

The Cistercians in the Middle Ages

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For many, the Cistercian order remains the medieval monastic success story *par excellence*. With this new history of the White Monks and Nuns, two of the UK's leading monastic scholars present an engaging and authoritative history of the Cistercian order from its origins to the end of the Middle Ages. This volume, a further contribution to Boydell's excellent *Monastic Orders* series, is a wide-ranging, Europe-wide history of the Cistercians, considering them in the religious, cultural, political and economic contexts of their world and time.

The usefully wide geographical approach chosen by the authors provides a meaningful framework both for a greater understanding of the Cistercian order, and for a comprehensive evaluation of its historiography. Although a large number of examples are taken from the British Isles, reflecting the authors' own research foci, these serve to exemplify the great variety of experiences within what is generally regarded as a monastic order that excelled by virtue of its unifying and unified structure across medieval Europe. This history, then, takes us from the origins of the Cistercian order through nearly half a millennium, tracing their history, spread, and expansion throughout the Middle Ages, and considering their contributions to both the religious and secular spheres. It moreover provides a thorough and informative reassessment and update of Cistercian historiography, with particular focus on English- and French-language works.

The first two chapters, written by Janet Burton, revisit the origins of the Cistercian order: its beginnings in the forests of Burgundy; its initial difficulties; and its eventual success, tracing its expansion across 12th- and 13th-century Europe. Burton addresses the ongoing historical debate about the emergence of the

Cistercians as an 'order', which has been challenged by Constance Hoffman Berman, who argues for a later date than previous scholars. Burton convincingly defends the conclusions of the original scholarship, making particular reference to the nature and dating of early Cistercian writing, including the *Exordium Parvum*, the *Exordium Cistercii*, the *Carta Caritatis*, and the *Vita Prima* of Bernard of Clairvaux. In her second chapter, Burton explains the spread of the Cistercian order via the foundations of daughter houses, the first of which came into existence as early as 1113 at La Ferté, described in the foundation charter as a 'perfect spot for the monks to serve God'. The foundation of this first daughter house reflected the success of Cîteaux after its initial problems, and marked the beginning of what was to become a Europe-wide network of Cistercian monasteries, which, by the 13th century, extended the width and breadth of the continent.

Chapters three to eight are the work of Julie Kerr and look in illuminating detail at particular aspects of Cistercian life, spirituality, economy, and their involvement with the world outside the monastery walls. What lay behind the Cistercians' choice of sites for their emerging and expanding order? What do we really know about the day-to-day life of a White Monk? What was distinctive about Cistercian spiritual life? Kerr takes us on an insightful and thoroughly documented journey through cloister, choir and kitchen of (predominantly high) medieval Cistercian abbeys in order to show what was, and what was not, idiosyncratic about the lives and routine of the men and women in the white habits. The third chapter takes a closer look at the Cistercians' choice of sites for their monasteries, considering the ways in which the White Monks tried, often successfully, to recreate the spiritual desert image in their settlements, while simultaneously catering for their more practical, physical needs. The 'taming of the wilderness' is a recurring theme in Cistercian foundation histories, prime examples of Cistercian propaganda, which occasionally paint fanciful pictures of White Monks settling in truly horrific, savage and solitary places plagued by wild vegetation, beasts and robbers. The reality may not always have been quite as dramatic, but it is certain that the Cistercians developed a reputation among contemporary writers – an admiring Gerald of Wales among them – for turning wasteland into arable fields. Kerr then proceeds to explain the development of Cistercian sites in terms of their organization, from temporary buildings which were often simple timber structures, to the increasingly grandiose stone monasteries which still mark the landscape today, addressing also the issue of 'Cistercian styles'.

Chapter four looks at the administration of this large and growing religious order, assessing issues of internal and external authority, the ever-relevant matter of discipline in the cloister, and the figure and duties of the abbot, who played a very central role in the maintenance of order and obedience among his brethren. Kerr here succeeds in making the reader appreciate the very real achievement that was the successful organisation of a structure that sought to combine lofty ideals and (not always equally lofty) human beings. Keeping discipline within the monastery, among a group of men or women living according to a physically and mentally harsh regime, was not always an easy task for a monastic superior, as becomes clear when we consider the numerous references to (often, however, minor) transgressions committed by the monks (Kerr lists as the most common among them 'lateness, laziness, breaches of silence, and gluttony'). This chapter explains both the different types of breaches of monastic discipline committed by monks and nuns, and the measures taken accordingly by the abbot to penalize the transgressor. Moving from internal to external organization and control, Kerr leads us through the system of visitations to the annual General Chapter held at Cîteaux, considering both male and female houses of the Cistercian order and explaining the relative successes of Cistercian administration.

The following chapter is dedicated to the daily life of monks and lay brethren, the monastic *horarium* and the monks' diet. Here the harshness of monastic life is brought to life: the strict Cistercian diet (mostly bran bread, vegetables, pulses and fruit) that prohibited meat and reduced eating to a refueling exercise rather than a pleasure for the senses; the restrictions on sleep that saw the White Monks, unlike their Benedictine counterparts, spend the time between Vigils and Lauds at prayer rather than resting in bed; and the regulations on silence, which kept non-essential communication to a minimum. This, as Kerr explains, was bound to have an impact on the monks' mental wellbeing, and psychological problems were not uncommon even among monks who did not take the physical mortification to extremes.

Cistercian spirituality is the focus of the sixth chapter, and here Kerr discusses the liturgy, and what made it

'Cistercian', namely, the centrality of the Virgin, as well as the important topic of mystical writing among Cistercian authors. She also tackles the issue of the metaphysical, the presence and function of relics and saints' cults in Cistercian monasteries, and the miracles accompanying them, which occasionally boosted the Cistercian economy by drawing in pilgrims. That men and women submitting themselves over a prolonged period to intense prayer and meditation, combined with physical mortification, eating little and sleeping less, should occasionally experience what was interpreted as mystical visions or 'ecstatic trances' is perhaps not altogether surprising, nor was it a specifically Cistercian feature. Yet the Cistercians produced a notable number of mystical writers, among them Saint Bernard himself, who enhanced the order's reputation for spiritual excellence, and who have left us a very significant body of meditations on the humanity of Christ and His life.

As well as being a spiritual force, the Cistercians have often been credited with transforming the landscape in which they settled, of turning wasteland into arable fields, by virtue of the labour of both their own monkish hands, and those of the lay brotherhood attached to their monasteries. Chapter 7 deals with the issue of the *conversi* or lay brethren, who represent such a characteristic, if not unique, feature of Cistercian monasticism. Kerr examines the nature of their relationship with the fully professed members of the order, and explains their duties and activities. The final chapter draws together earlier conclusions and provides a usefully contextualizing frame for the entire book by considering the Cistercians' involvement in worldly affairs. Emphasised here are their provision of charity and their attitudes to and participation in the Crusades, including the fight against the Cathars, and the *Reconquista* in Spain, examining in particular Bernard of Clairvaux's polemic in praise of crusade and military orders.

Perhaps the main achievement of these two authors to have created a new, up-to-date history of one of the most intriguing of medieval religious orders, and to have done so in a way that is both very readable and very scholarly, including little-known evidence and introducing illustrative examples from across the whole of western Christendom. The book ends with a useful index of the Cistercian houses mentioned in the text and an extensive bibliography, as well as a glossary which explains specialist terms to the non-specialist, elements which further contribute to making this a most recommendable work for scholars and students alike, as well as for anyone with a less professional interest in one of the most enduringly fascinating religious groups of medieval Europe.

The authors thank the reviewer, and do not wish to comment further.

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