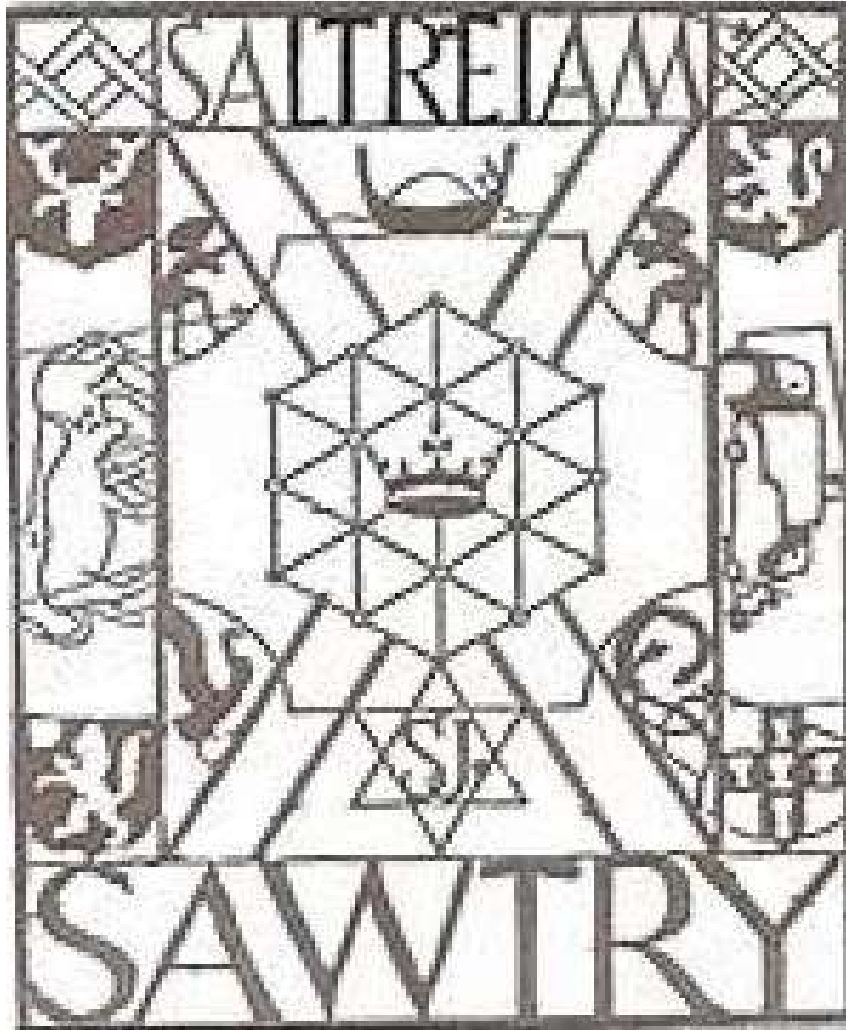


# **SAWTRY HISTORY SOCIETY**



**ARTICLES ON THE  
CISTERCIAN ORDER**



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## Origin of the Cistercian Order

The seed from which the Cistercian Order emerged was planted some 180 years earlier with the Cluniac Reformation of AD 910, which saw the emergence at Cluny Abbey (in Burgundy) of the Cluniac Order. This reformation of Benedictine monasticism embodied a purer observance by the Cluniac Order of the authentic spirit of the Rule of St Benedict than that achieved by the Benedictine Order through their traditional observance.

In 1098, Robert of Molesme, with a group of 21 followers, left the Cluniac monastery of Molesme (in Burgundy) in order to follow a more strict and literal observance of the Rule of St Benedict than that achieved by the Cluniac Reformation. Robert and his party arrived, reportedly on the Feast Day of St Benedict, at the site (gifted by Odo I, Duke of Burgundy) on which the Abbey of Citeaux would be founded. Paradoxically, in 1099 the Abbot of Molesme, angered by Robert's departure, petitioned Pope Urban II to order Robert back to the Abbey. Robert, shortly after, became Abbot and implemented reforms similar to those he had instigated at Citeaux.

