CISTERCIANS AND FEUDALISM

This article is concerned with the conventional assumption that the Cistercians, in their early period, lived outside the manorial system. My interest focuses on the way in which this assumption — not always explicit — has been argued.

The Cistercian order has been seen as a movement of religious reform which emerged at the end of the eleventh century as a reaction to contemporary practice in monastic life, and which aimed to restore the letter and spirit of true Benedictine monasticism. In order to pursue the monastic vocation according to St. Benedict’s ideal, the early Cistercians — as they themselves recounted, and as was enshrined in their statutes — renounced the revenues from churches, altars, oblations, burials, tithes, ovens, mills, villages and dependent peasants. They were to live by the fruits of their own labour, frugally and austerely, in sites remote from human habitation. With the assistance of lay brothers (concerns), or even hired labour, and by organizing their estates into granaries (directly managed units), they would be in a position to fulfill this ideal.

The Cistercian interpretation of the Rule of St. Benedict has generally been accepted as "an economic program that implied a departure from the economic practices of contemporary monastic

* An earlier version of this article was published as an epilogue to my book La colonizzazione cistercense su la Mecina del Duero e il dominio di Manzana (cotti XVI- XIX) (Zaragoza, 1986). This version, which pays greater attention to the English bibliography, has benefited from the comments of colleagues in the School of History of the University of Birmingham, in particular Christopher Dyer. I am especially grateful to Rodney Hilton, whose warm interest and encouragement have been instrumental in the completion of this version, and to Jean Berrell, for her crucial assistance with the English translation.

† The Erasmianus commensius cisterciensis was composed by Stephen Harding, third abbot of Cleeve. There are many editions: I use here that based on the Latin version by Reinhart and published in the monastery of Santa Maria of Felder in 1935. The Erasmianus was reaffirmed by the statutes of the General Chapter of the order: Statuta abbatialis generalis ordinis Cisterciensis ab anno 1116 ad annum 1786, ed. J. M. Canivet, 8 vols. (Leuven, 1933-41). On the dating of these documents, see D. Kneen, “The Primitive Cistercian Documents”, in D. Kneen, Great Historical Enterprise: Problems in Monastic History (London, 1963). The standard institutional study is J. B. Mau, Ulibarri cisterciense en su gobernancia (Paris, 1945).


and secular estates', an attempt "to base monastic existence on an altogether different socio-economic system", and "to divorce Cistercian land cultivation from manorialism". Put another way, "the basic unorthodoxy introduced by the settlers at Cîteaux was the rejection of the manorial system both as a way of life and as a source of income".

As a result of the emphasis placed on the economic side of monastic life by the founders of Cîteaux, historians have tended to refer to their religious-economic precepts in order to assess the actual development of Cistercian abbeys. They have also judged whether the abbeys conformed or not to these ideals and, according to this, have identified stages of prosperity or decadence.

The outcome of this close association between religious ideal and reality was a model, today regarded as "traditional", which describes how the Cistercians, in seeking places "far from human habitation" — and given that the better lands were occupied — settled in unpopulated and unclaimed areas, resorting to large-scale land clearance and reclamation. The direct exploitation of monastic lands consolidated in compact granges practised by the monks and convents made their estates more productive. Savings derived from this rational organization and from their ascetic life could be used to extend and improve their patrimony. That is to say, these monks, by putting into practice the letter and the spirit of the Rule, unintentionally obtained a certain amount of surplus production. Trade developed as a necessary way of dealing with this surplus produce, and this in turn provided further opportunity for territorial expansion. However, one consequence of this


6 For David Knowles, this meant that "the wheel had come full circle"; D. Knowles, The Monastic Order in England (Cambridge, 1949), p. 349. This is the circle that some liberal economists in our day would label as the "virtuous circle of wealth" in contrast to the "vicious circle of poverty". The notion of a circle to explain the logic of the Cistercian growth has been adopted by many recent historians. Knowles wrote about the "supreme agricultural methods of the Cistercians, whose monastic organisation gave to their enterprises many of the advantages possessed in the modern world by the multiple-branch concern or vertically controlled group industry over the small manufacturer and trader": ibid., p. 353. He thought that the disappearance of the convent left the "Cistercian monks as capital in the full sense" (p. 349).

involuntary economic prosperity was a growing deviation from their original principles, which led to a transformation in the religious quality of the monks' life. Eventually they became landlords in receipt of rent like other seigneurial groups and, at the same time, declined economically.

Spiritual ideals have thus long been used to account both for the paradoxical success of the Cistercian monks, who were "the voluntary poor", but became "the involuntary rich", and for their rapid expansion throughout Europe.

This interpretation, which has generally portrayed the Cistercians as pioneers, labouring monks and reclaimers of waste, has been influenced by the "frontier thesis", which compares Cistercian monks to the pioneer settlers of the New World who derived unexpectedly large yields from rich soils which had never previously been cultivated. According to this view, in seeking a life of asceticism and apostolic poverty the Cistercian monks were twelfth-century predecessors of Weber's Puritans, and, like those later Protestants, ironically reaped a rich reward for their efforts.

