

Article

Monasticism in the British Isles: A Comparative Overview

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Abstract: The medieval British Isles were marked by a lively monastic presence throughout the entire period. Groups of monks, nuns, regular canons and canonesses, and friars established communities even in the furthest reaches of the territory, and by doing so they came to play an important part in the life, culture, economy, and politics of the region. This paper will provide an overview of the arrival and spread of the different religious orders in England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, and by doing so, it will provide some comparative study of the different parts of the British Isles and examine how and when the spread and settlement of the various religious groups manifested itself across the islands, and what their impact was upon their localities and the society around them.

Keywords: monasticism; religious orders; Ireland; Wales; England; Scotland; conquest

“In the fourteenth year of Maurice¹ and about 150 years after the coming of the Angles to Britain, [Pope Gregory the Great (590–604)], prompted by divine inspiration, sent a servant of God named Augustine and several more God-fearing monks with him to preach the word of God to the English race.”

Thus wrote the Venerable Bede (1965, 1994) in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in the eighth century.

1. The Beginnings

When Augustine and his fellow monks arrived in England from Rome, the island was by no means an empty stage as Christian monastic activity was concerned, though the earliest beginnings of cenobitic movements in the British Isles are difficult to reconstruct. Different types of monastic communities emerged unevenly but roughly concurrently in the north, south, east, and west of the archipelago. Evidence for these early communities is unequally distributed and often scant. We can, however, complement the fragments of formal documentation, including letters, with toponymics, hagiographical works, and archaeological remains, including inscribed stones, to try and get a picture of the extent and nature of early monasticism in the British Isles.

The topic of monasticism in the medieval British Isles has been much treated by historians over time, both in terms of individual parts of the archipelago and collectively (the literature is too vast to list here, but note for example Knowles 1950; Lawrence 1984; Burton 1994; Melville 2012; Vanderputten 2020 and works listed in the bibliography of this article). What the present paper aims to do is provide no more than a brief comparative overview of the arrival and spread of the different groups of monks and nuns, canons and canonesses, and friars, in Ireland, England, Wales, and Scotland, and on their impact on their localities and on the region.²

Christianity arrived in Britain during the Roman period and the patchy evidence, both documentary and archaeological, suggests that some sort of a diocesan organization was in place by the fourth century, dividing the Roman part of the island into ecclesiastical provinces. Moreover, it was shown by Marilyn Dunn and others that cenobitic communities of some sort were present in parts of the British Isles from at least as early as the fifth and early sixth centuries (Dunn 2000, p. 139). These earliest foundations are often linked to individuals of holy renown, who attracted a following and might develop into centres



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of learning, occasionally of some repute, as at Clonmacnoise in Ireland, Iona in Scotland, or Lindisfarne in Northumbria. Early monastic founding fathers include, notably, men like Ciarán (d. 549, founder of Clonmacnoise), Colm Cille (or Columba, d. 597, founder of Iona), or Aidan (d. 651, founder of Lindisfarne).

During the early Anglo-Saxon period, as Christianity spread in what is now England, monasticism was an integral part of it and was often promoted and patronised by kings and queens (Burton 1994, p. 1). A characteristic feature of the early religious landscape in England was the minster church, staffed by secular clergy, which could be found across Anglo-Saxon England and played a part in the process of Christianisation. Sarah Foot has described them as “mission stations” whence groups of religious set out to preach to people in the locality, while they simultaneously served as administrative centres (Foot 2006, p. 77). At the same time, other types of monastic institutions began to emerge in the region during the seventh and eighth centuries, though our knowledge of them is mostly limited. Some of these, however, prospered and grant us something of an insight into the monastic life of the period. Thus, we know that religious houses in Anglo-Saxon England during the seventh century benefited from contacts with Rome and the Continent, thanks to the initiative of some early monastic founders, men like Benedict Biscop (d. 690), first abbot of Wearmouth in Northumbria, and from the appointment of foreign bishops (Foot 2006, p. 58; Burton 1994, p. 2).

As elsewhere, religious communities across the British Isles around that time began to adopt rules to regulate the communal life, which was also influenced by local and regional customs (Burton 1994, p. 20; Vanderputten 2020, p. 37). We find a good example of what is known as the *regula mixta* in the writings of the Venerable Bede about Benedict Biscop. Among other things, Bede stresses Benedict’s repeated visits to France, whence he gained experience and understanding of the monastic life on the Continent and brought back books and relics, as well as masons and glaziers to work on the buildings of his new Northumbrian monastery.

In Wales, the monastic panorama was similarly lively (Davies 1982, pp. 146–47). Religious communities were present from the fifth century, often linked to certain individuals, like St David or St Beuno, and several early religious foundations, as the one at Llanwit Major in Glamorgan, acquired a reputation as centres of learning (Dunn 2000, p. 139). The *vitae* of the Welsh saints, such as the *Life* of Saint Beuno, despite the limitations of their genre, grant us an important insight into this period, which has been called the “Age of the Saints” for a reason (Baring-Gould and Fisher 1907, pp. 209–20). The other defining feature of early Welsh monasticism was the so-called *clas* church, which was not unlike the Anglo-Saxon minster in its structure, and which comprised communities of monks (later secular canons) or *claswyr* living under an abbot. The mother church, which could have one or more dependent chapels, was situated in its enclosure, which can still be identified today by the toponymic *llan*, as at the former *clas* church of Llanbadarn Fawr near Aberystwyth in Ceredigion (Evans 1992, pp. 33–35; Burton 1994, p. 19).