By the time of Robert's departure from Citeaux, the Cistercian *ordo* (a monastic way of life, liturgy and ethos) had been established. Despite Robert's departure, Citeaux continued to flourish; particularly under the abbacy of Stephen Harding (the third Abbot, 1108 to 1133). By 1119 the four primary daughter-houses of La Ferté (1113), Pontigny (1114), Clairvaux (1115) and Morimond (1115), the four filiations of Citeaux, had been founded, and the *Carta Caritatis* (Charter of Charity), the foundational document of the Order, had received a papal bull from Pope Calixtus II; enshrining it as a canon law of the Catholic Church. The Cistercian Order was established.



Locations

Stephen Harding is considered the Father of the Cistercian Order, with good reason. During his abbacy he guided the fledgling Abbey through the trials and destitution common to most abbeys in the early years of their founding, to the beginnings of the accomplishment that would elevate Citeaux as the Mother-house of the Cistercian Order. Stephen was also singularly instrumental, both as Prior to Alberic (second Abbot of Citeaux) and as Abbot himself, in the creation of the charters and usages that would govern all aspects of the Cistercian Order; of particular import being the aforementioned *Carta Caritatis* and the *Consuetudines* (customs and regulations of the Order). Stephen's abbacy also saw

Cistercian monasticism spread rapidly throughout Europe and at the time of his death upwards of ninety monasteries had been founded; twenty of which were daughters of Citeaux.



Cîteaux Abbey

How did the Cistercians differ from the Benedictine, Cluniac and other contemporary Orders? Why were Cistercians benedictine and not Benedictine? The difference lay not in the strictness of their adherence to the Rule of St Benedict, although this was of significance, but in the charters and usages that governed that strict adherence.

In following the traditional Rule of St Benedict, each abbey of the Benedictine Order was autonomous and independent of other religious houses. The Abbot was not answerable to any authority, religious or secular, but that of God. Abbeys depended on patrons to provide support - in the form of donations of money and land, and protection; in return for which was a guarantee of prayers of salvation in perpetuity for the patron, his family and descendants. However, the autonomous independence of Benedictine abbeys exposed them to patrons who exercised privileges of material benefit, rights to hospitality and involvement in Abbey governance, as a condition of their continued patronage. The consequence of which was that Benedictine abbeys, to varying extent, displayed wealth and trappings of comfort, ate less frugally, and ceased to observe some of the night-time Divine Offices.

The Cistercian Order, however, was hierarchical under the central governance of a Mother-house and Father-abbot, which allowed statutes to be disseminated and discipline to be enforced. Firstly, by the Abbot of an abbey's respective mother-house in the filial affiliation, and secondly, directly by the Father-abbot from the Mother-house of Cîteaux through the mechanism of the General Chapter (on general matters pertaining to the Order as a whole or when the filial method failed or was unable to do so). Filial affiliation also aided and set the passage of ideas in matters such as architecture, furnishings, agriculture, industry and technology. Filial affiliation also prevented patrons from exercising those privileges customarily enjoyed over Benedictine abbeys.

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## ***Carta Caritatis* (Charter of Charity) - Foundational Document of the Cistercian Order**

The *Carta Caritatis* was the principal document of governance of the Cistercian Order that governed every aspect of monastic life. It became canon law of the Catholic Church when it was approved by a papal bull of Pope Calixtus II in 1119. The basis of the *Carta* is 'Uniformity of Observance and Unity in Charity' which states that all avowed in the Order, 'are all servants of one King and Lord. He has in His love dispersed the members of the Order in many different places, there to live under one *Rule*.' This equality under God meant that no abbot could impose material exactions on another house of the Order. However, the Abbot of Citeaux, as the Father Immediate of the Order, retained care for the souls of all members of the Order out of charity. The Abbot of Citeaux, with the abbots attending General Chapter, therefore, strove to prevent any monastery of the Order from wavering in its purpose or deviating from the rule.

