



The Dynamics behind the Spread of the Cistercians in Galicia (North-Western Spain), 1142–1250

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Galicia saw the first Cistercian foundation in the Iberian Peninsula. This essay explores the dynamics behind the introduction of the White Monks to this region. Consequently, the following lines are intended to address the current state of things in which there is such a traditional issue in medieval Spanish historiography, as monastic dominions. In order to achieve this, I have proceeded not only to examine the first Cistercian foundation charter in the Iberian Peninsula, but also to select, gather, and analyse the most relevant bibliography that has been written on the development of the Cistercian Order in Galicia. As nearly all the monasteries were existing houses which were incorporated into the Order it is necessary to begin with an examination of the context into which the Cistercians came. This is followed by an analysis of their spread and accumulation of endowments, and an examination of the consequences of this growth.

Background: Galician Monasticism before the Arrival of the Cistercians

The Galician medieval monasticism has an extensive and detailed work published by Freire Camaniel (Freire Camaniel 1998). In it, the different rules that the monasteries followed in Galicia until the eleventh century are studied, as well as the communities, usually double houses, that lived in them are analysed.¹ On the other hand, as was the case in all of Europe at the time, these centres were the property of the laity, and this circumstance was one of the issues that the Gregorian Reformation - that began in Rome in the middle of the eleventh century – will address. This new era of reorganization set in motion an important stage in the history of the Church that will be transcendental for the subsequent evolution of this institution. In addition to the exclusion of the laity from all aspects related to religious life, the reform proposed the unity of the Latin church and the standardization of Western monasticism with the imposition of the Benedictine rule, although giving also to the Augustinian some preference for the regular life of the cathedral councils (Knowles 1983, 2: 175–194).

¹ For a better understanding of the evolution of double monasteries in Galicia: Rodríguez Castillo 2005.

The central idea of the reform was that the Church should be independent of any other power and would be led without discussion by the Pope who would exercise control over all the churches through an episcopal hierarchy organized in ecclesiastical provinces. The Gregorian programme reached Galicia in the time of Alfonso VI (1065–1109) and was imposed after the Council of Burgos in 1080. As a direct result, the rite was unified, the double monasteries were suppressed, and the traditional peninsular rules were replaced by the Rule of Saint Benedict (Nieto Soria & Sanz Sancho 2002: 91–94). Thereby, Castilian monasteries were to be independent, owners of themselves, and free from any secular interference, being subject to the supervision of the corresponding diocesan bishops (García de Cortázar 1969: 312). As in Castile and León, in Galicia the reform implementation process was long. Many of the ancient monasteries ceased to exist, while others, sooner or later, ended up being reoccupied by Benedictine or Augustinian monks. Furthermore, the great and powerful monasteries such as Samos or Celanova were more than reluctant, on the one hand, to submit themselves to their bishops in the ecclesiastical sphere and, on the other, to give in ecclesiastical rights - exercised in their immediate territories for centuries- to the diocesans (Andrade Cernadas 1997: 183–188). After a hundred years of discrepancies, certain agreements were reached. These would leave the abbots of the houses as ecclesiastical hierarchs of those territories in exchange for them to recognize diocesan authority, episcopal visitation rights and confirmation by the bishop of the abbot chosen by the community of monks (Pérez Rodríguez 2008: 23). The role that the monks of Saint Peter of Cluny played in the imposition of the Gregorian norms during the reign of Alfonso VI was very significant. However, unlike what happened with the bishoprics, Cluny's influence on the Galician monasticism was rather low, reducing its presence to four priories of little relevance.²

So, while in Galicia some monasteries disappeared forever, others were converted into Benedictines or Augustinians, and others dedicated themselves to fighting against their bishops, twelve White Monks arrived in Galicia in 1142 from Clairvaux to re-occupy the old monastery of Sobrado that had been empty for decades.

Santa María de Sobrado is a Spanish monastery located in the municipality of the same name, Sobrado in the province of A Coruña, on the Way of Saint James, sixty kilometres from Santiago de Compostela. After the Spanish confiscation of 1835, the monastery was sold to private individuals, thereafter beginning a progressive abandonment and decay of the buildings that ended up becoming a huge pile of ruins. On

² San Salvador de Villafrió, San Vicente de Pombeiro, San Martín de Jubia and Santa María de Ferreira: López Sangil 2005: 16.

