

LAY PATRONAGE OF WELSH CISTERCIAN HOUSES AND THE INFLUENCE THIS HAD ON WELSH AND ENGLISH POLITICAL HISTORY, 1150 - 1290

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In 1098, as a response to perceived laxness within traditional monasticism as followed by the Benedictines and especially the Cluniacs, a small group of monks set out from the rich Abbey of Molesme to found a new monastery, "far from the concourse of men." This *Nova Monasterium* was to be organized following a strict observance to the Rule of Saint Benedict, most of the changes in the Rule from the previous five centuries were removed. The heart of this move to a new monastery, that became a monastic movement with the first real organization, was the Englishman, Stephen Harding.

Harding, a secretary at Molesme, was the man who gathered the small group together. Within a year he was the Prior of the New Monastery, within ten he was the Abbot. During his Abbacy, the growth of what was to be called the Cistercian Order began,¹ as in 1113 a daughter house, La Ferté, and the following year a second daughter, Pontigny, are founded. Harding is credited with writing the *Carta Caritatis*, which sets out the rules of the Order.

This document was presented to Pope Calixtus II in 1119 as the constitution of the Cistercian Order. It stressed poverty, simplicity and separation from the material world.

The Order was to be outside the 'feudal order,' no monastery could own or receive tithes, churches or mills, and had to be self-sufficient. The Carta also provided

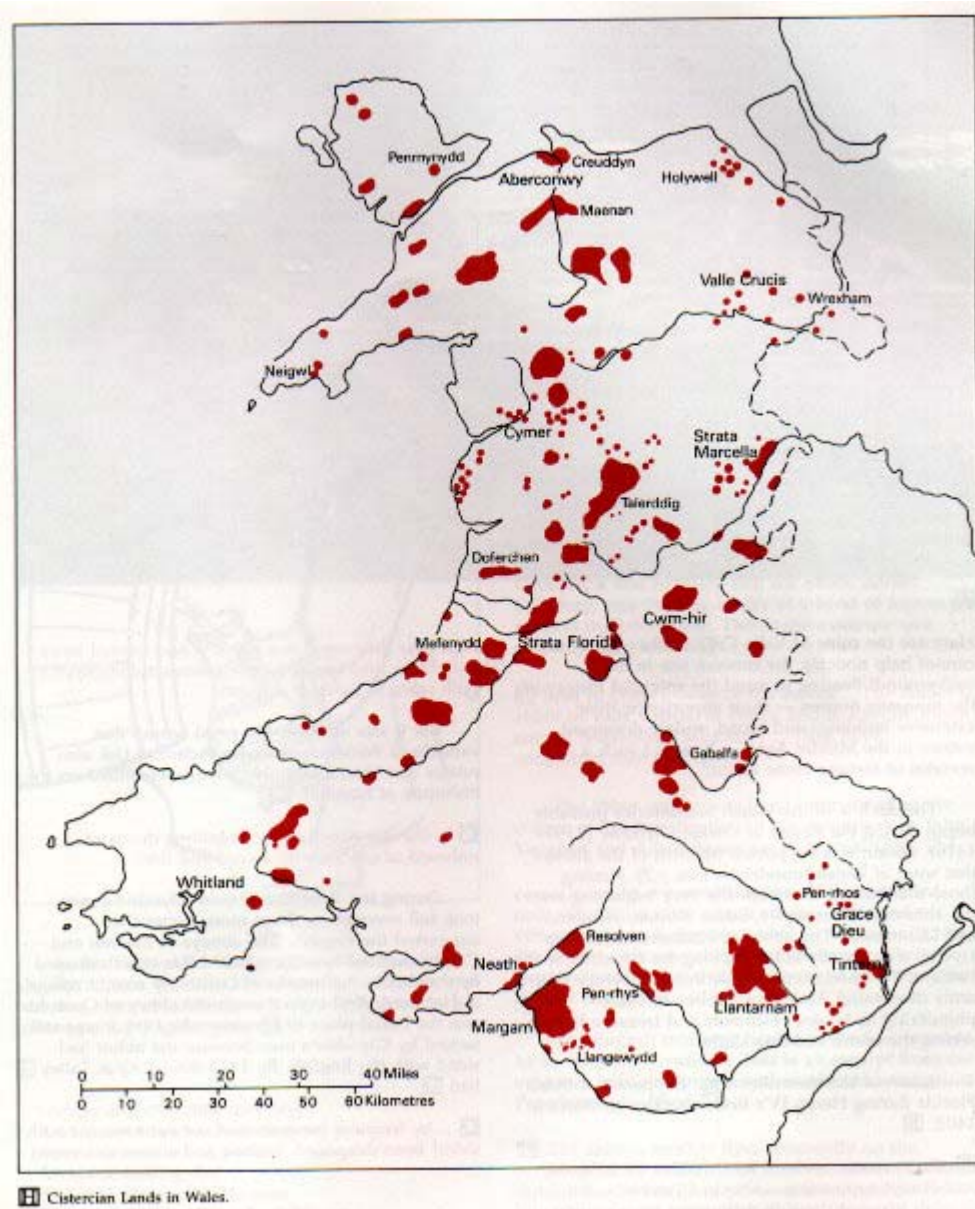
that each monastery was to be visited by its mother house to ensure that the physical and spiritual needs of the monks was met. A General Chapter was also included in the Carta, this was a meeting between the abbots of each monastery once per year to enact and enforce legislation. Other acts organized by Harding were the choice of an undyed wool habit, which gave the Cistercians their nickname, "the White Monks" and the institution of "lay brothers," uneducated "worker monks" who operated the day-to-day affairs of the monastery as well as doing the manual labor.