Foremost of the provisions of the *Carta* are:

The Abbot of Citeaux, as the Father Immediate of the whole Order, had the right to visit all monasteries of the Order. When so visited, the local Abbot of the visited monastery was to yield his place to the Father Immediate in affirmation of Citeaux as the Mother of all the houses of the Order. The Father Immediate would replace the local Abbot in all matters except two; he would eat in the refectory of the visited abbey with the brethren, rather than with visitors in the guest house and would not receive the profession from the brethren of the monastery.

Similarly, the Abbot of a mother-house, as the Father Immediate of his filiation, was to visit all the daughter-houses of his filiation at least once each year. When so visiting he would take precedence over the local Abbot of that monastery and would eat in the refectory, not in the guest house, to show that he is the father of a family and not a visitor. However, the Father Immediate can do nothing against the will of the local Abbot except what is good for the soul, such as the correction of irregularities. The visitation of Father Immediate on Citeaux was to be done by the Abbots of the four primary daughter-houses of Citeaux, collectively, once each year.

The General Chapter of the Order met once each year at Citeaux under the presidency of the Abbot of Citeaux for the purpose that all abbots of the Order could meet on another. The purpose of the Chapter was to: repair the *ordo* and to confirm the peace and charity; and correct errors, proclaim faults and help one another materially if need be. Irregular abbots were to be charitably proclaimed, by abbots only, and were obliged to do the penance imposed; the Abbots of the four primary daughter-houses of Citeaux were to, collectively, advise and correct the Abbot of Citeaux. The Chapter had the definitive right to decide all cases, and judge and punish all faults (of a regular nature) brought to its attention. An abbot could only absent himself from the General Chapter for two reasons - sickness and solemn profession; in which case, their prior was to attend as their vicar.

All new monastery foundations were to be dedicated to St Mary in Her honour, and no monastery was to be founded in cities, towns or villages. A new foundation was to be made with twelve brothers (choir monks) and a superior (abbot), and a prescribed set of books that would enable the same interpretation of the Rule and the same observance of customs as all other monasteries of the Order. The following places were to be constructed in the first instance; oratory, refectory, dormitory, guest house and gate house, and no dwellings were to be placed outside of the precinct enclosure. Choir monks were to get their living from manual labour, farming and stock-raising, but were not to live away from the monastery. Monasteries were to

have granges as necessary that were manned by lay-brethren; it was forbidden for choir monks to live in the granges.

Finally, the *Carta Caritatis* was revised in 1124 as the *Summa Cartae Caritatis* and again in 1152 as the *Carta Caritatis Posterior*. Neither of these revisions altered the fundamental basis or tenor of the *Carta*.

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## Founding a New Abbey

When an abbey had grown in such size (approximately 60 choir monks) that it would not suffer the loss of a founding colony it was expected to colonize a new daughter-house as a filial *de novo* foundation. There was no prescribed location for a Cistercian abbey, although valleys were dominant in chosen locations, and the '...setting up their monasteries in deserted places far away from human habitation...' (Jamroziak, 2013) was more myth than fact; indeed, the only statute regarding the location of a new abbey was that, 'no abbey was to be founded in cities, towns or villages'. In reality, the location for a new abbey was governed by the wishes of the founding benefactor, availability of land, local conditions and ready access to a source of fresh water, and nearby settlements. Choir monks were to get their living from manual labour, farming and stock-raising, but were not to live away from the monastery. Abbeys were to have granges as necessary that were manned by lay-brethren, and it was forbidden for choir monks to live in the granges.

The process by which a new abbey was established took several years and is summarized by the following:

The prospective founding benefactor would apply to the General Chapter for permission to found a new abbey. The General Chapter was held each September so, depending on when the application was made, it could be upwards of a year before the matter was addressed.

