



How do the foundation narratives of Byland, Fountains, Jervaulx, and Kirkstall Abbeys formulate Cistercian memory in Northern England?

The Cistercians were founded in 1098 as a reformatory order in opposition to contemporary monasticism. The order became one of the largest in Europe, spreading quickly across the continent and parts of the Middle East from their origins in Burgundy (France), particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Cistercians founded their first English monastery at Waverley (near Farnham, Sussex) in 1128, but it was in Yorkshire that they made the largest impact – founding or absorbing eight abbeys there between 1132 and 1150,¹ which themselves went on to become mother houses of new monasteries across the Britain Isles and into Western Europe.

This essay will be looking at the surviving foundation histories of four of the Yorkshire Cistercian houses: Byland, Fountains, Jervaulx, and Kirkstall. These texts are narratives describing the founding of the communities, and although not unique to Yorkshire monasteries or even to the Cistercians, they provide detailed accounts of the events (true or not) which are useful for historiographical study. They serve several general purposes: to record the history of each of the sites for posterity,² to legitimise the claims made in them, to prove adherence to the Rule of Saint Benedict (both practically and allegorically), and to establish an identity specifically in Northern England. Individual narratives may also have their own purpose. Each of these purposes will be discussed in this essay and will be linked to wider Cistercian history and writings. For the purposes of consistency, “Northern England” or any variant thereof is defined by the accepted modern definition consisting of the North East, the North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber.

History of the *Fundationes*³

The original *Historia Fundationis* (foundation history) of Byland and Jervaulx were both written by Phillip, third abbot of Byland Abbey, who states in the Byland part of the text that he wrote it in 1197.⁴ It is likely that the Jervaulx text was written around the same time, as it is clear from the narrative that the two texts are meant to form a cohesive

¹ Rievaulx, Fountains, Kirkstall, Roche, Meaux, and Sawley were founded as new monasteries; Byland and Jervaulx were moved to Cistercian ownership when the Savigniac Order was absorbed by them in 1147.

² As is literally stated so in the Byland foundation history.

³ When appropriate, and for lack of a cohesive collective term, I shall refer to these texts under the plural “fundationes” for the rest of this essay.

⁴ Janet Burton, *The Foundation History of the Abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx* (Borthwick Publications, 2006).

singular work to reflect the mother/daughter link between the houses (for example, the end of the Byland text has a transitional sentence which indicates the story will now move to Jervaulx, its daughter house). The stated purpose for writing these narratives is stated explicitly in the text: to record the history in writing so that the story cannot be changed or forgotten if it were to be remembered only orally. Unfortunately the original text has not survived, nor are there any extant manuscript copies from the time; the only copy that currently exists was transcribed 450 years later by seventeenth-century antiquarians, with older more contemporary documents (possibly including the original) lost sometime after 1649.⁵ Compared to the two other *Fundationes* in this essay, the narrative seems to be more concerned with land ownership and legitimacy rather than reinforcing Cistercian ideals through storytelling, with both texts including several legal charters that the other two do not.

The *Narratio de Fundatione* (foundation narrative) of Fountains Abbey spans the first ninety years of the site and was written by Hugh of Kirkstall during an extended period between 1205 and 1226,⁶ at the request of the reigning abbot: John of York. The stated purpose for this is to show “*by whose influence and in what manner our holy mother, the church of Fountains, over which by God’s grace you (Abbot John) now preside, was first founded*”. The earliest extant manuscript is a fifteenth-century copy held at Trinity College, Cambridge,⁷ itself thought to have been copied from an earlier manuscript from Fountains.⁸ This is the largest of the four texts analysed in this essay and additionally serves as a (brief) foundation story for Rievaulx Abbey, which does not have an independent foundation story of its own.⁹

The *Fundacio Abbathie de Kyrkestall* (Foundation of Kirkstall Abbey) was written around 1210,¹⁰ and was also written over an extended period. The only extant manuscript is a

⁵ Burton, *The Foundation History of the Abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx*.

⁶ Elizabeth Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Writing in England, 1150 - 1220*, Medieval Church Studies, 2 (Brepols Publishers, 2002).

⁷ Gale MS 1104

⁸ Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Writing in England, 1150 - 1220*.

⁹ At least, not one that survives – though I suspect due to the importance and sheer size of the abbey it probably did have one. There are snippets of history contained in the Fountains story and also in the Life of Aelred of Rievaulx, both of which I shall refer to later on.

