

‘Far from the dwellings of men’. The notion of the desert looms large in Cistercian writing. How far did the tradition of the desert influence the siting of Cistercian houses and their contact with the laity, or how far can it be seen as rhetorical?

The Cistercians are a monastic Order founded in 1098 at Cîteaux by a group of reforming monks from the nearby Cluniac abbey of Molesme led by their abbot, Robert. These twenty-one founding monks wished to follow more strictly the Rule of St Benedict and felt that they could not do so at their current house. This new Order arose at a time of change within the Church at the end of the century following the first millennium, a period of reflection following the failure to occur of the expected Apocalypse in the year 1000. Proceeded by the papacy’s Gregorian Reforms of the mid eleventh century it was contemporary with the First Crusade. The Cistercian Order spread rapidly throughout Europe. Cîteaux’s four first daughter houses of La Ferté, Pontigny, Morimond, and Clairvaux, founded respectively in 1113, 1114, 1115, and 1115, indicate an intense interest in the Cistercian ideals and their interpretation of the rule of St Benedict in the early twelfth century; this was an enduring pattern. The four elder daughter houses went on to found numerous daughter houses of their own across Europe. By 1151 there were over three hundred daughter and granddaughter houses. This was a huge undertaking when considering what was required in Order to found and construct such a number of monasteries. In the subsequent century the castle building campaign of Edward I of England created fewer than twenty castles and yet is considered to the present day to be an impressive achievement. It is interesting to place into context the three hundred and thirty new Cistercian abbeys and communities, as well as those supporting sites of the monastic granges, which were constructed in a period of less than forty years. There were over five

hundred Cistercian abbeys by the end of the twelfth century, increasing to over seven hundred .

It is well recognised that the Cistercian literature of the twelfth century, in particular the two *exordia* of the Order, the *Exordium Cistercii* of 1123 or 1124, and the *Exordium Parvum* of circa 1150 together, with the earlier *Carta Caritatis* of 1119, make numerous references to deserts, wastelands, and isolated places. This essay will examine in more depth what this meant to the monastic mind, and to the Cistercians in particular, and how far the notion of the desert influenced the siting of Cistercian houses and the contact of those institutions with the laity. It will consider how Cistercian literature utilised desert vocabulary and the role of this image in the life of the monks, both in their practical application of the Rule of St Benedict within the strict parameters of the *Carta Caritatis* and the legitimisation of these monastic houses through their own narrative foundation histories. Given the large number of Cistercian sites, this essay further proposes to consider specifically the sites of the abbeys of Fountains and Rievaulx and the extant evidence of the pre-Cistercian landscapes of these two sites in Yorkshire. Initially, however, it is essential to examine the importance of the cultural, religious, and historical context of the period in which the Cistercian Order developed.

The eleventh century came as shock to the population of Christendom. People had expected the world as they knew it to have come to an end and to have experienced the fulfilment of the New Jerusalem as attested to in the Book of Revelation. This unexpected situation confounded people and as the years continued to pass beyond any period of time which could be explained by a margin of error in the calculations of the dates of the life of Christ and the events of the early first century of Christianity, they sought further explanation. The

promise of Salvation hinged entirely on the realisation of the Apocalypse and the second coming of Christ. The uncertainty of the coming to pass of this crucial necessity, and the failure of the salvation of a thousand years of Christian souls, was a destabilising and threatening concept. It can be argued that this impact was a significant driving force behind the waves of revision which swept through the eleventh century and into the twelfth.

Christians feared that they had failed to fulfil their side of the Second Covenant. The response can be seen in papal, liturgical, ecclesiastical, and theological revisions and reforms together with a desire to return to earlier aspects of the faith as found in scripture. One of these aspects was the return to the notion of the desert and by extension the tenets of the desert fathers and early saints of the church, in particular in relation to the foundation of the Cistercian Order. This was the century which witnessed the Gregorian Reforms, named after Pope Gregory VII, and carried out by a succession of reformist popes. The church reforms of the mid to late eleventh century were extensive. For example, the introduction of compulsory celibacy for clerics reveals the considered necessity for the clergy to step further from the temporal world than had been expected of them in the previous millennium. It betrays how shaken the collective eleventh century mind must have been. Against such a backdrop the Cistercians seem to fall reasonably into the spectrum of eleventh century reform and a return to scriptural foundations. It is also worth noting that the foundation of Cîteaux is directly contemporary with that most famous aspect of the eleventh century reforms, the First Crusade, the martial incursion into the Holy Land from 1096 to 1099, which resulted from the address given by the Cluniac Pope Urban II at the Council of Clermont in November 1095.