The next General Chapter following submission of the application would consider the matter and appoint a commission, that included two or three abbots familiar with the prospective locality. The commission would visit the intended site for the new abbey and assess the suitability of the initial grant of land, its legal status and the distance between the proposed site and neighbouring abbeys of the Order; no Cistercian abbeys were to be closer than 10 Burgundian Leagues (40km or 25miles).

The report from the commission was discussed at the next General Chapter and, if the findings were positive, foundation of the new abbey was initiated. Before a new foundation could proceed, and as provided by the *Carta Caritatis*, the Bishop in whose diocese the foundation would be established was to agree, 'to avoid every conflict between Bishop and monk.' The provision in the *Carta Caritatis* removed all Cistercian abbeys from episcopal control and jurisdiction.

Lay brothers, with resources provided by the benefactor, would construct the first essential buildings; an oratory - where the monks could pray, a dormitory and refectory - for the monk's living accommodation, a guest house - so that visitors would not intrude on the claustral life of the abbey, and a gate house to control access to the monastic precinct. These first buildings were 'primitive' in nature until more substantial structures of stone could be constructed, and would likely have been built from readily obtainable materials such as wood, wattle and mud, and thatch. At the same time, the precinct boundary would be marked out and, in the first instance, ditched, whilst a fresh water supply would be channelled from the source provisioned for in the foundation endowment.

Only then would the founding colony arrive at their new abbey. The founding colony consisted of twelve choir monks (representing the twelve Apostles of Christ) and a new abbot (as their Superior, as Christ was to the Apostles), who was appointed by the abbot of the mother-house. The colony was to be in possession of the prescribed books - a missal, the gospels, a gradual, an antiphony, a hymnal, a psalterium, a copy of the rule and a religious calendar, that would enable the same interpretation of the Rule and the same observance of customs as all other abbeys of the Order. This



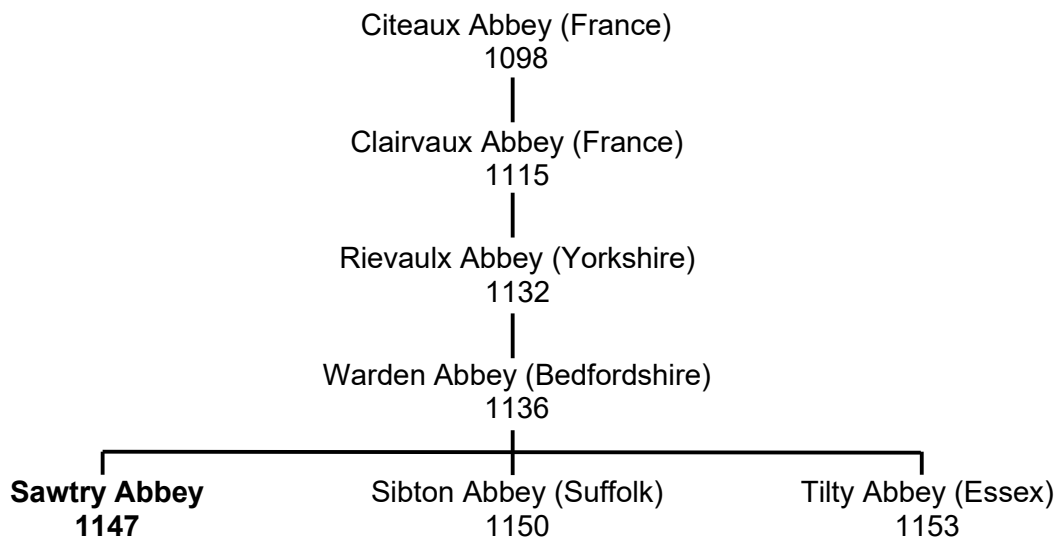
set of books would have been meticulously copied by the monks of the mother-house as part of the founding process and in preparation for the departure of the founding colony.

The founding benefactor would then issue the foundation charter that confirmed the initial grant of land and other endowments.

