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Constance Hoffman Berman, *The Cistercian Evolution: The Invention of a Religious Order in Twelfth-Century Europe*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. xxiv + 382 pp. Charts, plans, photographs, maps, tables, appendices, notes, bibliography, and index. \$59.55 U.S. (cl); £42.00 G.B. ISBN 0-8122-3534-7.

Review by Bruce L. Venarde, University of Pittsburgh.

A book to challenge, confound, and even madden its readers, *The Cistercian Evolution* is an ambitious undertaking and an impressive achievement. Constance Hoffman Berman sets out to do no less than rewrite the early history of the Cistercian Order, the most successful of the European monastic federations to appear in the twelfth century. She finds that the traditional account telescopes the formation of a fully developed monastic organization into a few decades when, in fact, it took most of the twelfth century to emerge. Deploying an impressive array of historians' methods and approaches, Berman makes her case by discussing everything from manuscript groupings to the economic history of individual monastic communities. As a piece of scholarship, then, this is something of a *tour de force*.

Berman's thesis is easy to grasp: "What can be said definitively here is that not only was the Cistercian Order not founded in 1098, it was not even founded before the death of Bernard of Clairvaux in 1153" (p. 236); and, more specifically, "a Cistercian Order was only invented in the third quarter of the twelfth century" (p. xi). This notion is likely to prevail in some form, not least of all because it accords well with the understanding of twelfth-century European society that medievalists have advanced in recent years.[1] Alas, clarity of intention is not answered by coherence or consistency of exposition; the book is so packed with such diverse contents that it does not hold together well. The latitude afforded by electronic publication allows the presentation of a detailed synopsis that describes both the conclusions of the book and its character. That may be the best way to convey the accomplishments of *The Cistercian Evolution*.

According to the traditional story--at least as Berman presents it--the theory and practice of a religious order, a structured group of monasteries sharing common practices and mutual responsibility, was invented within a generation or so of the founding of a monastery at Cîteaux in 1098. In a stunning instance of institutional growth, the Cistercian Order included several hundred monasteries half a century after its birth. Two men were key to this process. The first was Stephen Harding, the second abbot of Cîteaux (d. 1134), under whose leadership the Cistercians established uniformity of monastic practice in the Order, including mutual aid among monasteries, idiosyncratic economic organization and privileges, and an annual General Chapter attended by all abbots of the order. The twenty years after Stephen Harding's death were dominated by the abbot of Clairvaux, an early daughter house founded from Cîteaux in about 1115. Bernard of Clairvaux was a tireless advocate of Cistercianism whose pan-European renown allowed the Order to spread far beyond its Burgundian homeland. Through establishment of new monasteries organized and built according to the Cistercian model the two great abbots created, the Cistercian Order had grown to include over 300 houses of monks by Bernard's death in 1153.

The trouble, Berman asserts, is that almost all of that story is wrong, a myth formulated by Cistercians themselves in the later twelfth century and all too uncritically accepted ever since. The somewhat clumsy device of chapter titles shows not only how Berman contests the received wisdom on Cistercian origins but also what she offers in its place. Chapter one, "Twelfth-Century Narratives and Cistercian Mythology," first scrutinizes the earliest narratives of Cistercian origins, the *Exordium Cistercii* and what Berman describes as its expanded version, the *Exordium Parvum*. The first text contains some (but only some) of the elements of the early Cistercian story; the second includes many documents provided as proofs to support an expanded narrative account that adds more detail about Cistercian practices, from rituals of profession to economic organization. Berman finds reason to doubt the authenticity of many of "embedded documents" in the *Exordium Parvum*. She concludes that it is not a simple truth-tale that it purports to be but is instead a carefully crafted and documented piece of retrospective historical fiction. But this mythical tale became, and remains, the account of the genesis of the Order most often cited by historians.