A system not dissimilar to the Welsh *clas* was also present in Scotland, housing communities of eremitic monks, *culdees* or *Céli Dé*, which had been introduced from Ireland via Iona, while there simultaneously existed communities of priests along the lines of the Northumbrian model (Gilchrist 2020, pp. 50–51). The former was predominantly a northern phenomenon, serving the “spiritual needs of rural communities to the north of the Forth”, while the latter could be found mostly in southern Scotland. Several of these early sites were identified (McNeill and MacQueen 1996; Gilchrist 2020, pp. 51–52), though so much has now disappeared that it is difficult to reconstruct the scope of early Scottish monasticism. One exception is the site of Portmahomack in Easter Ross in northern Scotland, where remains of ecclesiastical buildings and a cemetery, possibly dating from the sixth century, have been unearthed. In contrast to “Anglo-Saxon monasticism”, early Scotland had few connections with the papacy and the role of bishops in the monastic organization was limited (Gilchrist 2020, p. 52). There were similarities to early Irish monasticism, and also to the early Welsh church, which has led scholars in the past to coin

these communities collectively as “Celtic”, signifying their differences from Benedictine monasticism, a term which is problematic in this context.

Ireland was home to an impressive number of early eremitic communities or houses of *culdees*. As elsewhere, the beginnings of Irish monasticism are difficult to reconstruct on account of the uneven evidence, which includes hagiography and toponymics, and due to the scarcity of material remains, but by the mid-sixth century, notable monasteries which have left clearer traces had begun to appear in Ireland (Dunn 2000, pp. 142–46; Ó Cróinín 1995, pp. 162–63; Ryan 1931, rev. 1992), including Clonmacnoise (County Offaly) and Clonard (County Meath). By the eighth century, a large number of monastic communities, including houses for men and women, had been established across the entire island (Collins 2015, pp. 235–37).

Little is known for sure about the internal workings of the early monastic communities in the British Isles. Their lasting reputation as houses of learning, and the survival of manuscripts and other artefacts indicates their importance as cultural centres, an aspect much emphasised in the early literature, especially in hagiographical works, but these, of course, tend to defend or emphasise their own aims and interests.

What about the place of women in these early monastic communities in the British Isles? Again, the evidence is not plentiful, but we know that women played an active part in the emerging options of cloistered life, and in addition to documentary sources, including formal documentation, letters, and hagiographical accounts, there survive examples of tomb sculptures depicting women, hinting at a much greater female implication than it might appear at first sight. Toponymic evidence also reveals something of the locations of female religious communities, or of sites and places associated with nuns. Nearly 50 early female communities have been identified in Ireland where sixth-century women founders include Brigit of Kildare and Ita of Killeedy (Collins 2015, p. 230). On the whole, their expansion in the British Isles was less pronounced than that of their male counterparts. Thus, in Anglo-Saxon England, nunneries were geographically restricted to the south and the Midlands (Burton 1994, pp. 104–5), though we know of a number of formidable abbesses during this period. Our knowledge of the provision for female religious in early medieval Wales is scanty to say the least, and even during the later Middle Ages the number of nunneries did not rise to more than three successful houses, while a number of female Welsh saints, on the other hand, were known to be venerated (Cartwright 2008, pp. 67–91). The paucity, real and alleged, of both material remains and documentary evidence has often been cited as the reason for the neglect religious women experienced for a long time in the historiography. Over the past decades, however, women religious in the medieval period have at last enjoyed increasing attention from scholars across the disciplines (Burton and Stöber 2015b, pp. 1–6).

From their earliest appearance in the region, Christian cenobitic communities were marked by their founders as well as by their localities with their specific customs and social structures. We thus have to bear in mind the differences in the socio-cultural, political, and economic contexts of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland when we talk about monasticism in the British Isles. It is problematic to speak of monastic settlement patterns, but it is possible to identify certain tendencies. The early Scottish houses, for instance, were almost exclusively located in the Scottish Midlands and the east (McNeill and MacQueen 1996). In England, evidence for early monastic settlement is predominantly in those parts of the country that were less affected by the Anglo-Saxon invasions of the fifth century (Dunn 2000, p. 139). And early Welsh religious houses can often be found in the southern half of the country. It is in any case problematic to speak of a systematic monastic movement in the region at this time. The motivations of early monastic founders were not driven by a singular common goal or a common aim for some monastic ideal, but rather it would seem that several men, and a few women, were motivated by similar but not identical ideas and experimented with different ways of putting them into practice (Vanderputten 2020, p. 3). Their inspiration had at its core the search for the spiritual life and included in most cases the withdrawal from the world, the renunciation of wealth

and property, and a life of chastity. Contacts clearly existed between different parts of the British Isles. An obvious case is the monastery of Iona in north-western Scotland, founded by Colm Cille around 563, after he was exiled from his native Ireland. But just how much the various monastic communities across the Isles knew of each other, and how much contact there was between them, is in most cases a matter of speculation. In some instances, we know that one house was founded from another as in the case of Lindisfarne, established by Aidan (d. 651) around 635 from Colm Cille's monastery at Iona.

From what can be gathered, both from the written sources and from the surviving material remains, the monastic life in the British Isles thrived during the early period, both in terms of expansion and of cultural sophistication (Burton 1994, p. 3). But this "golden age" was not to last. By the eighth century, the monastic life in the British Isles was in decline, not least on account of successive Viking raids, which often had as their targets the religious houses, especially those on or near the coast (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 10–11). During the century or so after the start of the raids, the Northumbrian monasteries were either destroyed or had been abandoned, and those of the Lincolnshire and Kentish coasts subsequently shared the same fate. It is difficult to assess in any detail the state of monasticism in the British Isles during this period as the sources are scarce, but it seems that life according to the *Rule* of St Benedict, which had, in any case, not been followed exclusively in pre-tenth-century British religious communities, was disappearing from the surviving monasteries.