I believe this idealized picture to be important as an expression of the outlook and attitudes of a historiography originating in the nineteenth century. Such historiography seems, in this as in other fields, to have sought justifications and antecedents for its own political models in the Middle Ages. The past is interpreted according to certain nineteenth-century values — large and con-

7 For an example of the standard account which has had widespread influence, see ibid., pp. 348 ff., 312 ff. We can consider L. Lethi, The White Monks: A History of the Cistercian Order (Oxford, 1953) — which brings together and diminishes what I believe to be the key elements of this traditional discourse — the point of contact between the old and the new literatures on the subject. Lethi, himself a Cistercian monk, asserts that his predecessors "turned their back to the staggering system of feudal administration of monastic property... The monastic system divided the large feudal estates into isolated and virtually independent units, where the peasants, handpainted by servility of status and tenure, was left alone to its own primitive devices without any large scale planning or utilising organisation, for the lord's interest usually was strictly limited to the collection of revenues". In contrast, for the Cistercians: "who rejected the traditional feudal system together with all sorts of incomes of feudal origin, there was certainly no other choice but to organise a group of lay religious for agricultural work": ibid., pp. 209-10, 230. There is another version of this book, L. Lethi, The Cistercians: Ideals and Reality (Kem., 1977), which Lethi himself labels as a "new history of the Cistercian order". He has certainly used a "large number of recent studies" which, in his opinion, have "revolutionized our traditional views on Cistercian beginnings": ibid., p. ix. However, in my view he persists with the traditional global interpretation.

8 Berman, Medieval Agriculture, p. 9, ch. 1.
centrated estates (although not directly managed); productive labour forces and productive investment - in contrast to what were seen as manorial ways of production.2 We must not forget that the central decades of the last century were considered the "Golden Age" of European agriculture, with British and French "high farming" as the most significant example.12

This traditional model has had a widespread influence over a long period, since it has generally been accepted by economic and social historians when assessing the contribution of the white monks to medieval economic growth.13 It is worth noting that Lester Little, in his Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe (1976), still repeats this same argument, his secondary sources being B. H. Stichter van Bath, Georges Duby and David Knowles.14

Recent monographs on the monasteries, granges and economic activities of the Cistercians, based on archival evidence from the medieval houses of the order in different parts of Europe, however, have questioned some of the elements composing this traditional model. A preoccupation with a regional perspective is the most relevant feature of this new historical literature. The con-

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13 For Burgundy, see B. Clairin, "Évolution et érosion de l'économie cistercienne dans les abbayes et cellules de Bourgogne au moyen âge (exemples de synthèse)", ibid., pp. 13-52; for north-west Europe, see R. Fournel, "L'économie cistercienne dans les abbayes du nord-ouest de l'Europe", ibid., pp. 53-74; for south-west France, see B. Baraille, "L'économie cistercienne du sud-ouest de la France", ibid., pp. 75-99; for southern France, see also Adam, Medieval Agriculture; for Portugal, see R. Durand, "L'économie cistercienne au Portugal", ibid., pp. 101-17; for Irish Cistercians, see J. Friel, "Les abbes et les monastères cisterciens en Irlande", in L'abbaye cistercienne en Irlande (Athlone, 1982), p. 36.


useful summary of the debate on the Cistercian economy in the period of expansion, and I will draw on them extensively in what follows.

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The most questionable part of the traditional thesis holds that the Cistercians were *reclamators of waste*, pioneers who created new arable land out of the wilderness. Many local studies have revealed that their settlements were almost entirely located in previously inhabited areas, where much clearance and reclamation had already taken place. Constance Berman has shown how much the traditional model has been influenced by the "frontier thesis"; she is highly critical of this interpretation, the origins of which she locates in the twelfth century, when the early Cistercians had to legitimize their settlements in terms of the statutes of the order. Showing that the Cistercians of southern France acquired property not through the clearance and reclamation of unoccupied land, but rather by careful purchase and the reorganization of holdings which often had a long history of cultivation, she argues that the Cistercians in this region were entrepreneurs and managers, not frontiersmen or pioneers.22 Robert Fossier also stresses that the conservation of forests was a prime concern of the white monks in north-west Europe, while Goburn Graven considers that, in

22 Fossier, "Economie cistercienne dans les plaines du nord-ouest", p. 71; Graven, "Economic Activities of the Cistercians", p. 16. See also Chauvin, "Realité et évolution", pp. 20-1, which argues that "forest monks (moines forestiers) are referred to in many abbey charters, and the Forest of Fontaine, among others, during the second half of the twelfth century". **"Cistercian forestry took different forms depending on the place and time; here, scarcely at all, there, sporadic, elsewhere again, large-scale and systematic. It is high time that we stopped arguing in terms simply of assassins or non-assassins":** Righi-pocquet, "Assassins", p. 8.

23 For example, Comba states that "we have no grounds for believing that the Cistercians introduced any technological innovations": Comba, "Cistercian", p. 256; Righi-pocquet argues that "in fact, there seems to be virtually no firm evidence that the Cistercians employed any technology which was not available to and practiced by their contemporaries": Righi-pocquet, "Plan et réaleté", p. 96. Berrebi believes that "as far as technical equipment is concerned, the Cistercians seem not so much to have innovated as to have improved existing techniques": Berrebi, "Economie cistercienne du sud-ouest", p. 82. However, Florida found evidence that a very advanced plough (trombade) was used on the granges of the Galician monastery of Sobrado, as well as new schemes for crop rotation: Porcell, "Colonizaciones cistercienses en Galicia", pp. 108-11.


put rather on their specialization in other activities, namely sheepfarming, 
and industry and trade.24

These remarks are not meant to provide a comprehensive survey of all the dominant trends in current historical writing on the Cistercians. I have tried, rather, to draw attention to some criticisms of the old model, as well as to the most relevant new contributions to our understanding of the economy of the white monks. These studies undoubtedly improve our knowledge of the rural history of the various regions in which the Cistercians settled. Nevertheless, in my opinion, this historiography retains the underlying traditional global interpretation, though this is not always readily apparent. Thus these historians — who do not make full use of the evidence on which their studies are based — assert the non-manorial character of the primitive Cistercians, and/or see the Cistercian economy as foreshadowing the early capitalist economy.