For the purposes of this essay the Cistercian literature under consideration is constituted of the three early seminal Cistercian works: the *Carta Caritatis*, the *Exordium Cistercii*, and the *Exordium Parvum*. The *Carta Caritatis* of 1119 was the first important document of the Cistercian Order. Translating as the Charter of Love, the *Carta Caritatis*, which was the charter that regulated the Order, was presented by the then abbot, Stephen Harding, to Pope Calixtus II. The *Carta Caritatis* is very clear in its instructions on new monastic houses being constructed away from human settlement, in the forms of towns or castles, “*Incivitatibus castellis villis nulla construenda esse coenobia.*”, and the forbidding of dwellings, except those for animals, being built outside the abbey gates, “*Extra portam monasterii nulla domus ad habitandum construatur, nisi animalium.*” The *Carta Caritatis* underlines the importance of choosing isolated sites for Cistercian communities. ...*terras a saecularium hominum habitatione semotas...*, “lands removed from the habitation of secular men” The translation of *semotas* from Chapter XV of the *Carta Caritatis*, meaning remote, removed, isolated, illustrates this need for isolation. To the twelfth century Cistercian mind, and indeed any monastic mind of the period, the concept of an isolated and remote place away from human settlement corresponded to the notion of the desert.

The two additional documents under consideration, the *Exordium Cistercii* and the *Exordium Parvum*, can be considered as the official histories of the development of the Cistercian Order as written by the Order itself. The *Exordium Cistercii* relates, in its first chapter, the arrival at Cîteaux of the twenty-one monks who had left the abbey at Molesme with their abbot Robert and describes the landscape of this site in the following terms: “...*locum tunc scilicet horroris et vastae solitudinis.*”, “...at that time a place of horror and of vast solitude.”.

Chapter II describes how the monks “...found a desert place and began building it into an abbey...”, “...*inventam heremum in abbatia construere coeperunt...*”. Heremum can be translated as waste or desert and is derived from the Greek *eremos*, ἐρημος, meaning solitary, abandoned, lonely, bereft of, empty. These descriptions echo the *semotas* in the *Carta Caritatis*, and underline the importance of the desert motif in Cistercian literature. The third chapter of the *Exordium Parvum* also describes the departure of the monks of Molesme and their arrival at Cîteaux, “...*ad heremum, quae Cistercium dicebatur, alacriter tetenderunt.*”, “...they eagerly headed for the desert-place called Cîteaux.”. This description continues with “*Qui locus in episcopatu Cabilonensi situs, et pro nemoris spinarumque tunc temporis opacitate accessui hominum insolitus, a solis feris inhabitabatur.*”, “This place, situated in the episcopate of Chalon, and rarely approached by men back in those days because of the thickness of grove and thornbush, was inhabited only by wild beasts.” This description evokes, even to the modern mind, biblical descriptions of the wilderness.

Medieval monasticism had its roots in the eremitic and ascetic lives of the Desert Fathers of the third and fourth centuries. It was from these hermits in the Egyptian desert that St Pachomius the Great founded Christianity’s first ascetic community at Tabenna, an abandoned village on the Nile bank, in around 320. The desert as a spiritual place of transformation and revelation has a long tradition in Biblical literature, after all the first case of this is the Fall of Man and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden, the point of genesis of all Yahwinistic faith. The motif of the labours of Adam and Eve in the wilderness was a common one, frequently depicted on the walls of churches for the whole congregation to see. And extant example of this can be seen in St Botolph’s church in Hardham, near Pulborough,

in West Sussex. The wall paintings in the Saxon church of St Botolph's are dated to the beginning of the twelfth century. They are contemporary with early Cistercian literature, and they possibly reflect the spiritual malaise and response to the failure of the Apocalypse to materialise in the year 1000.