¹⁰ Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Writing in England, 1150 - 1220*.

fifteenth-century copy held at the Bodleian,¹¹ its provenance unknown. This text is unusual in that, unlike the others, the narrative goes well beyond the early days of the abbey and into the early fourteenth century. Lexical analysis has shown that the author of the first part of the text, detailing the foundation of the abbey, was likely to have been written by Hugh of Kirkstall – with the rest of the document being added to over time.¹² The purpose of the text is not stated, however it is likely to be similar to the other texts in that its aim is to preserve its own history. There is some panegyric text written about the nobleman funder of the abbey, Henry de Lacy, the likes of which is not seen in such detail in the other works – indicating perhaps a commissioner for the work.¹³

The texts used for this essay are English translations of the original works. For Byland and Jervaulx, a translation by Janet Burton will be used.¹⁴ For Fountains, an abridged translation provided during class will be used and will be supplemented by the 1910 translation by AW Oxford.¹⁵ Finally, for Kirkstall, an 1895 translation by Edwin Kitson Clark will be used.¹⁶

Cistercian Ideals in the *Fundationes*

The core tenet of Cistercian belief was to abide by the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. The text was written by Benedict of Nursia c. 530 and details both spiritual and practical rules for monks to follow. Benedict himself withdrew from Roman society in the sixth century to become a hermit, emulating the Christian pioneer monks of Egypt and Palestine, such as Paul of Thebes and Anthony the Great, who settled in the desert four centuries prior to Benedict writing, withdrawing from society to seek hesychasm. Benedict eventually

¹¹ Laud MS, Misc. 722

¹² For purposes of consistency, I will only be analysing the first part of the text which documents the foundation and early history from 1147 to 1210 and was likely written by Hugh of Kirkstall. Following this, a list of successive abbots is provided and then the narrative resumes with a different author in 1287 going up until 1304 – taking up more than half of the text. I have deemed the portion after 1210 to be out of scope of this essay.

¹³ “Most notable and noteworthy” for example as a descriptor – but very generally presenting him as a generous and pious nobleman who always had the monks at heart.

¹⁴ Burton, *The Foundation History of the Abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx*.

¹⁵ A.W. Oxford, ‘The Story of the Foundation of the Monastery of Fountains in the County of York’, in *The Ruins of Fountains Abbey* (Oxford University Press, 1910), pp. 127–231.

¹⁶ Edwin Kitson Clark, ‘Foundation of the Abbey of Kirkstall’, in *The Publications of the Thoresby Society, Miscellanea* (Leeds, 1895), Volume IV, pp. 173–208
<<https://archive.org/details/publicationstho13socigoog/page/n274/mode/2up>> [accessed 29 December 2025].

became the abbot of Monte Cassino in central Italy, where he wrote *The Rule of Saint Benedict*.

The Cistercians were founded as a reformatory order against the Benedictines, a monastic order founded in the ninth century who followed the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, as some monks felt they and their brethren had strayed too far from the *Rule*, becoming too wealthy and self-serving; neglecting or attenuating several of the rules as laid out by Benedict. The Cistercian Order was founded in response – with a core aim of wanting to return to the more primitive form of monastic life as described in the *Rule*, emphasis of which can be seen in varying extents across the four Yorkshire *Fundationes* texts.

One of the major emphases was the “rediscovery” of the desert. New Benedictine monasteries had become less remote with time, even being founded within towns.¹⁷ The desire to return to solitude was one of the key tenets of the Cistercian order. However, the geography of Western Europe presented a challenge: there were no deserts in the traditional understanding of the word. The Cistercians thus built upon the story of Benedict, who had retreated to a mountain cave, and re-interpreted it to suit local geographies: choosing secluded areas away from towns (forests, moorland, etc) to found new sites.¹⁸

The Fountains Abbey *narratio* opens with an introduction explaining the story is being relayed by an elderly monk, Serlo, who left the Benedictine monastery of St Mary’s Abbey in York to join the Cistercians at Fountains,¹⁹ and eventually becoming a founding brother of Kirkstall. Having a reliable narrator introduced in the prologue, somebody who participated in and witnessed the events at hand, is a common way to denote trustworthiness and accuracy in medieval chronicles, especially in the twelfth-century – the so-called golden age of historical writing.²⁰ Fountains is mentioned first in the introduction and is said to have been founded in a place of “horror and vast solitude”, alluding to Deuteronomy 32:10.²¹ This is followed by a more subdued depiction of the

¹⁷ Janet Burton and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Boydell Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Although rarely too far away from major towns and travel hubs, as I will explain later.