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To illustrate this point I would like to discuss — without distorting or decontextualizing them — those descriptions and assessments of the granges which have generally been accepted. These reveal, clearly and eloquently, the persistence, in different ways, of the traditional picture. At the same time, I would like to suggest, first, that the relationships of domination and subordination within the granges should not be overlooked, even though the labour of the concern was hired labourers might appear to be "voluntary" and "free" when compared with the services of the tenants; and secondly, that the study of the nature of Cistercian land accumulation and the role of tenancies — that is, land indirectly managed — in the functioning of the estates, both of which should be considered in relation to the granges, reveals that the Cistercian monks held and exercised seigneurial power from an early period in their existence.

We know from the recent studies that, though with many regional variations, all Cistercian abbeys, in aiming at self-sufficiency, planned and controlled their economy through a complementary network of granges, which were well adapted to the agricultural conditions of the areas in which they were located. On these granges, a large, unpaid, voluntary and highly motivated work-force, composed mainly of lay brothers, but assisted by hired workers, cultivated the soil, tended the cattle, worked the iron or salt mines, and manufactured their products, not only for their own consumption, but to produce surpluses. These brought financial benefits which were, in turn, used to improve and expand the patrimony.25

In the century before 1250, a period of general economic expansion, the Cistercian granges reached a high peak of development, which varied in intensity with monastery and region.26 During this period, however, they departed considerably from the ideals of the founding fathers. These deviations were gradually accepted and, as they became common practice, were eventually incorporated by the annual assembly of abbots of all monasteries in the General Chapter into the rules of the order.27 From then on the leasing-out of land in various forms made the monks the recipients of income from rent, and disrupted the original Cistercian economy.28 A decline in the recruitment of concerns is


24 See, for example, Beurin, "Cistercians", pp. 255-60; Alfeno, "Contradiction cistercienne en la Moita del Duero", pp. 179-84; Chavane, "Réactions et évolution", p. 30. For the wool trade and woolen cloth manufacture in England, see Greaves, "Economic Activities of the Cistercians", pp. 19-33. Rosten, "L'économie cistercienne de l'Alsace occidentale", analyses the expansion of Cistercian production consequent to the growing orientation towards the market economy; see also Beurin, Medieval Agriculture, p. 121; Durand, "Economie cistercienne en Portugal", p. 109.

25 Higonnet, "Essai sur les granges", pp. 157-60, sums up the debate on granges, examining both theory and "the testimony of the facts" concerning this institution and its evolution. It is interesting to note how, in spite of the wide variety of types of granges documented by historians, this standard view prevails in the end.

26 On the question of overall chronology, Higonnet argues that "in general, the grange system remained in full vigour up to the mid-thirteenth century"; ibid., pp. 164-5. See also Beurin, "Réactions et évolution", pp. 20-39.

27 Higonnet examines the mixed manors situated between 1200 and 1300, which show how the "institution of the system ... was progressively accepted and made possible". Higonnet, "Essai sur les granges", p. 176, cf. p. 169-1. See also Barrière, "Economie cistercienne du sud-ouest", p. 94; Rodit, "Plan and Reality", p. 166.

28 According to Chavane "before 1250, the Cistercian economy shows evidence of a rapid emergence, then continuous progress coupled with a permanent concern to adapt ... Once past the watershed of the 1250s, what had by then become the economy of the Cistercians was to experience internal decline as a result of the passage of time" (ibid., n. p. 31).
assumed to be the main reason for the disintegration of the demesne.  

The introduction of a granary system, variously described as "a monument to Cistercian organizational skills", "the key to Cistercian economy", "fundamental to abbatial prosperity" and "the basis for the high quality of organisation", has won all kinds of praise — for its efficiency, its profitability, its rationality and its superiority.  

It resulted in "a new scientific agriculture", "an ideal system, perfectly balanced", which in the less-developed areas became a model for others to follow.  

Scholars continue to employ such terms to describe the consolidation and organisation of land in granges, the work-force used to exploit them, the planning of complementary activities, and the management of those centres which reflected "the spirit of the order", and which were, indeed, "founded to carry it out".  

Thus the old story is repeated, although historians now tend to stress Cistercian organizational and managerial skills rather than their ability to reclaim wasteland.  

It is not my intention to question the existence of such granges, or the exceptional efficiency of such demesnes, although, from the beginning, as we shall see, there were other forms of estate organization and other types of labour. What I wish to draw attention to are certain inferences which are being drawn. According to these accounts, the most distinctive feature of the Cistercian economy before 1250 was the direct farming of large and compact demesnes by, instead of tenants, a work-force which did not pay rents. Hence it is described as a programme, model or system which did not resemble the manorial economy, but was rather "an island of advanced organisation in a sea of peasant tenements and feudal demesnes".

It is possible to argue that the primitive Cistercians were independent of the manorial structures which they claimed to have rejected? A casual glance at the titles of studies of the Cistercians or of medieval rural history, for example, would be enough to show that the seigneurial character of the Cistercians is commonly accepted. Nevertheless it is also customary to portray monastic monasticism as represented by Cluny with the new labouring orders, and — more specifically — with the Cistercians, whose members "chose not to live by the labor of other men and so took a stance outside the seignorial mode of production".