Scripture was the primary source of monastic literature and therefore can be identified as the source of the desert motif adopted by Cistercian rhetoric. It is also the source of much of the vocabulary favoured by Cistercian writers. The desert wilderness of the Bible is a place of spiritual trial and subsequent salvation. This is seen in the Old Testament narratives of the Binding of Isaac on Mt Moriah and the resulting First Covenant; the wanderings of the people of Israel after the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent revelations of the Ten Commandments and the construction of the Tabernacle; the exile of David and the resulting foundation of the Temple of Solomon on Mt Moriah. The New Testament continues this tradition with the narratives of John The Baptist preaching in the wilderness which preceded his revelations of the prophecies of Isaiah and of the coming Messiah as well as that of Christian baptism; of Christ's own period of temptation by Satan in the desert which preceded the commencement of his ministry which is in itself the revelation of God's plan for the New Covenant as revealed through Christ. This repeating pattern of desert solitude preceding, and arguably resulting in, spiritual revelation is an appropriate typological interpretation of the bible that would have been common and familiar to medieval Christianity. Within the spiritual context of the eleventh and twelfth centuries it is hardly surprising that the desert was a notion that warranted revisiting, in particular within the monastic world which could look to a returning towards its own roots in desert ascetism.

Within this prototypical reading of Scripture there are further desert parallels. It was in the desert that the Israelites received the sustaining and lifesaving manna from heaven, a Biblical prototype of the bread of communion, and that the Ten Commandments, a Biblical prototype of the New Covenant, were delivered to them through Moses, himself a Biblical prototype of Christ. It is in desert settings that God speaks to mankind and through his chosen human representatives. In Numbers 32:13 the desert wilderness is a place of cleansing. The forty years spent in the desert would cleanse the Israelites of a whole generation who had done evil, and this also acts as a biblical prototype to the forty days spent by Christ in his desert temptation.

It cannot have been lost on the Cistercians that the Tabernacle was created in the desert wilderness and that the First Covenant with God took place on a mountain, a place which meets the requirements of a desert site, by being distant, lonely, and non-productive arable land. The Tabernacle was later moved by King David to Mt Moriah and then the Temple built there by King Solomon, both kings being considered prototypes of Christ. If the reaffirmation of the First Covenant takes place in the wilderness the reaffirmation of the Second Covenant surely should also. The first Jerusalem, the temporal and physical city and kingdom, was built around the temporal and physical location of the First Covenant and thus it follows that the second Jerusalem, the spiritual kingdom as attested to in the Book of Revelation as being vital for the manifestation of the Apocalypse, should be built around the spiritual location of the Second Covenant. For surely the ultimate Biblical prototype is found in the Binding of Isaac on the remote mountain of Moriah which prefigures the Crucifixion of Christ on the mountain of Golgotha outside of and removed from the city of Jerusalem. The minimum number of

twelve monks led by one abbot as outlined in chapter VIII of the *Carta Caritatis* is highly evocative of the twelve disciples led by Christ and establishes a link from a Cistercian house to Christ's own ministry.

It is important to look at why this motif of the desert was so important in Cistercian writing. It was important to the Cistercians firstly this was a response to the unexpected experience of the end of the first millennium and as a way of seeking to restore and reaffirm the New Covenant. It is also a way of legitimising the new Cistercian Order and its strict interpretation and implementation of the Rule of St Benedict away from the concourse of men. It is interesting to note at this point that a similar tactical usage of desert rhetoric is also found in the secular chronicle literature commissioned by the Dukes of Normandy. The Marches of Neustria and pre-Norman Normandy are described as places of wilderness and uninhabited except by wild beasts and thus the Dukes of Normandy legitimise their arrival from Scandinavia to settle that region of Frankish territory. Just as the Norman Dukes felt compelled to construct a legitimacy around their actions the Cistercian houses appear to be creating their own respective foundation narratives. The early twelfth century was a period of increasing administrative bureaucracy. Perhaps it is not for nothing that Aelred of Rievaulx is praised for his administrative competency. Written proof of entitlement was increasingly necessary, as seen in the expansion of cartularies, in an increasingly administrative world. This practical application of a foundation history as a document having some legal sway is surely only made stronger by the narrative of a monastic house being the first building to be built in that place. If a place that was considered to have been a wilderness and or a

wasteland is settled and built on for the first time by a particular monastic community then there is a whole extra aspect of legitimacy and primacy associated with that monastic house.

It is interesting at this point to consider briefly the sites of the Cistercian houses of Fountains Abbey and Rievaulx Abbey, both in Yorkshire. It can be argued that, on a purely practical level, there is no need to clear the land of preexisting settlements to make way for a monastic community if a potential site is considered wasteland. Great swathes of the landscape of northern England after the harrying of the north by William the Conqueror in the winter of 1069 and 1070 was described in the Domesday Book survey as "*wasta est*". With particular focus on the West and North Ridings of Yorkshire, where Fountains and Rievaulx respectively