¹⁹ That is, once it was established. He was not part of the original splinter group that left St Mary’s.

²⁰ Chris Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (Hambledon and London, 2004).

²¹ “He discovered him in a desert land, in a place of horror and a vast wilderness”

founding of Rievaulx Abbey. Numerous instances of botanic imagery are used throughout these first two parts as if to reinforce the imagery of the wilderness: “blessed vine”, “extending its branches”, and describing the creation of a new monastery as “planting an offshoot”, as well as further reference to Biblical verse with the breakaway monks wishing to be “grafted into the fatness of the olive tree” – an allusion to Romans 11:17.²² Later in the text, the future site of Fountains is described as “*uninhabited, covered with thorns, lying between the mountains and the rocks, more suitable for the lairs of wild beasts than the habitation of man*”. The narrative of the re-discovery of the desert and subsequent taming of the land in this story upholds Cistercian ideals.

In the Byland and Jervaulx *Fundationes*, the emphasis on wilderness is more subtle. Several instances of the physical unsuitability of the land when building are mentioned, but the bulk of the texts refer to legal land ownership disputes rather than defining the wilderness. In the Byland text, it is mentioned that the land the monks eventually settle on is swampy woodland, which needs cultivation by draining and chopping down trees. In the Jervaulx text, we see a variant of the Deuteronomy 32:10 allusion, when a manifestation of Jesus as a child leads them to the site of their new monastery: “*a very dreadful and uncultivated place*”. Besides these negative examples, compared to the other two texts, there is not much emphasis on wilderness and the focus is largely around the legality of land ownership. The narrative almost seems to be a vehicle for a text designed to establish ownership of various land plots and holdings.

The emphasis, however, is not always on the negatives of the proposed site. The Kirkstall *Fundacio* somewhat bucks the trend by having the monks settle their original site in the (then) remote Lancashire village of Barnoldswick, on the grounds of which there is already an ancient church. The local parishioners allegedly became a nuisance to the monastery,²³ leading to the abbot ordering the church to be torn down. The monks are prosecuted for this, but the archbishop rules in their favour. The monks resume monastic life on the site but are plagued by years of torrential rains which ruin their

²² “If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,”

²³ The specifics of the nuisances are not mentioned.

crops, and are additionally victims to multiple raids by invading armies.²⁴ Deeming the site unsuitable, the abbot began to search for another site – stumbling across one whilst out on an errand which was already settled by religious hermits. This site is described as “wooded and shady”, “pleasant”,²⁵ and having a river and “woods adjacent being suitable for the erection of workshops”. A similar description of the site of Rievaulx Abbey can be seen in *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx*, where it is described as “*clothed by trees of various sorts and maintain in pleasant retreats the privacy of the vale, providing for the monks a kind of second paradise of wooded delight*”.²⁶ The abbot gently admonishes the hermits for not belonging to any specific order and convinces some of them to join the Cistercians. We see here too a nod to the desert fathers and mothers; the implication being that the hermits already on the site serve as inspiration for the Cistercians to build their site there.

The landscape is not described in negative terms to begin with; the only blockage is the hermits who are easily won over. However, once the ownership of the site has transferred to the monks, it becomes “*a place covered with woods and unproductive of crops, a place well nigh destitute of good things save timber and stone*” and it is only through the hard manual labour of the monks that the land is cleared and made suitable for use. This taming of nature can be seen as allegorical and is common across Cistercian writing; the implication seemingly being that they alone are able to transform these places of horror and isolation into holy spaces through hard work. All four of the *Fundationes*, to some extent or other, attempt to create a strong sense of Cistercian memory via imagery related to the spaces in which they come to inhabit.

Yorkshire (and the north of England in general) would likely have been seen as an appealing location to the Cistercians. Population estimates of Medieval England are difficult to assess, but the north was already less populated than the south prior to the Harrying of the North in 1069,²⁷ in which a large number of the population was murdered

²⁴ Given the timeframe mentioned in the introduction as “during the reign of King Stephen”, this must either refer to general Anarchy skirmishes or the Scottish invasion of England as orchestrated by King David I.

²⁵ The term pleasant is used three times to describe it.

²⁶ Walter Daniel, F.M. Powicke, and Marsha Dutton, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx & The Letter to Maurice*, Cistercian Fathers Series, 57 (Cistercian Publications, 1994).