While this interpretation is not always explicit in these studies, its presence is frequently betrayed in other expressions. It seems to me that, as long as historians (and I acknowledge certain exceptions) write about the first Cistercian century as a century of purity, of the renunciation of all standard feudal revenues, and of the exclusively self-sufficient cultivation of land, the white monks will only be characterized as seigneurial lords in the century during which they leased out their demesnes. Thus Higounet, for example, describes a process by which, at the end of the thirteenth century, these granges "travel ever further towards a seigneurial type of organization", so that "Cistercians were hitherto no more than rentiers like other lay and ecclesiastical landlords".  

Similarly, Werner Rößner shows how, "from the

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10 Dehisc, Cistercians, p. 173. See the works listed in nn. 4-5 for similar assumptions.


thirteenth century, the tendency to rent out newly acquired property strengthened at Salem, and there gradually emerged an unequivocally donorial system,” though he concludes that “in the economy of Salem, there was already, in the twelfth century, in addition to the granges cultivated by the monks, an important group of farmed-out lands, which the monies had primarily acquired through donations in very scattered locations”.

D. H. Williams also describes “the transition of a grange economy to a manorial structure” on the part of the Welsh Cistercians and “the transformation of the monastic communities from directly-involved farmers to financially-interested landlords”, although he also recognizes that at Strata Florida in central Wales, “many of its vast ‘granges’... were based upon a semi-manorial Celtic pattern, with attendant dees and customs”.

There is, in fact, an almost imperceptible tendency to associate the manorial system with a form of estate management in which the landlord received rents — in kind, cash and/or labour — from his tenants: that is to say, in which the lord lived by the sweat of others. This conjoins up, both from an economic and a social standpoint, all kinds of negative associations, such as idleness, luxury and avarice, in contrast to the hard work, austerity and poverty attributed to the Cistercians.

We need to question the implicit meaning of the type of associations which are to be found in the analysis contained in this historiographical discourse. Most relevant, in my opinion, is the one which associates seigneurial exploitation with rent collection, of whatever type, from a tenant peasantry. Even though rent (as the appropriation of part of peasant production) was a key element in shaping class structure in a feudal society, this connection tends to obscure our understanding of social relationships and their characteristics on the Cistercian estates which, we are told, consisted wholly of directly cultivated demesne. We will see that evidence from an early date — quoted in the studies already referred to — of other monastic land held by tenants, has generally

10 Rößner, “Économie cistercienne de l’Ardenne occidentale”, p. 152. Rößner attempts to differentiate German monasteries according to their degree of self-sufficiency; however, he is forced to conclude that “it was only during the initial phase and in some abbeys that a wholly self-sufficient economy was found. The majority of monasteries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had a mixed economic system; as well as the lands which the monks cultivated themselves, a great shot of land was rented out and cultivated by dependent peasants”.

11 Williams, Welsh Cistercians, pp. 343, 367.

been regarded as exceptional, and has not been taken into account in the analysis of the Cistercian economy of that period.

All the same, even if we are to accept that all monastic land was organized in granges and cultivated mainly by conoversi and that, though unpaid, these lay brothers were not totally disinterested, we need to remember that the character of the relationship between monks and labourers should not be assumed, but must be analysed. It is often suggested that it was through the efforts of the conoversi, assisted by hired workers, that the granges made the Cistercians rich (though the lack of quantitative evidence for this is also generally admitted). The higher degree of commitment, the strong motivation and the pious devotion of the lay
brothers, together with the austerity of their lives, have long been adduced to explain the exceptional level of productivity typical of Cistercian granges in comparison with earlier or contemporary agrarian units worked by villein tenants. In addition there have recently been attempts to assess the major advantages that the *conversi* offered the Cistercian economy in terms of cost functions. Most important on the theoretical level, according to Richard Roehl, was that the use of *conversi* reduced dependency costs for labour, because "they were not feeding wives, children or the elderly, but (in terms of labour cost) had only to feed and clothe themselves". In other words, "the unit cost of subsistence per labourer was significantly lower on Cistercian granges than it had been on the peasant farms which had preceded those granges. The immediate effect was decreasing cost and thereby increasing the order's net yields". It is interesting to note that Roehl, in his assessment of "the ratio of economically productive to economically non-productive individuals supported by the estate", includes among the latter those members of peasant families that he considers to be "economic parasites (children, women, and the allying, infirm and aged)", but not the *conversi*, since they "intended to be active participants in the work of production".

Berman devotes a whole chapter to "The Profits of Grange Agriculture", in which she uses a "hypothetical example" to demonstrate the saving on dependants derived from *conversi* labour which, she argues, must be "recognised as one of the reasons why direct cultivation by lay brothers and hired laborers was so attractive". She also tackles the problem of the reproduction of the *conversi* work-force, since "it did not replace itself from generation to generation as had the peasant farm family". It is

1 For example, Roehl writes about the implications of their "autonomy, even puritanical consumption regime": Roehl, "Plan and Reality", p. 92. For Berman, *conversi* must have been highly motivated, seeing their work in the fields as a form of prayer": Berman, Medieval Agriculture, p. 82. Further, "Cistercian asceticism and stress on simplicity in religious practice promoted the saving which allowed capital accumulation": ibid., p. 83.

2 I have used Berman's quotations from Roehl to demonstrate that she accepts this analysis: Berman, Medieval Agriculture, p. 79.


3 Berman, Medieval Agriculture, pp. 81, 79. I believe that, among other considerations, the contract he is the last chapter of her book, where she claims that monastic houses, by providing a secure and respectable place of retirement for parents, fostered earlier marriage and, indirectly, population expansion; see ibid., p. 119.