When the new abbey had the resources and finances to do so, construction of the abbey church would be commissioned. When the east end of the church (the presbytery, with high altar) was complete, the church was considered 'sufficiently ready' for its dedication (to St Mary in Her honour) by the diocesan bishop.

Sawtry Abbey was founded in 1147. This suggests the foundation of Sawtry Abbey was approved by the General Chapter that sat in September 1146 which, in turn, infers the General Chapter that instigated the commission to assess suitability sat in September 1145. The application by Simon II de Senlis, Earl of Northampton and Huntingdon, to found a Cistercian abbey in the manor of Sawtry Judith would, more than likely, have been made sometime between October 1144 and August 1145.

The recurring process of mother-houses despatching colonies of monks to establish daughter-houses created the filial relationships that were instrumental to the governance and efficiency of the Cistercian Order. With regard to the filial relationship of Sawtry Abbey; it was a fifth generation abbey in the Clairvaux filiation, its mother-house was Warden Abbey (Bedfordshire), and it had two siblings - Sibton (Yoxford, Suffolk) and Tilty (Essex).

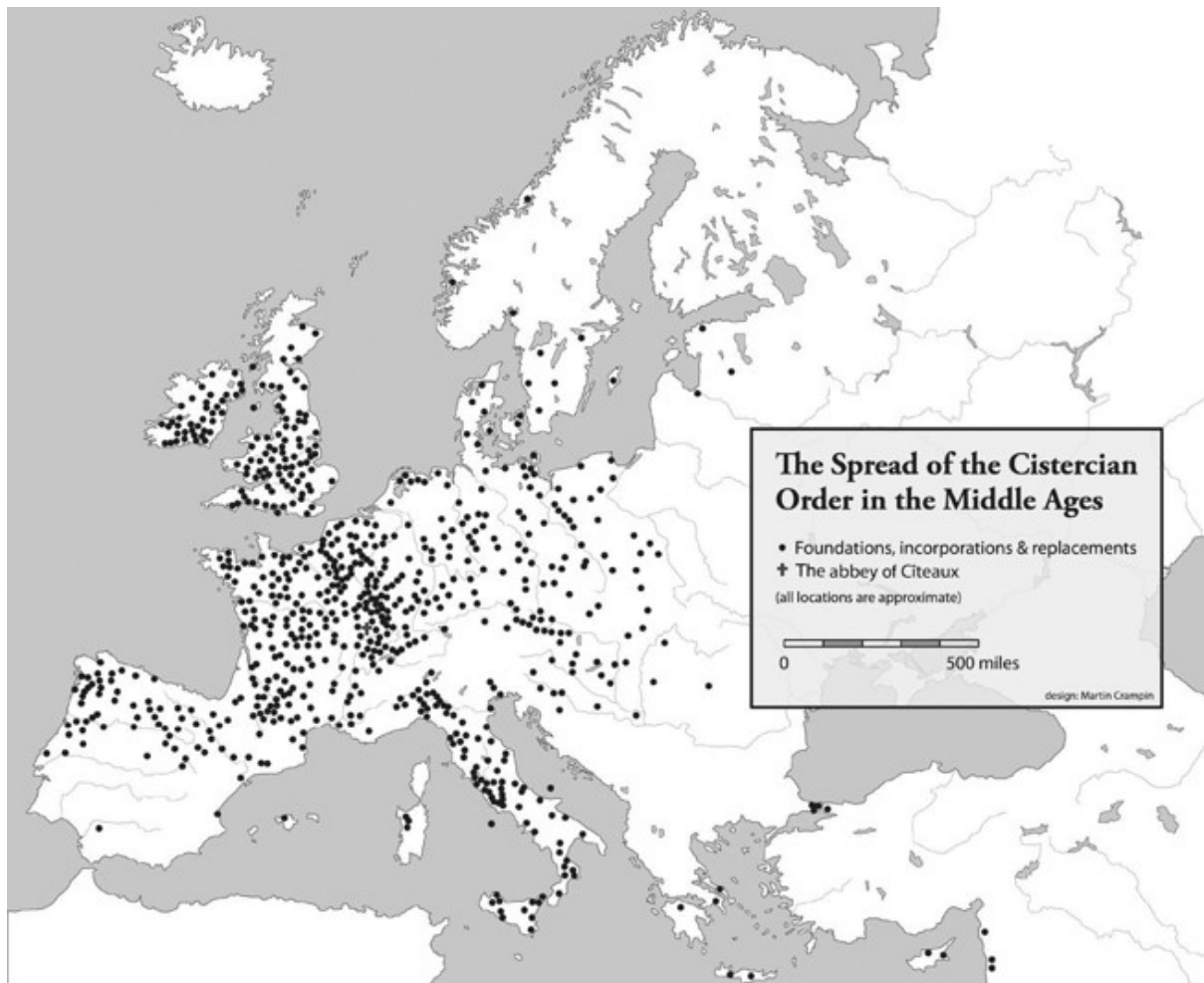


Sawtry Abbey in the Rievaulx Lineage of the Clairvaux Filiation

In addition to filial *de novo* foundations, there were also incorporations where existing abbeys of other orders were affiliated into the Cistercian Order; examples of this are the thirty-two abbeys of the Savigniac Order and seven abbeys of the Obazine Order, both of which affiliated to Citeaux in 1147. Less common was incorporation by adoption where a community of monks of another order made application to the General Chapter; an example of this is Fountains Abbey. In October 1132, a dissatisfied group of monks from the Benedictine Abbey of St Mary in York left (or were expelled from) the Abbey. Under the protection of Archbishop Thurstan of York they were brought to Skelldale Valley and took shelter under an elm tree and nearby rocks. Thurstan granted the lands at that place, in Herleshowe wood on the bank of the River Skell, so that the monks could build for themselves a monastery. The following year the fledgling Fountains Abbey was adopted