²⁷ ‘Map | Domesday Book’, n.d. <<https://opendomesday.org/map/>> [accessed 4 January 2026].

or displaced by the Normans,²⁸ bringing land under Norman control. From the perspective of the Cistercians, this was an ideal place to settle and grow; the population was lower, but they still had access to large trading hubs, an appealing rural and wild landscape standing in for the Cistercian idea of the desert, and compared to the south there were fewer monasteries of other orders in the area – making it a prime area to target for expansion.²⁹

Three of the *Fundationes* have a common theme in that the original site chosen for the monasteries is unsuitable and relocation is necessary³⁰ – especially Byland, where the monks occupied a total of five sites. The original splinter group of Savigniac monks that eventually become Cistercian and found Byland Abbey are originally from Furness Abbey in Cumbria,³¹ which eventually became a Cistercian monastery itself but at this point belonged to the Savigniac Order. Some land was donated by a local nobleman for them to build a new abbey at Calder (some 35 miles north), but it proved unsuitable due to being the target of Scottish raids. The abbot proposed the monks head back to Furness, but they were refused entry on the grounds that it would not be appropriate for a house to have two abbots – with the abbot of Calder refusing to resign. They eventually settled on a new site in Hood, North Yorkshire, which was donated by a noblewoman, but found it to be too close to Rievaulx Abbey (approximately six miles away) and each abbey reported that the bells of the other abbey were in earshot and causing confusion and annoyance between the two orders. Another move ensued and proved unsuitable before a local noble donated further land to them at Old Byland, which was used only as a temporary stopgap until, in the year they became Cistercians, they moved to Byland Abbey as we know it today which was built in woodland on the outskirts of the village of Coxwold. In the story of Jervaulx, the original site (Fors Abbey) is settled for ten years before moving to another site, the land for which was donated by a nobleman. However, when setting off to the new site, the monks found they did not know the way, and were

²⁸ Estimates vary substantially on casualty numbers – but the Domesday book can be interpreted to imply that at least 75% of the population was killed or displaced.

²⁹ ‘The Cistercians in Yorkshire’, n.d. <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/>> [accessed 28 December 2025].

³⁰ The relocation of Kirkstall is discussed in detail above

³¹ The monks that founded Furness themselves relocated from an original site in Preston. Relocation seems to be a common theme in Cistercian writing, at least in England.

led there by the child Jesus at the request of the Virgin Mary. Because all Cistercian buildings are devoted to Mary, this shows a divine endorsement for the new site. From these examples, we can be inferred that the suggestions of land parcels from nobles, although appreciated and used, are not suitable – and it is in fact the monks themselves that end up finding the final site through discovery or through divine guidance,³² the implication being they have a sort of preternatural ability or holy assistance to “correctly” select monastic sites.

In reality, the monasteries are secluded rather than isolated; the Cistercians were not true isolationists in vein of the desert fathers and mothers, but instead opted to seclude themselves in areas that, whilst wild and unsettled, are not far from the practicalities of large settlements.³³ It may therefore be suggested that the idea of a desert is more allegorical than it is geographical; the secluded locations of the monasteries were far away enough from society to promote a sense of independence and to remove distractions which may impede the spiritual development of the monks, but close enough to society to enable trade and provide routes for travel. Furthermore, it differentiated them from the Benedictines, who were focusing more on building monasteries in or very close to urban areas.

Another major emphasis in Cistercian belief was that of apostolic poverty. Many monasteries prior to 1098 had grown wealthy due to patrons and benefactors, the monks' lives entirely liturgical with no time for work because of the embellishment of the canonical hours defined by Benedict.³⁴ Many Benedictine and Cluniac abbeys were lavishly decorated, particularly Cluny – from which the phrase “the beauty of holiness” is said to come from as a result of its lavish decoration.³⁵ The four *Foundationes* reinforce the idea of apostolic poverty in numerous ways, often through imagery of starvation and food scarcity, but most explicitly in the Fountains text. In that text, numerous references are made to poverty as part of the narrative, whereas in the others it is reduced to a

³² The land at Byland IS donated by a nobleman, but it appears to be a large parcel of land on which the monks specify their own final location.

³³ Today - Fountains is 3 miles from Ripon, Rievaulx is 4 miles from Helmsley, Kirkstall is 3 miles from Leeds city centre, and Jervaulx is approximately 14 miles from both Ripon and Richmond – with numerous smaller towns along the way.