If this were true, I think the result would have been a higher level of dependency, not perhaps on the *conversi* as individuals, but on the whole religious community.
work-force which the order had at its disposal until 1250-75. I have already noted the view that the white monks did not live by the labour of others until they began to lease out their demesnes, evidence — we are told — of the complete transformation of the Cistercian spirit and the decadence of their original economy.99

The real nature of relations within the monastic community similarly seems to me to have been commonly ignored — perhaps it might even be said, misrepresented — when the granges have been lauded as being efficient, profitable, modern, rational and so on, on the basis of their size and homogeneity, and the considerable managerial ability of the monks in purely technical terms. In these cases, the inequality and mechanisms of social exploitation are relegated to a subsidiary role. It is in this context that we can understand the emphasis placed in this historiography on the concern of the monks for the rational use of their estates, on their economic sensibility and their organizational skills. They are considered active, experienced, even "Schumpeterian managers", with whom the era of great entrepreneurs begins to take shape.100 From this perspective, the Cistercian demesne represents a different model, clearly superior to its underdeveloped environment,101 one in which the monks' managerial efficiency does not appear to be related to the monastic power which they employed, and in which, therefore, oppression and coercion of the conversi — unpaid labour — or of hired workers — underpaid labour — was not a factor.102

99 For example, when he argues that "up to 1250-75, it is reasonable to say that, in the successive habits of the devoted lay brother, then the commuting estate, and finally the full-time wage-labourer, the order always had a work-force at its disposal which was unpaid or underpaid, and it was this which lay at the root of its overproduction, its progress and its entry into the market": Fossier, "Economie cisterciennes des seigneuries de nos jours", p. 72. See above, n. 40.

100 For example, for Charvet, "The dominant influence, which was fully prevalent from the mid-thirteenth century until around 1530, was the disruption and then gradual disappearance of the chief foundations of the triumphant Cistercian economy": Charvet, "Realetes et evolution", p. 40.

101 The quotation comes from L. Molière, La vie quotidienne des religieux au moyen âge, Xe-XIe siècles (Paris, 1975), p. 250; it is obviously something of an exaggerated version of current thinking.

102 Barletta, "Economie cisterciennes du sud-ouest", p. 91. See also the works cited n. 52.

103 For Fossier, "the essential contribution of Cluny to the economy of medieval Europe . . . lay — in the development of wage-labour; the labour paid for by these men of the church gained a dignity in which I am tempted to see one of the reasons for its later development": Fossier, "Economie cisterciennes dans les plaines du nord-

(see n. 34)
of the monks. This policy, we are told, allowed more efficient organization, since the monks had greater freedom to organize production and labour unimpeded by common rights.

Fosser argues that in Normandy through pursuing this policy the Cistercians disrupted the harmony of the open-field system and the agro-pastoral balance characteristic of the traditional medieval "eco-system". However, he thinks that in compensation the monks favoured "virtually capitalist development" by leasing out their granges to the wealthiest peasants.59

The greatest contribution of the Cistercian monks to the transformation of the landscape in the north of Italy, according to Rinaldo Comba, was a concentration and reorganization of the land, which involved a repositioning of absolute ownership (proprietà assoluta) over what had previously been tenancies. In the course of this process, conflicts originated, above all as a result of the contradiction between this form of agricultural organization and the irrationality of the other forms of possession (irrazionalità della separazione dei diritti di possesso) and the collective use of land. He stresses that the effects of monocultural expansion in mountainous areas started a process of capitalistic expropriation of land previously under collective control.60

Berman argues that by adopting careful procedures for the acquisition and rationalization of land, in southern France (where there was an absence of wasteland) the white monks could similarly amass "large, compacted holdings which were transformed into granges of which they were the only owners". Thus simply by consolidating holdings and reassembling fragmented units of land, the Cistercians could ensure that granges in that region would have "produced larger net yields than the estates and farms which preceded them, even with the same nominal acreage".61

According to R. Dousin, the general aim of Cistercian houses in England and Wales was similarly to assemble fairly compact demesnes that were independent of communal agriculture, in order to produce a more rational and efficient arrangement.62 To Rössner, it seems that in Germany the "revolutionary requirements"63 of Cistercian economic precepts obliged monks and lay brothers to extend and organize their lands in "units large enough to be profitable".64 In Galicia (north-west Spain), where there was a rapid accumulation of land in Cistercian hands, Ermelindo Portela states that for this reason alone the construction and widespread expansion of many granges and the abbeys themselves (especially in their aspect as agrarian units) can be considered a "real change (rivelati) in the rural economy of that region in the second half of the twelfth century. The granges were active centres in the renovation of Galician agriculture as a result of their size, specialization, the farming tools used and, most important of all, their rationality.65

We must bear in mind the ideological content of the terms italicized above, which refer to a particular type of large-scale, concentrated, homogeneous and undivided landed property, as opposed to the irrationality of other types of fragmented landownership, presumed to be less efficient and profitable. That is to say, the growth of absolute property rights seems to be regarded as a step towards a more productive economy.66

"For Rössner, "the ideal form" is "the isolated farm ... economically, such granges constituted extremely productive agricultural units, since they had no need to take account of the division of land in the community between villagers, or of pasture rights, with the result that the management of the unit could easily be adapted"; Rössner, "Economia cisterciana de l'Altageme occidentale", pp. 140-1. However, he gives examples of other types of granges with their lands "scattered and intermingled with those of village communities" (see above, n. 57).

