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REVIEWS

Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania 2000) xxiv + 382 pp.; 49 b/w illustrations; 5 appendices.

The Cistercian Order represents the most amazing success story of twelfth-century Europe, and perhaps of the entire history of monasticism. As such, it has attracted the scholarly attention of generations of academics, who interpret the early history of the Order generally as follows. Fostered by the general milieu of religious reform and by the charismatic writings of Bernard of Clairvaux, the Order grew from humble beginnings at Cîteaux into a network of abbeys radiating outward from Burgundy with astonishing speed. New monasteries were founded by a process called “apostolic gestation,” whereby a small group of monks leave the mother house to found the daughter house, and were characteristically located in remote places, according to the ideal of the “desert.” In her monograph *The Cistercian Evolution*, however, Constance Hoffman Berman gives a significantly different interpretation to the received tradition of the early Cistercian Order. Her main thesis is that the Order was officially established in the third quarter of the twelfth century, and not the first quarter. Its main form of propagation, moreover, was not “apostolic gestation,” but rather the incorporation of existing religious communities. She also challenges the traditional view that there were no Cistercian nuns in the twelfth century. In fact, her research into this particular question revealed features in the sources that were irreconcilable with the traditional history of the Cistercian Order as a whole. Attention to primary sources—including narrative accounts, charters and other documents—and archaeological evidence governs the focus of her research, and her insistence on always returning to the manuscript evidence helps reveal the inadequacy of the traditional view of Cistercian beginnings.

The monograph is divided into five chapters, the last of which serves as a conclusion of her argument and a reiteration of her thesis that the Cistercian Order did not emerge as an organized monastic order until the third quarter of the twelfth century. Chapter 1 covers the debate over the early narrative sources and examines architectural remains, particularly for women’s abbeys, which do not usually leave behind as

much documentary evidence. The following three chapters take similar approaches to different aspects of early Cistercian history, from the earliest documents, to the networks of abbeys, to the charters of patrons.

The narrative sources examined in chapter 1 are the early foundation stories of the Cistercian Order, primarily the *Exordium Cistercii* and the *Exordium Parvum*, which are the basis for the traditional history of Cistercian origins. These tell how Robert, abbot of Molesme, fled his monastery to found a new one at Cîteaux at the end of the eleventh century. The second abbot of Cîteaux, Stephen Harding, commissioned the *Summa Cartae Caritatis*, or Charter of Charity, which outlined the new order's emphasis on charity. However, none of the manuscripts which contain the *exordia* or the charter date to earlier than the 1160s, and Berman shows an often-cited papal bull of 1119, which supposedly confirmed the new order, to be a forgery. Furthermore, architectural remains of early sites and churches also serve as primary sources for understanding early Cistercian history. Berman uses such evidence to counter the claim that Cistercian houses were built on the outskirts of civilization, according to the ideal of the return to the "desert." Monasteries were dependent on a local population to tend to the farming and livestock which provided its income and subsistence. Most abbeys were therefore located in (albeit sparsely) populated farmland areas, often well-connected by roads or rivers to economic centers or other monasteries. Chapter 1 therefore exemplifies Berman's methodology of returning to physical evidence, such as manuscripts and architectural remains.

Chapter 2 examines the so-called "primitive documents," which include liturgical *ordines*, monastic regulations, the *exordia*, and the different versions of the Charter of Charity. Again, Berman examines manuscript evidence and shows that none of these sources date earlier than the 1150s. The fact that there are no remaining manuscripts referring to the Cistercian Order from the first half of the twelfth century does not necessarily mean that none ever existed. One could accuse Berman of arguing on point of lack of evidence. However, the plethora of evidence from the third quarter of the twelfth century and relative paucity of evidence from only a few decades before seems to be no coincidence. The only thing that could seriously disrupt Berman's thesis would be either the discovery of new, early manuscripts, or the discovery of faults in her analysis of the existing manuscripts.