Berman proceeds to challenge two other axioms of early Cistercian history. First, using plans and photographs, she argues that the vaunted uniformity of Cistercian architecture will not stand up to close scrutiny. In this section Berman's evidence is from southern France, introducing a geographical emphasis that will remain important throughout the book. To the extent that there is harmony of design in simplicity and austerity, Berman finds, it derived from a generally conservative approach to design or a house's poverty, rather than a template issued from Cîteaux. The third major point is about Cistercian women, whose presence from nearly the beginning of the Order is preserved in written and archeological record. Nonetheless, many monastic historians, starting with those who wrote the *Exordium Parvum*, have minimized or denied the presence of Cistercian nuns in the first half of the twelfth century.

Having asserted that much of the standard narrative of Cistercian origins is either unsubstantiated or contradicted by available evidence, Berman focuses on the documentation for early Cistercian history in chapter two, "Charters, 'Primitive Documents,' and Papal Charters." She finds that published editions of early compilations of Cistercian statutes, said to date to 1134 and 1152, have no manuscript authority. Indeed, the relatively few surviving manuscripts of the so-called "primitive documents" of the Order—in particular the Charter of Charity attributed to Stephen Harding, the *Exordium Parvum*, and the texts that are the basis for the early statute compilations—date to the 1160s through 1180s. Here Berman makes use of both contextual and codicological evidence. Moving along to the evidence of charters, the documents of practice recorded and preserved at individual houses, the author points out that in such records *ordo* usually meant a way of (monastic) life in the first half of the twelfth century. To the extent that early Cistercians thought about monastic *ordo*, then, it was "centered on notions of charity with little concern for administrative conformity or unanimity" (p. 79). Not until about mid-century did the word also refer to a specific group and the expression *ordo cisterciensis*, with its overtones of organizational homogeneity, appear. The final category of evidence addressed in this chapter is the dossier of well-known materials thought to document the early history of the Order. Berman argues that two famous papal bulls of 1119 (Calixtus II's *Ad hoc in Apostolicae*) and 1132 (Innocent II's *Habitantes in domo*) are forgeries, as is the Charter of Peace between Cistercians and Premonstratensians dated to 1142. Berman concludes that all three date to after 1150, that even papal bulls from the 1150s are of dubious authenticity, and that the first authentic papal confirmation of the Cistercian constitution is Alexander III's *Sacrosancta* of 1163 or 1165.

Chapter three, "From Cîteaux to the Invention of the Cistercian Order," examines the process by which so many monastic houses came to be associated with, and subject to, the mother house in Burgundy. Here again Berman works to discredit a powerful myth: the story of expansion via "apostolic gestation," colonization of new houses by a group of twelve monks and an abbot sent out from Cîteaux. She maintains instead that the growth of the Order, both before and after 1150, was mostly the result of incorporating formerly independent houses. Berman's alternate narrative identifies an early Cistercian

“textual community” comprised of a handful of monasteries, refining and exchanging ideas about monastic *caritas* and customs dear to Stephen Harding and Bernard of Clairvaux. The houses of this “community” were few in number and, with one or two possible exceptions, confined to Burgundy, at least until the 1140s. Many houses simply identified as “Cistercian” from their beginnings—the discussion again focuses on southern France—were in origin reform communities that moved from a “pre-Cistercian” phase to “proto-Cistercian” status as they adapted Cistercian customs; not until some decades later did they formally attach themselves to the Burgundian congregation. Only incorporation of existing houses, both before and after 1150, can explain the spectacular growth of the Order, and in some cases incorporation was not just of single houses but of autonomous congregations or other monastic networks.