If Harding was the heart of the Order, Bernard became the soul. Entering Cîteaux with some companions in 1113, Bernard quickly showed his potential as a leader and was granted the Abbacy of the fourth daughter house Clavaux in 1115.² From the 1120s until his death in 1153, Bernard was the most prominent churchman in Europe. Three future popes were his pupils, as were many other church leaders. Bernard's guidance pushed the growth of the order to such an extent that when he died there were over 300 Cistercian monasteries in Europe, almost half of which were his own filiations or daughter (and grand-daughter) houses. Bernard was a general organizing his 'soldiers of Christ' as if he were "deploying shock troops"³ in vital areas around Europe.

In 1128 the Bishop of Winchester, William Giffard, chose to establish a Cistercian monastery on his lands in Surrey. L'Aumône, a daughter house of Cîteaux sent the first Cistercians to Britain. L'Aumône also sent the second group to Britain. In 1131 Walter fitz Richard founded Tintern Abbey on lands near his castle of Chepstow.

Technically a Welsh foundation, Tintern most often sided with the Normans and English rather than the Welsh.

The first Welsh Cistercian foundation that could be accurately labeled *Welsh*, was Whitland, also called *Alba Landa* and *Blanchland*. Whitland was founded in 1140, but did not settle in its permanent location until 1151, when the monks settled near the River Taf at Y Ty Gwyn ar Daf (the White House on the Taf).



Whitland was a daughter house of Clairvaux, and mother house or grand-mother house to the remaining seven purely Welsh Cistercian houses : Cwmhir, Strata Florida, Strata Marcella, Cymmer, Aberconway, Llantarnum, and Valle Crucis.⁴

The first Norman bishop of St. Davids, Bernard, was Whitland's founder. Bernard invited Clairvaux to send a colony of monks to Wales. Between 1140 and 1144, little is known about the colony, but in 1144 the monks were settled at

Treffgarn, near Haverfort West, on land provided by Bernard. John of Torrington. provided the lands for the re-foundation near the River Taf.⁵ Although its founder and first patron were Norman, the Welsh began to join and patronize the new monastery, which unlike the foundations of the Benedictines was a full and independent abbey.

Whitland was, along with the third Welsh foundation, Margam, intended to increase Norman power in Wales. In 1147 the Order of Savigny was merged with the Cistercian Order. This added two Cistercian houses in Wales: Neath, founded in 1130 and Basingwerk, founded in 1131. Neath and Basingwerk were both purely Norman monasteries and had no Welsh character or patronage. It seemed that the Cistercians would continue to be a religious arm of the Normans, just as the Benedictines had been.