³⁴ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*.

³⁵ Burton and Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages*.

couple of sentences – mentioned but not the focus. For example, in the Fountains text, the monks are forced to take shelter underneath an elm tree for over a year prior to their entry to the Cistercian order, eating the leaves of the tree to survive. Additionally, and despite their poverty, they are able to donate bread to a homeless man and in return are rewarded for their kindness when a nobleman hears of the act and provides them with bread. A reference to them being unaccustomed to this lifestyle of poverty subtly criticises their old order: “*So lived these holy men, once used to luxury, eating bread by weight and pottage by measure*”.³⁶ Shortages of food are also seen in the Byland and Jervaulx texts, with money and crop failures both causing issue. The Kirkstall text contains a single line alluding to poverty: “*For six years and more they remained there in unbroken poverty and lack of food and clothing*”.³⁷ In addition to this, homelessness and ephemeral housing is prevalent in all four *Fundationes* – emphasising the holy struggle of the monks as they move around constantly due to land issues or money problems before settling on their final site and building a community. In this manner, the northern English *Fundationes* have continued the Cistercian ideals of poverty through their narratives, reinforcing the values of the order to varying extents.

The Fundationes and Northern Cistercian Identity

The Cistercians rapidly colonised Northern England, with 12 out of the 13 total houses in the north being founded by 1152.³⁸ In turn, these houses founded many daughter houses across England, Scotland, and even Norway.³⁹ Many of the houses were founded by monks originating from Yorkshire.⁴⁰ Of the 13 Northern houses, Fountains and Rievaulx were the only two originating from a Continental house (Clairvaux Abbey, France – one of the four primary daughter houses of Cîteaux, the first Cistercian monastery), with the others being founded as daughter or granddaughter houses consisting of northern monks,⁴¹ or in two cases incorporated into the Cistercian order from the Savigniac order (Furness and Byland).

³⁶ Oxford, ‘The Story of the Foundation of the Monastery of Fountains in the County of York’.

³⁷ Kitson Clark, ‘Foundation of the Abbey of Kirkstall’.

³⁸ The final one, Whalley Abbey, would not be built until the end of the 13th century.

³⁹ ‘The Cistercians in Yorkshire’.

⁴⁰ ‘The Cistercians in Yorkshire’.

⁴¹ With the exception of Whalley Abbey which was founded by monks from Combermere Abbey in Cheshire.

As well as reinforcing Cistercian ideals and providing a foundation narrative to be passed onto future generations of monks (and potentially benefactors), the *Foundations* also help to create a specific Northern English Cistercian identity.

In the Fountains text, the breakaway of the monks from the Benedictine St Mary's Abbey in York, who eventually found Fountains Abbey, mirrors the founding story of the Cistercians with the monks from Molesme Abbey breaking away to eventually found Cîteaux as told in the *Exordium Parvum*.⁴² The events of both stories are thirty-four years apart,⁴³ but the reasons given for the breakaways are the same: the monks at Saint Mary's became conscious of the transgressions of Benedict's rules and wished to follow them more closely. They explicitly state that they wish to join the Cistercian order, as it had been expanding rapidly across Western Europe⁴⁴, particularly in France, and had recently spread to England.⁴⁵ The first Cistercian house in England (Waverley Abbey) had been founded three years prior in 1128 – and over time seeded several southern and central English daughter houses. A house in Wales, Tintern Abbey, was also established in 1131. There was, however, limited Cistercian presence in the north; Rievaulx abbey was founded in 1132 (presumably earlier than Fountains, if the order of the narrative is accurate), a short distance outside York, by monks from Clairvaux Abbey – and undoubtedly news would have spread across the region that this reformative movement had settled in the North – likely acting as a catalyst for the story of St Mary's, the events of which occurred the same year.

When comparing the *Exordium Parvum* and the Fountains text, both the monks at Molesme and the monks at Saint Mary's have to overcome the objections of their abbot and fellow brethren, who try to stop them from leaving with punitive threats. Both sets of monks also receive ecclesiastical support for their leaving the monastery, with Archbishop Thurstan of York fully in support of the York monks' endeavours to leave the

⁴² 'Exordium Parvum : Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance: OCSO', n.d.

<<https://ocso.org/resources/foundational-text/exordium-parvum/>> [accessed 31 December 2025].

⁴³ 1098 for the Molesme monks; 1132 for the St Mary's monks.