The likeliest scenario, in Berman’s view, is that the articulation of the Order took place in the new era after 1153, when both Bernard of Clairvaux and his protégé, the Cistercian Pope Eugenius III, died. The dominance of Clairvaux, its wealth and the number of houses attached directly to it (and not to Cîteaux), may have been enough of a threat to the Order’s notions of community and charity that institutional organization was meant in part “to shear Clairvaux of its excessive power” (p. 149). Here, then, is the invention of the book’s subtitle, the process by which rules and procedures for formal affiliation with the Order were worked out, customs and practices harmonized, and dozens of pre- or proto-Cistercian houses “in the 1160s and 1170s began to be swept up into an Order that had not even been envisioned earlier” (p. 152). Only then, in the third quarter of the twelfth century, did the Cistercian Order appear in full bloom, with its characteristic economic organization, lines of affiliation, and statute-making General Chapters; universal and enforced attendance of abbots at an annual General Chapter may well have come only at the century’s end.

The last major chapter is “Charters, Patrons, and Communities.” In it Berman recounts the stories of three southern houses—Gimont, Nonenque, and Valmagne—and the eremitic and monastic communities associated with them. Her sources are charters, the documents kept by the monasteries relating primarily to property management and acquisition. Monks and nuns of these houses, in their pre- and proto-Cistercian phases, were not passive recipients of laypeople’s charity but active and sometimes even “quite aggressive” builders of monastic estates. Here Berman returns to the theme of women’s participation in monastic life, as nuns and as patrons of houses ultimately linked with Cîteaux. Berman weaves in several other themes, including the mix of pastoral and agricultural pursuits in the south as well as, in the case of Valmagne, the emergence of urban life in Montpellier. The chapter’s major theme is that the histories of such houses show how much the Cistercian Order as it appeared in the later twelfth century owed to the men and women who had created monastic houses, estates, and congregations for decades before formal alliance with Cîteaux.

The relatively brief fifth chapter, “Rewriting the History of Cistercians and Twelfth-Century Religious Reform,” includes a very helpful précis of the book’s thesis (two long paragraphs on pp. 222-23) while admitting that “[o]ne of the frustrations of a study such as this is that it seems nearly impossible to provide specific details on precisely how the Cistercian Order as an administrative institution first appeared” (p. 223). If Stephen Harding and Bernard of Clairvaux did not invent the Order, it is not possible to say who did or exactly when. It could hardly have been sudden: putting the principles of charity, equality, and mutuality into effect must have been a struggle in long independent and sometimes predatory communities. Hence Berman recasts twelfth-century Cistercian history as a long episode of evolution, with the invention of a centralized Order (along with a distorted version of its origins) occurring after 1150.

Readers who have come this far may be scratching their heads and wondering how exactly all the foregoing works together. I have no easy answer. *The Cistercian Evolution* has a clear—and to my mind—credible central idea: to redate many, even most, of the features we associate with the Cistercian Order from before 1150 to after 1150. However, the technique employed is not to provide a coherent argument

that builds momentum but instead to offer a series of proofs for its thesis from a number of perspectives. In other words, the reader is thrust from thesis to evidence without the intervening structure of an argument. Most of the first two chapters are essentially contrarian, aimed to discredit the story of precocious elaboration of the Order in the first few decades of the 1100s, while the rest of the book contains more positive assertions of the main point.

Yet even in chapter three, Berman spends much space dismantling some venerable stories, in particular the union in 1147 with the congregations of Savigny and Obazine, along with Cistercian refusal in that same year to incorporate the English Gilbertines. (She finds that the documentation of these settlements is of later date or forged.) The fourth chapter seems much longer than it needs to be, telling in sometimes minute detail stories of people and properties that date largely, according to Berman, to the era before the monasteries in question had any link whatever to the Cistercians. Despite Berman's statement that her entire investigation began with attempts to learn more about Cistercian nuns, the theme of female participation is only sporadically treated, and the remarks about Cistercians, women, and heresy in Languedoc toward the end of the book seem disconnected from the book's central contention.