Chapter 3 examines the expansion of the Order. Berman reclassifies early Cistercian communities as “Pre-Cistercians,” which refer to religious houses before their adoption of Cistercian customs, and “Proto-Cistercians,” which refer to these houses after their adoption of Cistercian customs and before their official integration into the Cistercian Order. What were cited as evidence of the early twelfth-century Cistercian Order are therefore more appropriately labeled “Proto-Cistercians.” This terminology also helps explain the incredible expansion the Order experienced in such a short period of time. Many religious communities actively sought out Cistercian texts and practices as part of a broader reform movement. Eventually, many of these communities were absorbed into the Order as the ecclesiastical hierarchy sought to establish firm control over independent religious communities. Very rarely were monasteries established by apostolic gestation. Berman also illustrates the highly aggrandizing motives for acquisition of property and expansion of influence on the part of Cistercian monasteries. Economic motivation was downplayed in the late twelfth-century sources in favor of the usual modes of apostolic gestation and the positive spread of religious influence. Berman would propose that this later re-writing of the realities of the history in favor of the Cistercian ideals is the true “invention” of the Order, and not the administration of Stephen Harding combined with the teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux, in the first half of the twelfth century.

Both chapters 3 and 4 contain representative surveys of specific monastic communities, mostly in southern France. The latter chapter continues this survey, describing southern French society in the light of the relations between patrons and monasteries and the charters which depict them, emphasizing in particular the roles of female patrons, as well as female religious communities. Documentary evidence for these communities was often scattered, partly because cartulary evidence for women’s houses is rarer than that for men’s, and also because women’s houses were more likely to be brought under the control of a men’s community. It is appropriate for Berman’s examination of Cistercian houses to end on this note, since it began from her attempt to pick up the scattered pieces of Cistercian women’s houses in twelfth-century southern France.

One might think that such hard evidence as is found in manuscripts and architectural remains is rather obvious; and therefore one might wonder why Berman is the first to make such assertions clear. This is a

difficult question. The answer can perhaps be found in the on-going historiographical debate concerning early Cistercian history, to which Berman's book is one of the most recent contributions. The few pages she devotes to this historiographical survey (in both chapters 1 and 2) are a strong component of her book, in my opinion, and also a telling illustration of academic politics: fear of going against an earlier generation of scholars, hesitation towards disrupting long-held views and reluctance towards sparking off new ("radical") interpretations, etc. These factors have, in Berman's view, clouded the proper study of Cistercian history in the twelfth century, making it seem more established at a much earlier date, and therefore justifying the Order's authority in the mid-to-late twelfth century.

Traditional scholarship also downplayed the role of nuns in the development of the order, which Berman labels as misogynistic and based on a limited analysis of the sources. The resolution for this debate "was deferred for nearly a generation" (55) by a 1974 paper by Louis Lekai, which separated early Cistercian history into "Cistercian Ideals" and "Cistercian Reality."¹⁰ Berman considers this thesis a convenient way to avoid the irreconcilable discrepancies between the traditional view and the contradictory evidence. Her present monograph can be seen as a direct response to the Lekai thesis.

Berman's methodology is straightforward and consistent as are her conclusions. Her approach is so thorough and so clearly explained that it is difficult to disagree with her thesis. Her use of geography, however, is confusing. Though there are several maps, they are of a limited scope, and lacking in detail as well as features that would help anchor them in an overall picture of France. Berman assumes a prior acquaintance with the monastic landscape of southern France; for someone who does not have this knowledge, the discussion of monastic locations in southern France can be confusing, even with the maps.

What I find most problematic about the book, however, is that it does not pay much attention to the overall context of the religious reform movement of the twelfth century. Comparisons to contemporary orders, such as the Cluniacs and Carthusians, would also have been illuminating. It is natural that Berman would take such a limited scope, both in geography and subject, since it enables her to be as thorough as

¹⁰Louis J. Lekai, "Ideals and Reality in Early Cistercian Life and Legislation," *Cistercian Ideals and Reality*, ed. John R. Sommerfeldt (Kalamazoo, MI 1978) 4–29, from a conference session in spring 1974 (Berman's n. 26, pp. 55, 273–274).

she is and to examine the multitude of documents properly, an examination central to her methodology. However, comparison with other religious developments of this time might have helped underscore the view of the gradual establishment of the Order by showing how the growth of wealth and membership of monastic houses led to the need for the tightening of ecclesiastical control in the early thirteenth century. Overall, though, Berman's study is an insightful contribution to the understanding of the development of the most famous monastic order of the high Middle Ages. Its conclusions represent a much-needed second look at the traditional scholarship, and highlight the all-important fact that history must always be examined in the light of its manuscript evidence.

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