

The Monastic Community

The two main constituents of a Cistercian monastic community are the choir monks (brethren) and lay brothers (*conversi*), and their respective novices. There were, however, a number of other less populace groups, all of whom contributed to the overall upkeep of the abbey and community in return for varying forms of succour or remuneration.

Choir Monks (brethren)

Choir monks, from the moment of entering their novitiate, devoted their entire life to *opus die* (the work of God); up to, and including, the moment of their death - if they were physically and coherently able to do so. From inception of the Cistercian *ordo* and establishment of the Cistercian order until 1188, any adult male over the age of fifteen years, no matter their social status, could be accepted as a novice monk into the order and, if successful in their novitiate, make their profession into the Cistercian order as a choir monk. However, the General Chapter of 1188 decreed that noblemen only could, from that moment onwards, be accepted into the order as monks.

Although no colour for the monks' habit was originally prescribed, by 1120 undyed wool (which varied in natural colour from off-white to grey, pale brown to reddish dark brown) was adopted by the order due to its relative low cost. Choir monks wore an undyed tunic and scapula; the cut of the tunic was said to be symbolic, the six panels represented the wings of the seraphim, whilst the wider sleeves represented an upward movement toward God. A cincture (rope) was worn around the waist over the tunic and a deep hood (cowl) was also worn which, when placed over the head, fully covered the face and draped over the shoulders. They wore no breeches, or any article made of lambskins. Choir monks were tonsured (the crown of the head was shaven creating a narrow crown of hair) as an act of humility and were clean shaven.

Although lay brothers undertook the majority of manual labour in the abbeys and granges, it was a key tenet of the Cistercian reform that choir monks performed manual labour on a daily basis, and specific times in the *horarium* were set aside for this. Labours performed by choir monks within the monastic precinct included; scribes, book repairers, book binders, Mass host bakers, glass blowers, locksmiths, wood turners, and domestic work within the cloister - such as cleaning and laundry. Distinction between tasks performed was not one of varied occupation, but the location of the work undertaken relative to the abbey.

Lay Brothers (*conversi*)

The institution of lay brothers arose in the late eleventh century and were a presence in the monastic communities of other orders before the founding of Citeaux, the establishment of the Cistercian *ordo* and the creation of the Cistercian order. Indeed, lay brothers were not introduced into the Cistercian order until 1115-1119, when the first daughter-houses of Citeaux were founded. What was significant, and uniquely Cistercian, was the manner in which lay brothers were integrated into the Cistercian order, that led to them becoming an integral component of the order and their proficiency as a work-force, which underpinned the evolution and success of Cistercian economies.

Novice lay brothers served a novitiate of 12 months in a like manner as novice choir monks and, similarly, were to be 15 years of age or above when admitted into the lay brother novitiate. Lay brothers took the same vows as choir monks and were, therefore, considered religious and to be treated as equals by monks in both life and death; with the same rights both material and spiritual. Lay brothers were provided clothing in accordance with the *usages* of the order; a cloak or mantle made of coarse common cloth or coarse skins (simple or lined with cloth), four tunics, footwear (shoes, clogs or sandals), and a detachable hood

that covered shoulders and chest. Additional clothing was made available for herdsmen, waggoners and shepherds. Lay brothers were not tonsured and wore beards which they were obliged to keep trim.

Their liturgical observances were less rigid than those of the choir monks and they often said their prayers at their place of work rather than returning to the church. Lay brothers did not rise until after Vigils and only followed the same times of the day as the choir monks on Sundays and twenty of the feast days. They learned by heart the required prayers of *Paternoster*, the *Credo in Deum* and *Miserere mei, Deus*.