The tenth century, however, saw a monastic revival in England that has been described as a second "golden age" of insular monasticism (Burton 1994, p. 3). The agents of monastic reform during this period were three men—all monks who later became bishops—and a king, thanks to whose initiative and efforts the English monastic scene began to recover some of its former splendour. They were Dunstan (d. 988), abbot of Glastonbury and subsequently archbishop of Canterbury; Æthelwold (d. 984), who became bishop of Winchester; and Oswald (d. 992), who rose to be bishop of Worcester, with the support of King Edgar of England (d. 973). This collaboration of religious and secular powers was a characteristic feature of English monasticism, with subsequent kings and queens fulfilling the role of patrons and defenders of the houses of monks and nuns (Burton 1994, pp. 3–4). Our knowledge of the early organisation of religious men and women in the British Isles is less than extensive, but over time the *Rule* of St Benedict began to gain ground. To help bring about its universal application in England and ensure a greater degree of liturgical unity, certain monastic reformers, foremost among them Æthelwold, compiled a set of instructions based on Benedict's *Rule* and known as the *Regularis Concordia* (Vanderputten 2020, p. 62; Burton 1994, p. 3). The transition from early to Benedictine monasticism was thus already underway when the Normans arrived in the British Isles in the eleventh century and accelerated the process.

2. After the Normans

2.1. Benedictine Monasticism

Following the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, continental monasticism was steadily gaining ground in the British Isles, changing the monastic landscape permanently. It seems clear that monastic life in the British Isles was not derelict at that time, with the Normans restoring an ailing institution, as was claimed by some Norman chroniclers (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 13–14). New foundations were often daughter houses of continental Benedictine abbeys, established by the recently-arrived Norman lords on their new English and Welsh lands (Clark 2011, p. 54; Burton 2013, pp. 21–37). Norman monastic foundations in England and Wales at this time might be regarded as the religious element of conquest, and their expansion across the territory reflects the expansion of Norman authority and settlement.

The monasticism the Normans encountered upon their arrival and settlement in England and Wales differed sufficiently from their own monastic experience in France to induce them to bring the existing system into line with practices familiar to them.

The efforts to establish new foundations following the continental model brought with it important building and rebuilding campaigns. Roberta Gilchrist has pointed out, for instance, that there is no archaeological evidence to suggest that the monastic claustral plan was known in England prior to the arrival of the Normans (Gilchrist 2020, p. 52).

It is important to bear in mind, when talking about religious houses in the British Isles, that these were often small (sometimes very small) communities, sometimes housing little more than a monk (or canon) or two. Indeed, the issue has been raised whether it is helpful to refer to these small cells as proper monastic communities at all. As Martin Heale once put it: “one man and his dog cannot easily be considered to make up a true religious house” (Heale 2004, p. 8).

In many cases, first-generation post-Conquest Benedictine houses in England began life as daughter houses or cells of Norman or French monasteries, as a result of the grants of land made by the new Norman lords in England to religious houses in their country of origin (Burton 1994, pp. 29–30). The years after the Battle of Hastings saw a spate of new monastic foundations, the first being William the Conqueror’s own abbey at Battle (colonised by monks from Marmoutier), allegedly on the spot where King Harold was slain. A parallel movement saw the revival of monasticism in the north of England, with efforts to revive former monastic centres like Jarrow, and founding such important abbeys as Whitby (in 1078/1079) or St Mary’s, York (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, p. 15). Altogether, some 130 Benedictine monasteries came into being in England, counting both pre- and post-Conquest foundations; several of them failed before the Dissolution in the sixteenth century (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 52–58).³

The Normans made their first forays into Wales shortly after the Battle of Hastings. By around 1071, only 5 years after the defeat of King Harold, the first Norman monastery on Welsh lands was founded in Chepstow by William fitz Osbern, lord of Chepstow Castle, as an alien priory of his monastery at Corneilles in Normandy (Cowley 1977, p. 17; Graham 1930, p. 103). William fitz Osbern’s monastic foundation alongside the new castle at Chepstow and the establishment of a borough can be considered what Janet Burton has called the threefold “instruments of power” in the wake of the Norman Conquest (Burton 2013, p. 23). Fifteen further houses of Black Monks and one Benedictine nunnery were founded in Wales in the course of a century, but not all of them lasted; some, like Llanbadarn Fawr, were transformed (into a collegiate church), others, like Llandoverly, dissolved (Burton 2013, p. 21). All, however, were dependent priories and all were relatively small houses.

In Scotland, the Benedictines arrived in the first half of the twelfth century, when King David I of Scotland founded the abbey of Dunfermline on the site of an earlier monastic foundation. Altogether, the Black Monks came to establish no more than six successful male houses and one nunnery north of the River Tweed (Hall 2006, pp. 14–16). Their comparatively late arrival in Scotland meant that even their earliest foundations coincided with the impact of groups of reformed Benedictines in the British Isles, most notably the Cistercians, but also the Order of Tiron (Dilworth 1995, pp. 5–6).

The study of Benedictine monasticism in Ireland was for a long time a neglected subject (Browne and Clabaigh 2005; Bhreathnach 2012, pp. 63–91). This was not, however, for want of a Benedictine presence. Early evidence is patchy, but it has been shown that the *Rule* of St Benedict was known in Ireland at least by the late seventh or early eighth century (Ó Clabaigh 2005, p. 81). As in England and on the Continent, the later eleventh and twelfth centuries saw the reform efforts of kings and bishops, which focused in the first instance on the larger and more important religious houses (Bhreathnach 2012, p. 65). In comparison with Cistercian, Augustinian or Franciscan monasteries, houses of Benedictine monks were never particularly numerous in medieval Ireland, and the dozen or so successful Benedictine foundations that can clearly be identified as such have left us very little documentary evidence to allow us to gain a sense of Irish Benedictine life during the medieval period (Ó Clabaigh 2005, p. 80).

