one,¹⁹ we can clearly see that the Cistercian Order had a very large geographic spread throughout the whole of Europe, with houses being in locations as far apart as Kinloss in Scotland, Falkenau in Estonia, as well as southern Portugal and Southern Italy. If we consider that the distances between these locations and the abbey at Citeaux can be up to 1500 miles in the case of Estonia, and nearly 1000 and a journey over water for Kinloss, and also consider that the abbots would be travelling either by foot or horse and carriage, we can see that it would be a major undertaking to travel to Citeaux on an annual basis. If we used an assumption of 15 miles of travel per day, we can see that a trip from Kinloss to Citeaux could easily take 3 or 4 months in each direction. Whilst the desire from within the Cistercian hierarchy to maintain control and uniformity throughout the order can be seen from looking at documents such as the *Carta Caritatis*, the

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Angela Petyt, *To what extent did the Cistercians in Yorkshire have a policy of depopulation?* (2001) <<https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~petyt/genealogy/cist3.htm>> [accessed 29 December 2022].

¹⁷ *Exordium Cistercii* Course Cistercian documents Vol 1 course handbook, chapter II, p.32.

¹⁸ *Summary of the Charter of Charity* Course Cistercian documents Vol 1 course handbook, chapter iv, p. 34.

¹⁹ Researchgate.net, *Map of the Cistercian expansion in medieval Europe* (2013) <https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-the-Cistercian-expansion-in-medieval-Europe-from-Duby-G-1989-Lart_fig1_327350300> [accessed 30 December 2022].

practicalities of such undertakings that result from doing this in the ways that it described do not appear to take account of the realities that they created. It would be possible to assume from this that the growth and expansion of the Cistercian houses and their locations throughout Europe was based on factors other than the practical requirements of running the order but perhaps more based at best on an overriding desire to spread the word of God according to their own view of the world or, at worst, on an ego driven desire to be the biggest and most powerful order.

Conclusions

From looking at the evidence put forward, we can see that there would have been many factors that affected the location of Cistercian houses. These range from the spiritual need to be remote from the ordinary world and so more closely follow the Rule of St Benedict, which was, according to the *Exordium* documents, the original reason for the creation of what became the Cistercian Order, to purely practical ones such as a need to be able to access water. However, it can also be argued that a great many other factors, beyond the purely spiritual, were at play when the Cistercians decided where to locate a new abbey. It would be easy to take a somewhat cynical viewpoint and state that these other factors, such as what was being offered by wealthy benefactors, the need to generate an income from sheep farming, the potential desire or need to override existing indigenous religious houses, the generation of funds for the papacy in Rome and the desire to spread their order ever further, may have overridden the more spiritual and practical considerations when deciding where to locate a new Cistercian house. It would certainly appear to be the case that there is a greater amount of evidence to support the argument that factors other than purely spiritual were used when considering the location of new Cistercian houses, even if it is the case that once in place, the Cistercian monks did indeed live a spiritual life.

Word count: 2395

Appendix one

Map of the Cistercian expansion in Medieval Europe (from Duby, G. 1989: *L'art cistercien*, Flammarion, 6).

PRINCIPALES ABBAYES CISTERCIENNES ET LEUR FILIATION



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