Lay brothers enjoyed a security and continuity of employment, and experienced the benefits of belonging and a place in society that they would not have otherwise had. Although lay brothers typically came from the rural poor, often victims of village depopulation or smallholders whose lands were absorbed into the granges, there are significant instances of men of high status becoming lay brothers, such as: Alexander, a prince of Scotland, who became a lay brother in Foigny Abbey in France; Salamon, a prince of Austria, who entered into Heiligenkreuz Abbey in Austria; Wulfric of Haselbury who joined Forde Abbey in England and Count Herman III von Vireneburg who became a lay brother at Himmerod Abbey in Germany. The General Chapter of 1188 decreed that noblemen were no longer to be accepted into the Order as lay brothers. Whilst it was commonly regarded that lay brothers were, in the main, illiterate, a belief reinforced by them not being allowed to possess any books, there were many who were literate, well-educated and worldly; such as Alain of Lille, a respected academic and theologian from Montpellier who became a lay brother at Citeaux in 1192. Many were employed in skilled and managerial roles, whilst some were involved in complex political missions to the papal curia on behalf of the General Chapter or in negotiations with secular powers.

Although manual labour held significant importance to the choir monks, devotion of the time necessary for them to undertake the necessary labours of an abbey would leave the monks with insufficient time to devote to their liturgical observances. It was the lay brothers, therefore, who performed all the daily labours in the abbey and on the granges that allowed the choir monks their full observance of the Divine Office. Lay brothers were answerable to the cellarer. They carried out the monastery's business in the towns and markets, selling surplus produce and purchasing the wide range of needs of the abbey that were not met by self-sufficiency. Lay brothers were allocated to granges and lodges where they lived and worked, and only returned to the abbey on important feast days, or when they were otherwise summonsed. At the granges, lay brothers followed the calendar of the neighbouring parish churches so that their workdays coincided with those of hired labourers. Distinction between tasks performed by lay brothers was not one of varied occupation but the location of the work undertaken relative to the abbey. From the mid-twelfth century many lay brothers became more involved in monastic affairs, holding prestigious roles as abbot's representative in legal matters, as negotiators with merchants, and as managers of various other enterprises.

Throughout the thirteenth century there was a sharp decline in numbers of lay brothers that was partially the result of a greater reliance on a tenant workforce on the granges, which resulted in rebellions against a number of abbots. Another contributing factor to the dissatisfaction and subsequent decline of lay brothers was the order's refusal of the demands of those lay brothers with enhanced status for better conditions, food and clothing; which is believed to have been another causative for lay brother rebellion. A series of General Chapter prohibitions on lay brothers drinking alcohol from 1180 onwards may well have been yet another factor towards lay brother rebellions. Between 1190 and 1308 there were approximately 103 incidents of revolt throughout the order - but predominantly in France, Italy and England, 27 of which involved both monks and lay brothers. The continuing decline in lay brother numbers was significantly exacerbated by the Great Famine

of 1315-1317 and the Black Death of 1347-1351; both of which devastated European populations.

Familiars (*familiares*)

Familiars performed manual labour alongside the lay brothers, in return for which they received food, drink, clothing and accommodation. They were not professed into the order but were required to make an oath of obedience to the abbot and renounce private possessions. Although they became an increasingly important labour force as lay brother numbers declined, in 1293 the General Chapter abolished the practice of *familiares*.

Hired Labour (*mercanerii*)

Hired labour worked alongside both choir monks and lay brothers in all manual works, particularly on the granges. The distinction between tasks performed was not one of varied occupation but the location of the work undertaken relative to the abbey. As lay brother numbers diminished, hired labour supplemented, and in many instances replaced, lay brothers as the monastic labour force.

Servants

In 1287, the General Chapter permitted abbeys with less than eight lay brothers to hire servants to work in the kitchens. As lay brother numbers diminished, paid servants supplemented the monastic labour force alongside hire labourers.

Corrודians and Fugitives

Corrודians were secular individuals who retired to a monastery to live-out the remainder of their lives. Their retirement (or corrody) consisted of food, board, clothing, physical care and spiritual privileges that were either purchased (by money or land donations) or sponsored as a reward to servants and staff of royal, aristocratic and other wealthy households.

Fugitives were also secular individuals who had sought and been granted sanctuary from legal pursuit or other persecution.

Notes

scapula - a large length of cloth suspended both front and back from the shoulders of the wearer, often reaching to the knees, that originated as aprons.

seraphim - the 'burning ones', heavenly or celestial beings originating in ancient Judaism; in Christianity, they are the highest of the angelic hierarchy.

Referenced Documents

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