⁴⁴ 'CISTOPEDIA: CISTOPEDIA - Encyclopædia Cisterciensis', n.d. <<https://www.cistopedia.org/>> [accessed 31 December 2025].

⁴⁵ The chronological list of houses given on the Cistopedia website lists 70 monasteries founded from 1098 – 1131. This number, however, is likely not accurate – for example it lists Furness Abbey in there which although was built during this time, it was a Savigniac house that did not transfer to the Cistercians until 1147. Still, the number of foundations is still very high for a 34-year period.

Benedictine monastery. A lengthy letter is included in the Fountains text, allegedly written by Archbishop Thurstan to Archbishop William de Corbeil (Archbishop of Canterbury), which details the story of the breakaway and launches into a reproving attack on Benedictine monasticism. The letter ends with a request to the Archbishop of Canterbury to restore peace between the breakaway and original monastic groups at York, and requesting that they be exempt from a mandate issued by Pope Urban II for the abbot (of Fountains) to return to York.⁴⁶ It is clear that this letter is meant to present Fountains Abbey as a direct parallel to Cîteaux, transposing the story to Northern England and seeding the roots of the northern Cistercian order. The comparison to Cîteaux implies this is the primary Cistercian monastery in the north, regardless of Rievaulx being founded the same year, because it is presenting the story as a resetting of the *Exordium Parvum*; the twelve founding members of Fountains were all from Yorkshire (or at least the north) whereas the original founding members of Rievaulx were from Clairvaux. This presents Fountains as a monastery with a stronger regional identity, one comparable to Cîteaux in its importance. Indeed, although the founding of Rievaulx is presented as an important development in the *Narratio*, it serves mostly as background to the catalyst for the St Mary's story. Rievaulx does not have a turbulent start, it is founded as part of the Cistercian expansion with no obvious roadblocks – making the story of Fountains with all the problems faced much grander in scale. Thurstan also, presumably intentionally, does not mention the existence of Waverley Abbey in southern England – further justification for this being an intentional reset of the Cîteaux story.

The criticism of the Benedictine order in the letter is frequent, and the solutions to the “problems” with the order are presented as standard Cistercian ideals. The authenticity of the letter has been called into question since at least the mid-20th century,⁴⁷ with the belief that this longer letter is likely to have been a fabricated exaggeration of a much shorter, less critical letter penned by Thurstan which is no longer extant. Thurstan

⁴⁶ The text says Urban II but I think this is a mistake. Urban II had died some 30 years previously. Urban did urge the Molesme monks to return, but it's not clear that the order was an official mandate and still in effect thirty years later. It could be a further attempt to link the two stories. I wondered initially if this were meant to say Pope Innocent II, the pope contemporary to the letter, but he was actually very supportive of the Cistercian order.

⁴⁷ LGD Baker, 'The Foundation of Fountains Abbey', *Northern History*, 4.1 (1969), pp. 29–43.

himself retired to a Benedictine monastery in his old age,⁴⁸ which makes his extensive criticism of the order somewhat unlikely. However, as Freeman points out,⁴⁹ the letter was deemed to be authentic when included in the text (evidenced by Hugh, author of the *Narratio*, explicitly stating that the letter will be inserted into the narrative to strengthen the evidence of the truth, right before the letter appears) and thus should be considered as part of the story regardless of its origins.

Byland also presents the idea of a northern identity, but in an altogether different manner. The story opens with a similar breakaway of monks from Furness Abbey – but presented differently in that they are not breaking away due to non-adherence to the Rule of Benedict, but because a nobleman donated land to found a new monastery in Calder and they left to become its founding brothers. This is unsuccessful, and after several other failed attempts they finally settle at Byland Abbey. It is important to note whilst most of the key events of the foundation story take place whilst these monks are still subject to the Savigniac order, the text itself was written by a Cistercian monk after the merger between the Savigniac Order and the Cistercian Order occurred in 1148,⁵⁰ so promotion of the Cistercian Order is evident. Indeed, when the merger is mentioned within the text, the succeeding paragraph details the extensive land granted to the monks of Byland abbey by various northern lords. So comprehensive is the list that it ends with “...and various grants from many others whose names I omit because to include them would be tedious for the reader”. Although gifted land is mentioned prior to the merger as well, it seems to imply here that the land is donated because they had become Cistercian – showing that the Cistercians already had widespread support and the nobles wanted to assist with their growth within the north. With these land gifts, as well as the ones donated to the monks whilst in the Savigniac order, Byland became a powerful land holder in the north of England. When plotting these holdings on a map (see figure one below), we can visualise just how much land Byland owned in the north – primarily in Yorkshire but also in Cumbria.⁵¹ It is clear when comparing the Byland text to

⁴⁸ Baker, ‘The Foundation of Fountains Abbey’.