Even without the support of the Welsh as patrons or recruits the abbey prospered. Soon the Welsh began to feel out the new order. This could be a sign that the Welsh were attempting to regain control of areas lost to the Norman invaders. In 1143 an abortive attempt was made at sending a colony to Maelienydd in North Wales. This meant that in just three years Whitland had grown enough to support a daughter house. This daughter house was Cwmhir. According to Lloyd, the founder Maredudd ap Maelgwn, a prince of Maelienydd, cannot be found in records at that time, but a Maredudd ap *Madog* did rule the region from 1140 to 1146.⁶

By 1164 Whitland had attracted enough monks and patronage to attempt a foundation of its own. Strata Florida, in the heart of Wales was founded by Robert fitz Stephen, the Constable of Cardigan Castle, "the chief personage in the Clare lordship

of Ceredigion."⁷ But it was not until 1165, when Rhys ap Gruffudd, Prince of Deheubarth, took control of most of central and southern Wales from the Normans, that the Welsh began to patronize and enter the Cistercian houses. Strata Florida soon became "the foremost monastic community in Wales."⁸

Rhys began generous patronage of both Whitland and Strata Florida, and so did many other high-born Welshmen. Rhys also sent his son Maredudd, blinded as a child while a hostage of Henry II, to be a monk at Whitland. The Cistercians came to be seen, not as political and economic colonies of a conquering power as the Benedictine priories and cells were, but as religious and spiritual houses. Also, since both the mother of Whitland, Clairvaux, and the motherhouse of the order were Burgundian, the order could be patronized "without compromising political loyalties."⁹

Once the Cistercians came to Wales, the Welsh began to embrace the movement. The Benedictines, which had been a forced change by the Normans, were too Norman: their purpose was to religiously conquer the Welsh. As the Welsh flocked to the Cistercians, the Cistercians began to act politically for the Welsh. By the time of the conquest of Wales by England's Edward I, the Cistercians were acting as advisors and ambassadors for the Welsh princes.

The Cistercians, especially in the north of Wales were to become the monastic group in Wales. The Welsh flocked to the Cistercians as they had shunned the groups brought by the Normans. The Benedictines were seen as the religious arm of the conquest. There were seventeen Benedictine foundations in South Wales, none in Central and North Wales, all were dependent on either English or Norman houses. Out

of the seventeen, only seven became conventual priories.¹⁰ They remained "cells," large enough for two to five monks at most. These small cells served no religious purpose, and eventually became a burden on the motherhouse.¹¹

From the late 1160s the expansion of the Cistercians in Wales begins. Over the next four hundred years the Cistercians would acquire through donations and purchasing a considerable amount of land in Wales.

¹This is from the Latin name for the area in Dijon where the New Monastery was founded: Cistertium, in French, Cîteaux. There is much speculation about what the name actually meant. The two most likely arguments are: 1) There was a Roman reservoir nearby: cisterna; and 2) The monastery was founded "just this side of the third mile marker" *cis tertium miliarium*.

²There is tremendous debate about Bernard and his place in the foundation and growth of the Cistercian order. Myth has formed around him stating that Cîteaux was dying until he entered in 1112 with his family and every friend he had, and that from this point the Order grew. See Knowles, *Order*, p. 200, *Lawrence Monasticism* p. 175, and Lynch, *Church* p. 200. However foundation charters state otherwise: La Ferte was founded in 1113 due to the fact that there were so many monks at Cîteaux that they could not all be housed. See *Lekai Ideals*, p. 18-19 The date of Bernard's entry was faked by his biographers to speed Bernard's canonization. *Bredero Cult* p. 201

³Coppack, *White Monks*. p. 11

⁴IBID. pgs. 8-19.

⁵Lloyd. pgs. 593-594.

⁶IBID. pg. 594.

⁷IBID. pg. 597.

⁸Lloyd. pg. 597.

⁹Burton. "The Cistercian Adventure" p. 22

¹⁰IBID. pg. 34.

¹¹Knowles. pg. 136.

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