Almost at the same time that English Black Monks were reviving the monasteries in the north of the country, the south of England saw the arrival of the first of the reformed Benedictines. Cluniac monks first settled in the British Isles when they founded the priory of Lewes in 1077, the church being granted to Cluny by William de Warenne and his wife Gundreda (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, p. 100). A little over 40 houses of the Order of Cluny were established in England, and by the Dissolution in the sixteenth century, 27 of these were still functioning. In the rest of the British Isles, the Cluniac presence was limited. There were two Cluniac houses in Scotland, the first of which, founded at Renfrew in 1163, relocated to Paisley just a few years later. A second house of the Order was added at Crossraguel in 1244. The two Scottish Cluniac monasteries were thus located in relative proximity of one another in Strathclyde (Hall 2006, pp. 14–16). What is remarkable about these is that both of them achieved the status of abbey.

Further south, Wales, too, was home to two houses of the Order of Cluny, at Malpas and at St Clears, both in the south of the country. Malpas was founded around 1122 as a cell of Montacute Priory in Somerset and remained small both in terms of brethren—perhaps only two or three—and in terms of wealth. Nonetheless, the house survived until the Dissolution in the sixteenth century. St Clears, similarly small, was a dependency of St Martin des Champs in Paris. Founded in the mid-twelfth century, the priory was granted to All Souls' College, Oxford, by Henry VI in 1442 (Smith 2008, p. 255; Burton and Stöber 2015a, pp. 176–78).

Only one single Cluniac house was ever established on the other side of the Irish Sea. The monastery of Athlone was founded in 1150 by the king of Connacht Tuloagh O'Connor (Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, p. 110), though its association with the Cluniac Order may have been later, and the exact nature of this association is indeed uncertain (Ó Clabaigh 2005, p. 88).

2.2. The Augustinian Canons

The gradual expansion of houses of regular canons from around the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries brought another dimension to the monastic landscape of the British Isles (Burton and Stöber 2011). The idea of groups of clerics living in community in imitation of the *vita apostolica*, while engaging in pastoral work by serving parish churches and administering the sacraments, as well as teaching and caring for the sick, clearly appealed to twelfth-century society, as the large number of foundations of regular canons in the region indicates. In England alone, over 240 houses of Augustinian canons came to be founded from the opening years of the twelfth century onwards, which saw the establishment of their first monastery in Colchester (Dickinson 1950; Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 139, 155). The popularity of the Augustinians was in part also due to their being an affordable option for potential founders and patrons of the lesser nobility. Many houses of regular canons across the British Isles were founded by members of the gentry, whose ties with their religious houses often became close and personal (S. Wood 1955, pp. 3, 41, 135; Stöber 2007, pp. 44–46). Many Augustinian priories came to house the tombs of their founders and members of the founding family.

In Wales, too, the regular canons enjoyed considerable popularity, both with Anglo-Norman and with native Welsh founders and patrons. The first of Wales's nine houses of Augustinian canons was the priory of Llanthony in the Black Mountains, founded at the turn of the twelfth century and much praised by Gerald of Wales during his travels through the country in 1188 (Gerald of Wales 1978, pp. 97–107). Regular canons settled in several cases on earlier ecclesiastical foundations, as in the cases of Puffin Island, also known as Ynys Lannog, or Beddgelert, both in Gwynedd (Burton and Stöber 2015a, pp. 52–56, 169–70; Stöber 2019, pp. 83–97). Surviving evidence suggests that their communities tended to be small. Their relations with some of the native Welsh princes involved the heads of several Augustinian priories in politics, though this was not an exclusively Augustinian feature (Stöber 2011, pp. 97–113; Stöber and Austin 2013, pp. 39–51).

With 18 successful foundations, the Augustinian canons represent the second largest religious group in Scotland, just after the Cistercians. Indeed, if we include the six Premonstratensian houses of Scotland, the regular canons form the most numerous group in terms of religious houses in Scotland (Hall 2006, pp. 14–16; Dilworth 1995, pp. 6–7). As elsewhere, they are noted for their pastoral care and their involvement in the political life outside their cloister walls. And as elsewhere, their houses were often of moderate size and wealth.

Similarly, in Ireland the Augustinian canons were the predominant religious group with some 120 foundations (Preston 1996; O’Keeffe 2011, pp. 469–84; Gwynn and Hadcock 1970, pp. 146, 199). Their expansion on the island was linked to the colonising efforts of the new Anglo-Norman lords after the twelfth-century invasion of Ireland (Clyne 2011, pp. 145–72), though a smaller number can be attributed to Gaelic-Irish founders.

Across the archipelago, the regular canons achieved great popularity with lay founders and patrons and with the population at large. In terms of investment, patronage of an Augustinian priory was an option for a new class of lay benefactors, who often developed close relations with their religious communities, manifested in donations and visits to their monasteries during their lifetimes, and burial within their walls after death. The regular canons attracted founders from across the ethnic divides in Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, and not infrequently this embroiled them in the political upheavals of the era in these regions. Through their duties as priests and their care for the sick, the regular canons had contacts with many aspects of life outside their convent walls and were hence a visible element of the religious panorama.

2.3. *The Premonstratensians*

The Premonstratensians, or White Canons, established their first abbey in England in Newsham (Lincolnshire) in 1143 (Colvin 1951; Knowles and Hadcock 1971, p. 183; Gribbin 2001, p. 3). Some 37 further foundations followed, some of these being alien priories dependent on Premonstratensian abbeys in France, as in the case of Cammeringham (Lincolnshire), founded as a cell of Blanchelande in Normandy and suppressed in 1396 (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, p. 186). Newsham founded its own daughter houses, among them Alnwick in Northumbria in the late 1140s. From Alnwick, the White Canons moved into Scotland, with the foundation of its daughter house at Dryburgh, whence the Premonstratensians subsequently arrived in Ireland (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, p. 183).