59 Portela, Cistercianism occidental en Galicia, pp. 104-9, 112 (my emphasis).

60 "I cannot resist the temptation to include Meuli's evaluation of the rationality of these monastic estates as a desired goal when he considers "the enlightened teachers of the rural masses... With respect to the peasants who remained probably attached to their ancient animal beliefs, the notion of the monks was a vital factor in their modernisation": Meuli, Vie pastorale, p. 250. "En el caso del pastoreo", he goes on, "la idea de que el diario estrangement, los monjes apoderaron el espíritu de intervención y el deseo de hacer rendir, si no se perdió el trato, la intervención": ibid., p. 251. Berman also remarks that "it is often mentioned that comensal laborers were free from the constraint of present mortality": Berman, Medieval Agricultura, p. 78.

However, the white monks’ accumulation of land, and its subsequent or simultaneous organization into granges, is a process which, in my opinion, should be considered as a result of the acquisition and application of what we refer to as “seigneurial” or “feudal” power, since it implied personal domination. This power was asserted in different ways and conditions, ranging from the usurpation and eviction of peasants in order to transform their settlements into granges, to the maintenance and control of the peasant population in their villages. The formation of the monastic patrimony represented the exercise of seigneurial power, whether or not it took a juridical form, through which relationships of dependence became institutionalized.

The exercise of seigneurial power, frequently documented, is generally presented as something exceptional, for which a variety of explanations are put forward. The attempt to explain an inherent element of the social system thus acquires a justificatory aspect. There are a number of curious and sometimes contradictory examples of this in the historiography we are considering, which reflect some of the ways in which historians have presented monastic power. Let us look at some of them. Robert Durand, in a valuable synthesis concerning Portuguese Cistercian estates, points out as the most remarkable peculiarity of the Cistercian economy in this area the fact that it was not only based upon landed property and its cultivation, but also upon possession of seigneurial power. Portuguese Cistercian monasteries, he says, obtained from their very foundation privileges which made the monks landlords with prerogatives of coercion and granted them the subsequent profits. He goes on to explain that these prerogatives were undoubtedly necessary for them to carry out the task of repopulation in this sparsely populated region. While his assertions are correct, the studies discussed here provide evidence of such privileges throughout the Cistercian order, which make it impossible to describe them as specific to the Portuguese or Spanish monasteries as has been assumed. Rüetschi, for example, when synthesizing research on the Cistercians in Germany, says that in some areas of grange settlement the monks could not achieve productive exploitation unless they acquired seigneurial

and feudal powers and evicted the peasantry. He explains that this was due to the high density of population.64

Berman has made a very interesting study of the careful acquisition procedures adopted by the Cistercians in southern France, which had a long history of settlement. She claims that there was a close relationship between land acquisition and the recruitment of conversi. In view of “the general economic dependency of most peasants on their lords”, she argues that, for them, “the opportunity to become conversi only existed if the Cistercians became their landlords . . . Once Cistercians had lordship over dependent tenants, they could encourage them to become lay brothers . . . The charters generally imply that the men and women living in the village or on the farms conveyed to the Cistercians were treated as appertainances to the lordship of those holdings; authority over such tenants was automatically conveyed to the monks along with ownership or dominium of land. Once dominium was acquired, the Cistercians either transformed those tenants into conversi or removed them from their tenancies, usually by a simple purchase of their tenural claims”. Occasionally, this removal “was made only under pressure”.65 Nevertheless Berman concludes that “the monks rarely sought or obtained hamuli or seigneurial rights so often associated with rural lordship or manorialism . . . When they obtained already-existing villages, or churches or tithes, or other manorial properties, such acquisitions were a step towards transforming those manorial resources into new non-manorial holdings — Cistercian granges — rather than the beginnings of seigneurialism”. She contends that “practices verging on seigneurialism must all be viewed as reflecting needs of the order, in its introduction of grange agriculture into settled areas, or of capital investment, rather than as lapses from the order’s ideals which forbade ownership of such tithes or profiting from seigneurialism”.66

Berman’s account speaks for itself; further comment is superfluous.

65 Berman describes some examples of such removals and organized, but unsuccessful, resistance to the monks’ expansion. However, according to her, “the success of the order in Southern France denotes a generally positive reception by the neighbor lai community” (Berman, Medieval Agriculture, pp. 53-60).
66 Ibid., pp. 90, 126, 91 (emphasis added). Berman does not achieve her aim (made explicit in the preface) of breaking with the schema that contrast the realms of the “ideal” with “reality”, or legislation with local practice. References to religious precepts are numerous throughout the book, but especially in the last chapter. She also believes that “indirectly, of course, the eventual loss of religious ideals may have been a result of rural economic success”: Ibid., p. 129.
We have already seen how Williams writes of the "transition of a grange economy to a manorial structure" and of the transformation of the Cistercians from farmers into landlords, although he documents "much more evidence of the continued enjoyment of jurisdictional rights by the Welsh Cistercians". In northern Italy, though from a different perspective, Comba also describes a carefully planned policy of the acquisition of land with jurisdictional rights. He maintains that the monks' power was not always used to collect rents, but rather to counter the eventual exercise of power by other lords with the objective of guaranteeing their territorial boundaries — and control of the population living inside them — within which boundaries they had unrestricted freedom of action. Similarly, Luisa Chiappa argues that in the valley of the Po in Italy, the monasteries had acquired seigneurial rights in order to eliminate external interference rather than to exercise them. Yet, she recognizes, in her opinion correctly, that "to hold even nominally the dominicatan entitled the possibility of enjoying further rights". This is something which should, I think, be accepted as general rather than exceptional, since the first grants of land to the white monks, often by kings or nobles, were generally made with jurisdictional rights.