⁴⁹ Freeman, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Writing in England, 1150 - 1220*.

⁵⁰ Burton, *The Foundation History of the Abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx*.

⁵¹ Please note that whilst every land holding mentioned in all four texts was attempted to be marked on the map, a few were impossible to find on Google maps for several reasons: lost place names, substantial changes in spelling or complete changes of name, and modern irrelevance of now remote sites. Most of

the Fountains text that the purpose is markedly different. The Fountains text barely mentions land holdings,⁵² because it concentrates more on being a northern resetting of the *Exordium Parvum*, but actually held around 140 holdings across the north and into Lincolnshire – eventually making it the richest Cistercian monastery in England.⁵³ Byland also owns a significant amount of land and it is this that the author chooses to emphasise. This all adds to the concept of a Northern Cistercian identity through sheer geographical presence; the abbey owned and managed so much land that it likely made them wealthy, influential, and famous across the north.

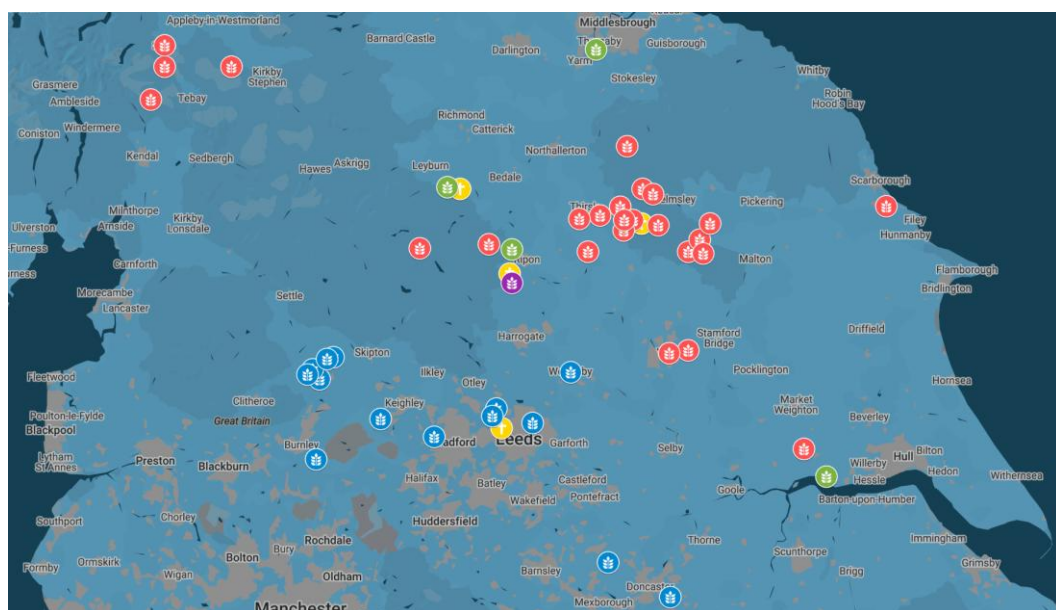


Figure 1: The four houses of the Fundationes and their land holdings, as mentioned in the texts. Yellow crosses indicate the four monastic sites, with red leaves indicating land held by Byland, green Jervaulx, purple Fountains, and blue Kirkstall.

The Jervaulx text has a strong running theme of land ownership, with the monks having to fight for the right for their monastery to even exist after it was founded without express permission of the Order (as well as numerous deeds and titles peppered throughout the text), but is additionally the only one of the four stories to have divine approval for their site. The presence of Mary in the that scene ties the site specifically to the Cistercians through their affiliation with her. Not many land holdings are mentioned in the text compared to Byland (See figure one), which implies that it was not the

the missing ones come from the Byland text, the red symbols of which in figure 1 already dominate the map even without the inclusion of these extra places.

⁵² Only two major plots of land are mentioned – one of which I could not find to mark on the map.

⁵³ ‘The Cistercians in Yorkshire’.

primary purpose of the text. Instead, the text seems to be about legitimacy of ownership, attempting to prove that the Cistercians had the right to be there in the first place.