The majority of the Irish Premonstratensian houses were founded during the thirteenth century, at a time of “colonisation of peripheral areas” in Ireland (Clyne 2011, p. 146). One of the earliest of them was the abbey of Carrickfergus, founded by John de Courcy in the recently established Anglo-Norman lordship at Ulster, as a daughter house of the English abbey of Dryburgh (Clyne 2011, pp. 148–49; *The Monastic Ireland Project*). The Premonstratensians arrived in Ireland during a time when the reorganisation of the church was still underway. What had begun as a movement in which the Gaelic kings were instrumental, from the 1170s the reform of the church was affected by the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland and the new, Anglo-Norman, lords, became enthusiastic participants in the founding of new, reformed, religious communities, among them Premonstratensian houses.

In Wales, the only foundation of the White Canons was Talley Abbey, established by Rhys ap Gruffudd, the Lord Rhys, as a daughter house of St Jean of Amiens, in the later 1180s. Like a number of their Augustinian and Cistercian counterparts, the canons of Talley forged links with the native Welsh rulers, as a consequence of which the monastery experienced the ire of the English king and his army during the Edwardian wars. It is also known that Talley had an uneasy relationship with its Cistercian neighbours at Strata Florida and Whitland (Burton and Stöber 2015a, pp. 198–203). Despite its occasional troubles, Talley Abbey survived until 1536, when the community, whose annual income then fell below the required £200, was dissolved during the first wave of suppression of religious houses.

2.4. The Cistercians

The early twelfth century saw the coming of new reformed Benedictines to the British Isles, notably the Cistercians and Savignacs (Burton and Kerr 2011; Jamroziak 2013; Bruun 2013). These groups of monks and nuns were to have a particular impact on the British monastic landscape. The two groups merged in 1147 and from this date houses of both Orders are known as Cistercian. Theirs had already begun to be a success story on the continent when they expanded northwards and found fertile ground for their project including in areas not hitherto overly populated by religious houses. Over time they came to form an important monastic presence in all of the constituent parts of the Isles.

Both Savignacs and Cistercians arrived in the archipelago at almost the same time. The first Cistercian monastery in England was the abbey of Waverley, founded in 1128, although by this date the then Savignac abbey of Furness, the foundation of which was originally at Tulketh, near Preston, in 1124, was already in existence (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 22, 119, 127–28). Waverley was founded by William Giffard, bishop of Winchester. Giffard was not the only prelate whose initiative helped establish the Cistercian Order in the British Isles: In Ireland, too, the White Monks enjoyed the early support of the episcopacy.

The Cistercians arrived in Ireland thanks to the initiative of St Malachy, archbishop of Armagh (d. 1148), who introduced the White Monks to the Emerald Isle with a foundation at Mellifont (Co. Louth) in 1142 (Moss 2007, pp. 35–37; Ó Conbhuidhe 1958). Here, as in other parts of the British Isles, Cistercian and Savignac monasticism proved to be very popular indeed (Stalley 1987; Ó Conbhuidhe 1998). Houses of monks and nuns of the Order appeared in large numbers during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, from Macosquin in the north to Abbeymahon in the south, and from Dublin in the east to Clare Island in the west (Map of Monastic Ireland 1979).

Across the Irish Sea in England, a total of 76 Cistercian monasteries came to be established across the regions, and nearly all of them survived until the Dissolution in the sixteenth century. The Cistercians enjoyed considerable popularity in medieval England. Janet Burton has emphasised the diverse nature of their early communities, and the involvement of kings, bishops, and the Cistercians themselves in promoting their expansion (Burton 1994, pp. 65–66). Their spread across the country, which began with the foundation of Waverley in 1128, was expeditious, and the following century saw a spate of new Cistercian monasteries; by the mid-thirteenth century, there existed nearly 70 Cistercian abbeys in England alone.

In Wales, the White Monks were to play an important role not only in the religious history of the region. A total of 14 male and 2 female houses of the Order came into being during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The first to arrive here, too, were groups of Savignac monks, who settled at sites in Neath in the south and Basingwerk in the north, in 1130 and 1131 respectively. Almost simultaneously, in 1131, the first Welsh Cistercian abbey was founded at Tintern from l'Aumône. Sixteen houses of Cistercians came to flourish in Wales, of which two were for women: The nunneries of Llanllŷr (Ceredigion) and Llanllugan (Powys) were small throughout their history, but both survived into the 1530s when they were suppressed (Burton and Stöber 2015a, pp. 120–24).

Scotland saw its first Cistercian foundation in 1136, when monks from the Yorkshire abbey of Rievaulx settled at Melrose in the Borders, thanks to the initiative of King David I of Scotland (Hall 2006, pp. 14–16). Over little more than a century, the Order became the most numerous of all the religious groups north of the Tweed. A total of 19 Cistercian houses were founded in Scotland, five of them nunneries (Hall 2006, pp. 14–16; Curran 2005).

The medieval Cistercians have often been regarded as one of the great monastic success stories, attracting patronage and support from bishops and kings to the nobility of the various ethnic backgrounds. Across the British Isles, as elsewhere, the White Monks were also an important economic force and they became involved in a very wide variety of economic activities, including horse-breeding and bee-keeping, according to the conditions

of their respective localities. Cistercian communities moreover played a part in the political life of their regions. Where they were associated with native Welsh, Irish or Scottish patrons, they might become the target of the English king's hostility during times of political unrest.

It is interesting to note the "internal" colonisation of the Cistercian Order in the British Isles. Thus, as we have seen, the Scottish abbey of Melrose and its descendants had been colonised from Rievaulx in Yorkshire; the Irish abbey of Tintern de Voto (Co. Wexford) from the Welsh monastery of Tintern (Monmouthshire); Grey Abbey in Ireland (Co. Down) from Holm Cultram in Cumberland, and this in turn from Melrose in Scotland; the Irish abbeys of Comber (Co. Down) and Tracton (Co. Cork) were colonised from Whitland in Carmarthenshire in southern Wales; and Inch (Co. Down) and Abington (Co. Limerick) from Furness in Lancashire.