On the basis of these historians' own descriptions, I would argue that this process of land accumulation should not be equated, as some seem to imply, with capitalist land accumulation. Further, analysis and evaluation of the functioning of the granges should not be divorced from consideration of the power relations among the local population, the monasteries, and the feudal lords. The economic organization of the granges was a complex one, involving many different social and economic factors. The land was often worked by local peasants, who were often forced to work for the monks in exchange for the right to use the land. The granges were also often used as a means of controlling the local population and ensuring the production of goods for the monastery.

The organization of Cistercian properties that were not granges should also be understood in relation to this monastic power as well as seigneurial interests. The detailed research that we have already examined shows that many Cistercian monasteries possessed land farmed by tenants from the beginning. Rösch, for instance, has stressed that from the twelfth century many monasteries in western Germany were profitable thanks to rents collected from the tenants who farmed their holdings. Therefore, he has to accept that a "mixed economic system" existed in most abbeys. However, like many others, he only seems to take into account "the relationship between the grange economy and leasing out after the crisis of the Cistercian economy in the late Middle Ages".

Rösch, with reference to eastern German monasteries, finds that "the Cistercians did begin to retain lands on which peasant cultivators resided, and on which they remained". But he feels that "the most serious difficulty in making a defense of the purity of the monks' intentions is that they acquired rent-returning lands not only as passive agents, but also in substantial measure by their own voluntary acts of purchase... it does indicate that the economies of Cistercian monasteries could quite often become characterized by a very strong element of rentier landlordship". Nevertheless, he also tries to explain what he considers "a growing dichotomization between plan and reality in the Cistercian economy" of the abbeys he studied. On this question, Fossier says that "at the beginning... it was only a matter of being given rent-paying tenements, even of buying them and evicting the..."

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18 Williams, Welsh Cistercians, pp. 243, 250.
19 I refer here to the monks’ interest in controlling labour resources in the areas where the granges were established. For example, Platt quotes disputes and agreements between the monasteries and other landlords regarding the recruitment of labourers: Platt, Monastic Granges, pp. 84–8.
20 Comba, "Cistercian", p. 248.
22 For example, in Bohemia: Chatera, "Modello economico cisterciano".
23 An unusual, though exaggerated, this is what he says about land accumulation: "In the nature of things, the regime of life imposed by faith created the optimum conditions for primitive capitalist accumulation"; Molinier, "Les grandes foires", p. 252 (emphasis added), from a chapter entitled "Les Spéciales Economies des Économiques". It is significant that Rösch refers to "their unique economic programme, which was a prerequisite to the realization of their programme of religious reform"; Rösch, "Plan and Reality", p. 92 n. 27. A good commentator on the process of land accumulation in the feudal system can be found in G. Bois, The Crisis of Feudalism (Cambridge, 1980).
24 The primary features of feudal accumulation — "its discontinuity and its contradictory character" — in contrast to those of capitalism: ibid., pp. 886–9. See also Nott (ed.), Growth, Profit and Property, esp. introduction, and chap. 1, 2, 15.
25 From the twelfth century, many monasteries in west Germany had to react to new, from land which was cultivated outside the granges and in the peasants: Rösch, "Economie cisterciennes de l'Allemagne occidentale", p. 151.
26 See above, n. 57.
27 Rösch, "Economie cisterciennes de l'Allemagne occidentale", p. 137.
28 Rösch, "Plan and Reality", pp. 106–5. We must bear in mind that to Rösch, "the successful functioning of the Cistercian economy" was "the operation consistent with the plan": ibid., p. 96.
worker; the difficulties encountered in implementing this 'final solution' led them to retain the tenant'. Yet he also states that "the Cistercians were rarely the owners of lands which were rented out". Williams argues that "serfs on the lands early granted to the monks, if not displaced, would have become villeins of the abbot", and that "the servile tenants were simply inherited by the monks". He documents the grant of manors to the Welsh Cistercian abbeys at their foundation, but continues to argue for the "transition of a grange economy to a manorial structure".

Higounet, in his general essay on Cistercian granges, provides extensive evidence of how very early on the monasteries had to employ hired workers, serfs or tenants, because the convents were above all a small team of experienced supervisors. He nevertheless interprets this as a "degradation" of the ideal of direct exploitation of all monastic lands in granges, as a "mutation of the system", which, from 1200, was accepted and sanctioned by the General Chapter in its statutes. Thus we see that this account of "degradation" is almost as widespread as the evidence for existence of peasants with holdings on the early Cistercian estates, and even of these peasants' contribution to the cultivation of the granges.

In this context, Spanish and Portuguese monasteries, which exhibited such tendencies from their foundation, should in my opinion be considered less unusual than is generally thought. On the basis of data contained in the studies discussed here, we should also question the marginal and exceptional character which has been attributed to such tendencies in other Cistercian estates prior to the generalization of the leasing-out of demesnes from the mid-thirteenth century onwards. As the role of tenant-holdings has been overlooked in the global analysis of the early Cistercian economy, I would like to emphasize the complementary relationship which existed, in a variety of ways, between these holdings and the granges within the estate as a whole.

Certainly, the links between demesne and tenancies on Cistercian estates were closer and more complex than has generally

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38 Foussier, "Économie cisterciennes dans les plaines du nord-ouest", p. 64.
39 Williams, Welsh Cistercians, p. 283.
40 "It was therefore necessary at a very early date to resort to the labour of paid agricultural workers and small rent-paying peasant tenants". Higounet, "Étude sur les granges", p. 173.
41 [Ibid., pp. 176-7.
42 "Ibid., pp. 176-7.
43 Platt, Monastic Grange, pp. 78-83.

been recognized. In the early period, since the monks assumed the direction of production, the retention of tenants on their holdings seems above all to have facilitated control of the peasantry as a work-force. We can quote cases in which tenants were obliged to work on the granges; in which they were associated with the tasks of clearing and reclaiming land; where the rents from their holdings were used to pay hired labourers to work on the granges; or when the cultivation of the peasants' vineyards was organized from specialized granges.