It would take a master of several scholarly literatures and techniques capably to evaluate all of Berman's evidence and exposition. *The Cistercian Evolution* will be a focus of discussion and controversy—and the starting point for many doctoral dissertations—for a long time to come. But I have some reservations to express now, especially as regards the treatment of evidence. Berman's repeated dismissals of documentation that interferes with her thesis as "dubious" or, more usually, simply "forged" is at first arresting but ultimately worrisome. Very often the charge is based solely on the observation that originals do not exist for many of the oft-cited monuments of early Cistercian history. One need not enter into a metaphysical debate about authenticity to point out that an enormous number of medieval documents exist only in copies, sometimes faulty ones, written down long after the originals. To toss out everything for which we lack contemporary evidence as reported in contemporary documentation would give medievalists even less to work with than is we have now.

Nor are the more developed arguments for forgery always convincing. To take one example, Berman finds that the 1119 bull of Calixtus II, *Ad hoc in Apostolicae*, is a deliberate confection of a later date and even provides an appendix (pp. 251-254) showing in parallel the "forged" text and an "authentic" papal document from the following year to "demonstrate" that the former was based on the latter. There may be no contemporary copy of *Ad hoc in Apostolicae*—Berman dates the manuscript in which it first appears to ca. 1170 on codicological grounds—but the argument for forgery is strained and makes much of very little. The "incorrect" dating clause turns out to be a mistake in indication number, a very easy mistake for any copyist to make. The similar language of the two documents probably reflects standardization of practice of the papal chancery; if we start identifying as forgeries all twelfth-century papal bulls for which there is no sealed original on the grounds that they bear suspicious resemblance to another bull in the relatively small corpus of genuine originals, we are in real trouble. Worse still, the text alleged to have served as a model for the "forgery" turns out not to exist in an original either—and Berman tells us nothing about its manuscript authority!

Later, in chapter four, Berman builds her claims not on originals but on copies, twelfth- and thirteenth-century cartularies, collections of charters gathered into one manuscript. But here the argument is *for* authenticity, on the grounds that there is no reason to forge (see p. 167). But isn't a reason to forge in the eye of the beholder? Then only a few pages later Berman states that the "so-called 'foundation charters'" in these cartulary collections are *not* authentic, but convenient narratives—just like the Cistercian "primitive documents" (p. 175). But the rest of a cartulary's contents, we are assured, is trustworthy. At this point, exasperation sets in, and there occurs the uncharitable thought that perhaps documents are authentic if they easily support the book's central contention and are confected or forged if they prove difficult for it. It might well require only subtle modification of the thesis to allow

admission of much of the evidence repudiated so stridently and, to my mind, unconvincingly.

There are a number of ways in which the book's findings might be corroborated or refined. For example, nearly all of the material on pre- and proto-Cistercian houses concerns southern France. It will be vital to test the idea of a slow development of the Order via incorporation by examining the documents of other houses, both those associated with Cîteaux in the early history of the federation and those that joined up later. It is especially odd that Berman does not adduce Burgundian materials in her discussion of the general absence of reference to the *ordo cisterciensis* in documents of practice. And why does it prove so difficult to identify the "inventors" of the Order in 1160s and 1170s? Will further investigation tell us more about them and their motives? In any case, Berman's new narrative, in which the Cistercian Order came into being across several decades as the product of need and idealism in equal measure, its emergence made possible by the efforts of men *and* women often far from Burgundy, is now the one to subject to the kind of scrutiny she has devoted to the old story. To have accomplished such a revision with one book is a spectacular feat of scholarship and imagination. I can only hope the inevitable ripostes will be as lucidly expressed--and as passionate.

#### NOTES

[1] I think in particular of R.I. Moore's *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) which identifies the conscious, indeed calculated, centralization of ecclesiastical and secular authority as the chief enterprise of the twelfth century, especially its second half. That powerful people in the later twelfth century organized and aggrandized quite deliberately seems to me exactly what Berman asserts about the Cistercians, although she seems uncertain about how purposeful the invention of her subtitle actually was.

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See also Constance Berman's response to Bruce L. Venarde's review.

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