2.5. *The Tironensians*

The Order of Tiron, founded in the early twelfth century by Bernard of Tiron in the forest of Savigny, was another manifestation of reformed Benedictines that established successful communities in the British Isles, though it was never a large Order there. No more than four houses were founded in England, as well as some smaller cells (Heale 2004; Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 106–7). In Wales, there were three Tironensian monasteries, at St Dogmael's, Pill and Caldey, all in Pembrokeshire (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 106–7; Burton and Stöber 2015a, pp. 63–65, 165–68, 179–80). Both English and Welsh Tironensians were outnumbered by Scottish houses of the Order. Altogether there were seven houses of the Order of Tiron in Scotland, though the earliest of them, Selkirk in the Borders, founded in 1113, failed before the Dissolution of the Scottish monasteries in 1560 (Hall 2006, pp. 14–16; Gilchrist 2020, p. 59). There appears to have been just one single house of Tironensian monks in medieval Ireland. This was the priory of St Mary, Glascarrig in County Wexford, founded as a dependency of St Dogmael's Abbey in Wales in the 1190s (Ó Clabaigh 2005, pp. 90, 106–7).

2.6. *The Gilbertines*

Among the new and reformed religious groups in the British Isles was one that was peculiar to England. The Gilbertines, also known as the Order of Sempringham, started life as a double Order for nuns and canons, when its founder, the priest Gilbert of Sempringham, in the 1130s, complied with the wishes of a group of local women and decided to help them live a cloistered life (Golding 1995; Burton 1994; Graham 1930; Sykes 2011). For the organisation of his communities, he looked to the Cistercians, who rejected his request to take his houses under their wing, but whose model of lay brothers he adopted. He also added lay sisters to serve the enclloistered women. The earliest foundations of the new Order were thus double houses, and they were almost exclusively situated in Lincolnshire, where Gilbert himself was active (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 194–96), but houses that were for canons only soon came to be added. A total of 10 double houses plus 14 Gilbertine monasteries for canons were established in England, the latter no longer restricted to Lincolnshire, but rather to be found across England, from Yorkshire in the north to Gloucestershire in the south (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 197–99).

2.7. *The Carthusians*

Perhaps the most extreme monastic experiment to successfully establish itself in Britain was the reclusive monasticism of the Carthusian Order, whose members sought to recreate the isolation of the desert within their communities. Founded by Bruno of Cologne in the 1080s, the Carthusians established their first house in England at Witham in Somerset in 1178–1179 (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, p. 133). A second Charterhouse was founded half a century later, at Hinton, also in Somerset. After this, the Order grew very hesitantly in the British Isles. No more than nine successful Carthusian houses ever existed in England. Of these, six were founded after the Black Death in the fourteenth century (Coppack and Aston 2002, pp. 33–46; Burton 1994, pp. 80–81). The spectacular remains of

the northern English Charterhouse of Mount Grace, with its reconstructed monk's cell, grant us a vivid picture of some aspects of Carthusian life in Britain.

There was one Charterhouse in Ireland, founded in the second half of the thirteenth century at Kinaleghin in County Galway, but this foundation failed before 1500 (*Map of Monastic Ireland* 1979). One Carthusian monastery was founded in Scotland, at Perth, to which might be added the three thirteenth-century houses of Valliscaulians (the only monasteries of this Order in the British Isles), at Ardchattan in Strathclyde, at Beaully in the Highlands, and at Pluscarden in Moray, respectively. Both Beaully and Pluscarden failed before the Dissolution in 1560. No Charterhouses were ever founded in Wales.

2.8. The Friars

The last significant group of new religious communities to arrive in the medieval British Isles were the friars. Not unlike the Cistercians, the mendicants, too, have often been regarded as one of the great religious successes of the age (Lawrence 1994; Robson 2006; Andrews 2006; Röhrkasten 2021). Upon their first appearance in England in the 1220s, the Franciscans and Dominicans, and also other mendicant groups, most notably Carmelites and Austin friars, soon established houses across the length and breadth of the country. Representing in the first instance an urban phenomenon, the friars sought out the towns and cities and there were few major towns in England that were not home to at least one group of mendicants after the thirteenth century. The most numerous group of friars were the Franciscans. Over 60 houses of Grey Friars were established in England during the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, plus six communities of Observants, founded at the end of the fifteenth and as late as the opening years of the sixteenth century. There were nearly 50 houses of Black Friars in England. To this must be added some 40 friaries each of Carmelite and Austin Friars, plus another 20 or so foundations of other groups of friars, such as Friars of the Sack or Pied Friars (Knowles and Hadcock 1971, pp. 212–50).

In Ireland, too, the mendicants enjoyed great popularity (Ó Clabaigh 2012; Lafaye 2015). Upon their arrival in the 1220s, houses of the different Orders of friars appeared across the island, and by the fourteenth century they had become a notable presence. The friars first settled in the larger towns, their first foundation probably being in Dublin, but they soon expanded into the smaller, Anglo-Norman boroughs across the island, as well as into the territories of the Gaelic aristocracy (Lafaye 2021, pp. 69–70; Ó Clabaigh 2012, pp. 2–3). Foremost among the mendicant groups in Ireland were the Franciscans, who began by settling in the Anglo-Norman boroughs, with their brethren, too, being of Anglo-Norman origin, but who soon expanded into more remote parts of the country, including the south and west. The late fifteenth century saw the emergence of Observant Franciscans, and by the sixteenth century over half of the Irish Franciscan friaries had become Observant houses. The Irish Dominicans followed a similar pattern, choosing the larger towns for their earlier settlements and expanding into the more remote west in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By 1536, Ireland was home to 38 Dominican friaries (Ó Clabaigh 2012, pp. 59–62). Other, smaller groups of mendicants were also active in Ireland, most notably the Carmelites, who arrived in the island in the 1270s, when two houses of the Order were founded, in Leighlinbridge (Co. Carlow) and in Dublin. The Order grew during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, thanks to the initiative of Anglo-Norman founders and patrons, after which the Irish Carmelites experienced decline, both in their houses and, allegedly, in their standards. Nonetheless, most of their communities survived until the 1530s, with a few of them, in northern and western Ireland, continuing until the seventeenth century (*Monastic Ireland n.d.*).