For Colin Platt, "the high price of temporary assistance, as well as its uncertain availability, no doubt explains the precautions that the Cistercians took to acquire land outside their granges, almost as much as within them". He considers that because lay brethren were never intended to yield a squad of inexpensive labourers, tied or hired labour on the grange would seem a necessary condition of its functioning. He questions the widespread view of the Cistercians as genuine depopulators. "As a programme of resettlement rather than depopulation, the Cistercian agricultural system assumes a somewhat different role. Needing the labour of a dependent peasantry to maintain their estates, the Cistercians competed with their contemporaries to recruit it". By the use of archaeological evidence, Platt has shown the close association with many of the known Yorkshire granges of remains of former peasant settlements, unremarked in the records and sometimes attributed to early depopulation. He argues that "the grange, perhaps even from its very beginnings, was a mixed community in which lay brothers, supervisors, servants and tied peasantry equally played their parts". His account of this association seems not to have received the attention it deserves. However, given these statements, it is difficult to understand why this same author claims that the Cistercians did not form part of the manorial system.

In north-west Spain I myself have found similar links between granges and peasant communities. Many of the granges of the abbey of Morcuera were in their origins small villages which were received, together with their inhabitants (colhuans) through royal benefactions. Thus the peasants passed under monastic authority. This dependent peasantry was employed by the white monks to cultivate their lands or in other directly managed work,
such as mining or stock-raising. The role of the rural community as a reserve labour force is clearly apparent from other monastic evidence, which suggests the complexity of the socio-economic relationship between the monks and the peasants of the villages. The Cistercian monks of Sobrado, the most powerful Galician monastery, could demand labour from the homines of their cotos (areas under monastic jurisdiction) to perform a variety of tasks. Granges and peasant communities were similarly connected on the estates of the Cistercian abbey of Poblet right from its foundation, as is well documented in the records of donations of lands together with their homines.

The related organization of granges and a tied peasantry in Portuguese Cistercian estates has been described in detail by Durand, who claims that “the Portuguese Cistercians [were] simultaneously, in the same place and at the same time, both masters of agricultural enterprises, if not cultivators, and also rentiers”. In Valera the Italian Cistercians of Chiaraavalle managed to concentrate land in a large and homogeneous grange. This, according to Chiappa, was established on the boundaries of the village of Valera, which the monks wished to keep as a community of labourers. For Chiappa, the Cistercians’ most innovative contribution to the Lombard countryside was the direct control they exerted over this peasant work-force through short-term leases which allowed them to direct production as well as dispose easily of available land. In the second half of the thirteenth century, through collective agreements with peasants, the monks “sanctioned the creation of a new organization for the rural community” which they continued to control. New settlements on monastic estates, quite common in the phase of economic expansion, are now beginning to be interpreted as the most effective way of exploiting peasant labour, rather than a solution to an adverse financial situation. The case of the abbey of Grandiselve, in Aquitaine, and its bastide of Beaumont illustrates this; by settling peasants in the new village, with the obligation to plant vineyards, the monks could respond to the growing demand for wine, the sale of which they continued to control.

Obviously, much research still needs to be done in the field of the social relations of production on Cistercian estates. I would argue here for a widening of the problem of linkages between monastic granges and village communities; that the study of the conserves should also be related to that of the peasant household and family structures, since it is, I think, a mistake to ignore or neglect the ties of conserve both with their families and with the peasant communities from which they were drawn. Further the various relationships established between monks and peasants as donors, sellers, creditors and hired and tenant labourers need to be investigated in more depth. The complexities of social articulation will show us much about the structures of domination in which the Cistercians were involved.

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In this article, I have criticized the historical “discourse” on the Cistercian economy, in which technical and economic factors relating to efficiency and productivity have been stressed, and the importance of social structures has been neglected. I have tried to demonstrate that relations of domination and subjection were present in the organization of production on Cistercian estates, and should not be associated solely with more traditional forms of manorial organization. If we do not recognize this — if we fail to see that the Cistercian economy involved seigneurial coercion and domination — we will fundamentally misunderstand how it functioned. There is also a danger that if we ignore the importance of these structures on the Cistercian estates, we will incorrectly portray socio-economic relations on the granges as purely voluntary and contractual, and imply the absence of such forms of domination from capitalist enterprises of the kind with which the Cistercian granges have often been associated. Our understanding of both feudal and capitalist social formations would be seriously skewed if we were to associate feudalism with social

89 Allaranc, Colonización cisterciense en la Mezeta del Duero, pp. 196-204.
90 Ibid., pp. 204-12.
91 Santamaria, Monasterio de Poblet, pp. 354-6.
93 Chiappa, “Construir un paisaje agrario pisanos”, p. 331.
94 Ibid., pp. 303 ff.
95 Barthélemy, “Economía cisterciense du sud-ouest”, pp. 87-9. See also Combe, “Aspects économiques”, pp. 128-9, where he discusses the different conditions in which the direct management of the demesnes was possible.
96 On the issue of the social status from which the conserers came, see Combe, “Cistercens”, pp. 240-1, 265-1.
organization involving exploitation and domination, and capitalism with contractual, free and voluntary relations. After all, this would mean accepting the very ideology which legitimizes exploitation in our own society.

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