The Kirkstall story also emphasises land ownership, but from the angle of contestation and ownership. A noble benefactor donates money and land in Barnoldswick (Lancashire) to Fountains Abbey to create a new Cistercian monastery – however the land was not his to give and the monks were not aware. Believing they had rights to the land, they tore down an existing church there which led to litigation (which the monks won). Additionally, the land the monks build Kirkstall Abbey on was already being lived on by hermits – themselves somewhat representing the desert fathers – and the eremitical lifestyles already lived there highlight that the land is suitable for settlement of Cistercians (and as if to highlight this, some of the hermits do join the order). Numerous holdings are mentioned (plotted on figure one above) across Lancashire and modern-day West and South Yorkshire, again placing a geographical hold on the area which would have made them well known and probably wealthy. The geographical spread of the sites is in a completely different locale to Byland and the others too – carving out their own niche in the local area.

Conclusion

The four *Fundationes* strongly reinforce existing Cistercian memory and identity, but are collectively also used to create a new Northern English identity for the order too – a subset of the Cistercians who became extremely wealthy and influential, seeding many daughter houses across the country and even abroad. A resetting of the *Exordium Parvum* is needed to legitimise this, and also to set Fountains up as a primary English monastery in the style of Cîteaux. In order to do this, the story is transposed to the North of England and Cistercian ideals are explicitly stated and emphasised throughout – especially in comparison to other orders like the Benedictines. In comparison, the Byland and Jervaulx texts have a much more subtle and subdued presentation of the ideals – because they have a different purpose: to emphasise and record land holdings. All four texts have different individual purposes, separate to the stated purpose, and demonstrate this through a narrative and inclusion of legal documents and letters. The Cistercians carved out a remarkable physical and spiritual history on the British Isles,

leaving behind transformed landscapes, beautiful architecture, and establishing local industries. This all started with their presence in Northern England, and it is these four narratives where the seeds are planted for posterity.

Bibliography

Baker, LGD, 'The Foundation of Fountains Abbey', *Northern History*, 4.1 (1969), pp. 29–43

Burton, Janet, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000 - 1300*, Cambridge Medieval Textbooks (Cambridge University Press, 1994)

——, *The Foundation History of the Abbeys of Byland and Jervaulx* (Borthwick Publications, 2006)

——, and Julie Kerr, *The Cistercians in the Middle Ages* (Boydell Press, 2011)

'CISTOPEDIA: CISTOPEDIA - Encyclopædia Cisterciensis', n.d.
<<https://www.cistopedia.org/>> [accessed 31 December 2025]

Daniel, Walter, F.M. Powicke, and Marsha Dutton, *The Life of Aelred of Rievaulx & The Letter to Maurice*, Cistercian Fathers Series, 57 (Cistercian Publications, 1994)

Donkin, R. A., 'The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England', *Geographical Review*, 59.3 (1969), pp. 403–16, doi:10.2307/213484

'Exordium Parvum : Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance: OCSO', n.d.
<<https://ocso.org/resources/foundational-text/exordium-parvum/>> [accessed 31 December 2025]

Fletcher, JS, *The Cistercians in Yorkshire* (The Macmillan Company, 1919)

Freeman, Elizabeth, *Narratives of a New Order: Cistercian Writing in England, 1150 - 1220*, Medieval Church Studies, 2 (Brepols Publishers, 2002)

Given-Wilson, Chris, *Chronicles: The Writing of History in Medieval England* (Hambledon and London, 2004)

Kitson Clark, Edwin, 'Foundation of the Abbey of Kirkstall', in *The Publications of the Thoresby Society, Miscellanea* (Leeds, 1895), Volume IV, pp. 173–208
<<https://archive.org/details/publicationsth013socigoog/page/n274/mode/2up>> [accessed 29 December 2025]

'Map | Domesday Book', n.d. <<https://opendomesday.org/map/>> [accessed 4 January 2026]

Matarasso, Pauline, and Various, *The Cistercian World: Monastic Writings of the Twelfth Century* (Penguin Classics, 1993)

Oxford, A.W., 'The Story of the Foundation of the Monastery of Fountains in the County of York', in *The Ruins of Fountains Abbey* (Oxford University Press, 1910), pp. 127–231

'The Cistercians in Yorkshire', n.d. <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/blogs/cistercians/>> [accessed 28 December 2025]

White, Carolinne, and Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict* (Penguin Classics, 2008)