The presence of the friars in Wales was moderate (Easterling 1914, pp. 323–56; Röhrkasten 2013, pp. 55–70; Burton and Stöber 2015a, pp. 15–17; 2021, pp. 138–79). There were five Dominican friaries, at Cardiff, Haverfordwest, Brecon, Rhuddlan, and Bangor; three houses of Franciscans, one house of Carmelite friars at Denbigh, and one Austin friary at Newport (*Monastic Wales n.d.*). The Welsh friars, then, here as elsewhere, chose in the first instance the major towns for their foundations, though they were absent from some

of Wales's urban centres, such as Cardigan or Pembroke. Jens Röhrkasten has suggested that we must consider factors like the rejection of a mendicant presence by the population, or the Orders' own choice of location, to understand their distribution (Röhrkasten 2013, pp. 62–65). Looking at the five houses of Friars Preacher, however, it appears that their locations were strategically planned to ensure a Dominican presence in each of the four medieval Welsh dioceses (Burton and Stöber 2021, p. 144). Both native Welsh and Anglo-Norman founders were involved in creating the mendicant presence in Wales and their houses were present both in Anglo-Norman settled *Marchia Wallia* and in native *Pura Wallia* (Burton and Stöber 2015a, p. 16).

In Scotland, too, the mendicants enjoyed some popularity. A concentration of friaries was in the Scottish Midlands, between Glasgow in the west and Edinburgh, St Andrews, Dundee in the east, while the remaining houses were mostly situated along the eastern and north-eastern coast, with houses at Montrose, Inverbervie, Aberdeen, Banff, Elgin, and Inverness (Cowan and Easson 1976, p. 116; Gilchrist 2020, p. 61). No friaries were founded in the north-west of Scotland. The Dominican friars established 16 houses, 13 of which were during the thirteenth century (Oram 2021, pp. 112–37). There were seven Franciscan friaries, one house of Conventual Franciscans, and the late fifteenth century saw the foundation of nine houses of Observant Franciscans (Cowan and Easson 1976, p. 116). Houses of Carmelites were present in Scotland, too, with some 11 foundations; and there was one house of Friars of the Sack. In Scotland, unlike in the rest of the British Isles, friaries continued to be founded until the 1520s, when a Dominican house was established in Dundee and a Carmelite friary was founded in Edinburgh (Cowan and Easson 1976, p. 116; Gilchrist 2020, p. 61).

2.9. Religious Women

There were far fewer houses for religious women in the medieval British Isles than male monasteries. Similarly, there has until fairly recently been much less scholarly interest in British nunneries than in their male counterparts, though this imbalance has been happily redressed over the last decades (note for example, for England: Thompson 1991; D. Wood 2003; for Ireland: Hall 2003; for Wales: Cartwright 1999, 2008; for Scotland: Curran 2005). Nonetheless, even today religious women often remain on the margins of historical study. Because there can be some ambiguity concerning their religious Order, houses of nuns and canonesses have been treated collectively here by region rather than by religious affiliation.

There is early evidence for houses of religious women in England (Foot 2006, p. 82; Burton 1994, pp. 87–88). These were the preserve of the aristocracy and we know of several royal women who entered nunneries during the Anglo-Saxon period (Burton 1994, p. 88). That there was a demand for female monasticism throughout the medieval period in England is clear, and it was in response to this demand that Gilbert of Sempringham, in the twelfth century, founded what was to become the Gilbertine Order, discussed above. The spread of continental monasticism enhanced the possibilities for religious women, too, and by 1300 there were in England over 70 houses of Benedictine nuns, nearly 30 Cistercian nunneries, and two priories of Cluniac nuns, as well as 24 houses of Augustinian and 4 of Premonstratensian canonesses. There were also other options for women (as indeed for men) seeking dedication to the spiritual life, as the surviving anchoresses' cells and the early-thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, a guide for anchoresses, demonstrate.

In Wales, the provision for women wishing to enter into the monastic life was limited. Only three nunneries were established here, the Cistercian houses of Llanllŷr and Llanllugan, and the Benedictine priory of Usk. There has been much speculation as to why so few houses for religious women existed in Wales, but no entirely convincing answers have been found (Cartwright 1999, 2008, pp. 176–77).

The evidence for Scottish nunneries is patchy, and as a result they were for a long time lacking a dedicated in-depth study. This was remedied some 15 years ago by Kimm Curran (Curran 2005). Fifteen communities of nuns have been identified in Scotland, not all of which survived until the Dissolution (Gilchrist 2020, pp. 45–49). They were mostly centred in the

mid-east of the country, where as many as 14 of them were located. Only the Augustinian nunnery on the island of Iona, the Benedictine nunnery of Lincluden, and the Cistercian convent of St Evoca's fall outside this pattern. Of these three, the latter two were in the south of the country, but both failed before the Dissolution in 1560 (Gilchrist 2020, p. 64).

Recent studies have thrown considerable light on the nunneries of medieval Ireland (Hall 2003; Collins 2015). Dianne Hall has divided the foundations of Irish nunneries into four "waves", from the earliest houses, of which less is known, via those that were founded by Gaelic kings during the twelfth-century church reform; followed by the first Anglo-Norman foundations on their newly-conquered lands, and including Benedictine, Augustinian, and Cistercian nunneries; and finally, the fifteenth-century foundations mainly of nunneries affiliated to the mendicant Orders (Hall 2003, p. 63). This model shows how female monasteries, too, were instruments of conquest in medieval Ireland.