into the Cistercian Order by Abbott Bernard as a daughter-house of Clairvaux Abbey. Fountains would become one the largest and most prestigious of Cistercian abbeys, not just in Yorkshire - or even England, but within the whole of the Order.

Expansion of Cistercian monasticism throughout Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries was prolific, to the extent that the Order had approximately 340 abbeys by the mid-12th century and approximately 680 abbeys by the mid-13th century.



The spread of the Cistercian Order by 1152 (from Burton and Kerr, 2013)

The principle reason for founding an abbey was, in the main, devotional, as a demonstration of the benefactor's piety in which they sought everlasting salvation for themselves and their family - living, dead and yet to be born. Through the endowment of lands and other gifts, the benefactor, and indeed other patrons of the abbey, expected to benefit for themselves and their families the rights to burial, commemoration and intercessory prayers in perpetuity. There were other, more earthly, underlying reasons for founding abbeys. However, the motives behind this reason were more secular: as a display of social status and wealth; as a political gesture to curry favour with factions of the nobility - or even royalty, who themselves had founded Cistercian abbeys; as an act of defiance during times of conflict in order to prevent a foe from gaining possession of the lands; and finally as an act of expiation for violence committed on the battlefield. Simon II de Senlis was a loyal supporter of King Stephen during the Anarchy (1135-1153), during which time he reputedly confiscated church lands and damaged Ramsey Abbey, and fought for King Stephen at the Battle of Lincoln (1141). Having committed offences to the church, and having delivered violence and blood-

letting on the field of battle, Simon II probably had much to atone for when he founded Sawtry Abbey.

### Notes:

*Carta Caritatis* - the Charter of Charity, rule of the Cistercian Order

*Antiphonary* - the book of chants; the most important being the Introit of the Mass, the Gradual, the Offertory and the Communion

*Gradual* - the book of Psalms; specifically Psalms 119-133

*Missal* - the book prayers and sacraments of the Mass

*Psalterium* - the book of Psalms

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