3. The Impact of Religious Communities in the British Isles

For their localities, monasteries and nunneries were much more than religious houses peopled by men and women who prayed and chanted in physical seclusion. Apart from the visual effect of even a small-scale monastery in a predominantly rural environment, being imposing stone structures with glass windows, bells, and leaden roofs, these were places that had a wider sensory impact on those who beheld them. From within could be heard the tolling of the church bells, perhaps even fragments of the brethren's chant. From their kitchens emanated the smells of monastic cooking, from their precincts perhaps those of brewing, too, as well as a myriad of other odours from stables, latrines, and orchards. One ought also to consider the psychological impact these communities might have on the outside world. After all, they housed those who had abandoned the world to dedicate their lives to God, and thereby represented a moral example to all.

Religious communities moreover had a considerable economic impact on their localities. Much has been said about the importance of the involvement of religious communities in economic activities in the medieval British Isles. Naturally the extent and nature of this varied from house to house, depending on the size and wealth of each community, on the religious Order to which they belonged, and on the localities in which they were situated. Monasteries were often important landholders and might possess properties in towns and villages. They might be responsible for transforming the landscape through deforestation or by making wasteland arable and farming it. Monks might engage in economic activities as varied as apiculture, fishing, and brewing. Their diverse economic activities brought them into contact with the lay community outside the monastery walls, with whom they traded and entered into business transactions. No less important was the role of monasteries as sources of employment in the locality. Apart from attracting recruits to the monastic life itself, the staff of a religious house, especially a large monastery, might be numerous and include servants and stable-hands, among other lay workers.

With the economy in its widest sense set aside, monasteries were of course important cultural centres, both in the sense of creating and promoting culture, through manuscript production for example, and as centres of learning and cultural exchange (Clark 2007).

Through these diverse activities, religious communities in the British Isles came into contact with the local laity, with their patrons and benefactors, and by extension were drawn into the political life of their localities. The extent and nature of these contacts depended on a range of factors, such as the type of house, whether a male monastery or a nunnery; and the type of religious order, more or less secluded, which determined to some extent how close the ties between a community and the outside world were allowed to be.

4. To Conclude

What this brief survey aimed to do is provide an overview of the main developments within monasticism in the medieval British Isles by looking at the diversity of monastic life in Ireland, Scotland, England, and Wales. Over the span of a millennium, the region

experienced the arrival and spread, as well as the rise and decline of numerous different monastic or quasi-monastic groups that contributed to shaping the history of the region. The study of monasticism in the archipelago has for a long time inspired scholars of diverse subjects, notably historians, archaeologists, theologians, and art historians, and their work has resulted in an important body of literature on just about any imaginable aspect of the topic. Yet questions keep arising. What, for instance, determined the “success” of a particular region in attracting a lively and varied monastic presence? The chief determiners in the case of the British Isles, and indeed elsewhere, would seem to be threefold, with all three elements equally important. There was the issue of the landscape in which a religious order chose to establish a community: Accessible or remote, depending on the preferences of a particular religious group at a particular time, and viable from an economic point of view, either through sufficiently fertile lands, which might be exploited, or by being in urban locations offering access to rents and properties that might safeguard the survival of a religious community over time. Then there was the important matter of precedent, i.e., earlier foundations, be they shrines, churches, or monasteries, of religious significance at the site. And finally, the crucial issue of patronage. In other words, it was the threefold combination of economic viability, religious tradition, and local support that encouraged religious settlement and favoured its success.

Why did some regions or localities attract certain religious groups while others did not? What lay behind the decision of a monastic Order to settle in any particular region? These are questions that can be applied to monasticism anywhere in Western Christendom, but a comparative overview of the monastic settlement and expansion in the different parts of the British Isles accentuates certain patterns and regional differences, however inconspicuous. A number of key factors determined why a religious group came to choose the location in which to found its monastery. Crucial among them was the role of the founders, be they religious or laymen, and their preferences in establishing an abbey or priory of any particular Order. What drove these men and women to opt for one religious Order rather than another might depend on personal preferences, on the current fashions (thus a new religious Order, for example, might be particularly attractive to a monastic founder at any given time), on precedent in the region, on a vow made in favour of one religious group, or on the external conditions (such as the site or the landscape) of any given locality. As has been shown, the Augustinian canons and the Cistercians were universally popular across the archipelago whereas Cluniacs or Carthusians were not. Nunneries and friaries were also unevenly distributed.

The monasteries and nunneries in the British Isles, as elsewhere, were closely connected to their localities and formed part of the landscapes in which they operated. As such, they were inevitably affected by external events and drawn into the affairs of the world and society around them. Thus, for example, the monasteries in the Scottish Borders suffered during the Scottish Wars of Independence in the fourteenth century, just as some Welsh houses did during the Edwardian Conquest of Wales in the thirteenth. They reflect the changes in society, such as the increasing urbanisation in the thirteenth century, and they suffered alongside it during times of crisis, such as the Black Death in the fourteenth century and its aftermath. The monastic presence in the medieval British Isles had an impact on its society more widely, notably on its religious, cultural, and intellectual life, but also on the economy, politics, and material culture. It is unhelpful, therefore, to separate the history of the British Isles from that of their religious communities, for indeed they lay at the very heart of it.

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Notes

¹ Byzantine Emperor Tiberius Maurice (582–602).

² For questions of scope, this brief discussion does not include the military orders.

³ The Dissolution of the Monasteries affected different parts of the British Isles in different ways and at slightly different times. In England and Wales, monasteries were closed between 1536 and 1540, eliminating the monastic presence in the region; in Scotland monastic life continued until 1560. In Ireland the Dissolution came about more gradually, but by the mid-1540s pressure from the English crown had resulted in the closure of about half of the country's monasteries, though some, notably houses of friars, continued.

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