25 July 1966, the Cistercian monastic life started again in the monastery of Santa María de Sobrado.

The fame of this monastery resides in its condition as the first Cistercian house in the entire Iberian Peninsula (Vázquez Varela 1982: 100; Rucquoi 2000: 489; Alonso Álvarez 2007: 707). However, Sobrado, like so many other monasteries in Galicia, had an earlier medieval past before adopting the Cistercian rule.³ The monastery was founded in 952 under the dedication of the Saviour (Salvador) by the counts of Présaras Hermenegildo and Paterna. In 1060 Ferdinand I confiscated the monastery from the descendants of the founding couple, thus disappearing as a religious community for over eighty years (Pallares Méndez 1979: 71–76, 109).

The First Cistercian Foundation Charter in the Iberian Peninsula

Basically, the foundation charter of the monastery of Sobrado consists of three parts: where the grantors are mentioned, the one concerning what is granted and, eventually, the signatures of the confirmers and witnesses who endorse the document.

As for the grantors, the name of Fernando Pérez de Traba stood out. As a leading member of the Froilaz-Traba lineage, he was outstanding in promoting the monarch's policy of attracting and privileging white monks. This nobleman ran for a long time the government of almost the entire Galician country and contributed handsomely to the foundation and wealth of the monasteries of Sobrado, Oseira, Monfero, Armenteira, and Toxosoutos (López Sangil 2002: 88). On 15 February 1142, the Count Don Fernando Pérez, together with his wife Doña Sancha, his brother Don Bermudo and his niece Doña Urraca Bermúdez, handed over the Sobrado monastery along with its possessions to the Cistercian Order.⁴ Although Don Fernando and Don Bermudo had been enjoying all its land rentals for twenty-four years, at that time the monastery was abandoned and in ruins. The Cistercian foundation of the monastery of Sobrado had great importance for Galicia. It was unquestionably the first foundation as such and was a sign of Don Fernando's friendship with San Bernard of Clairvaux, and his interest in the introduction of the Order in Galicia. Proof of this is that

³ As clearly appears from the work by Pérez Rodríguez 2008: 178–234.

⁴ *...Unde ego Fernandus Petri Dei preveniente gratia cuius omnia elementa subsistunt arbitrio, uxorque mea Sancia Gundisalvi, una cum omnibus liberis meis dono et concedo medietatem integram de monasterio Superaddi sicut mihi venit in particione fratrum meorum. Itaque consobrina mea Urracha Veremudi devota similiter dat aliam medietatem eiusdem monasterii que ei venit in particione inter fratres suos ex parte patris sui Veremudi Petri, cuius consilio et auctoritate sufulta in presenti facimus scripulturam testamenti...et cartam firmitatis Deo et ordini Sancti Benedicti, secundum consuetudinem Cistercensium degenti, necnon vobis abbatis domno Petro et monachis vestris...de monasterio integro Superaddi...* (Pallares Méndez 1979, doc. 18: 278).

Saint Bernard himself sent twelve Cistercian monks, including the abbot Don Pedro, who arrived in Santiago in early February 1142, receiving the donation on the fourteenth of that same month. On 22 March, abbot Peter and the white monks took possession of the monastery.⁵

With regard to what is granted, certain parallelism enduring in time can be seen between the territory donated to the monastery of Sobrado for the first time in 952 by the counts of Présaras and the endowment received by the Cistercians from the counts of Traba in 1142.⁶ It, therefore, seems obvious that the Cistercian monks were settled in the same areas that belonged to the earlier house monastery. In this way and for the most part, all the donations -i.e. the jurisdiction of a heterogeneous set of properties such as villages, hamlets, and messuages alongside their farmland and the men who inhabited them- were in the vicinity of the monastery in what was once the county of Présaras, converted, not without significant changes, in jurisdictional reserve or coto. The cradle of a territorial expansion nurtured by new donations and acquisitions that would eventually spread throughout Galicia, El Bierzo, and the Leonese plateau (Pallares Méndez & Portela Silva 2001: 231–232).

Concerning the confirmers and witnesses of the document, it is worth highlighting, among all, the names of Arias Muñoz, Pedro Cresconiz, and Pedro Helias. Archdeacons of great relevance in the chapter of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.⁷ This seems to confirm, at the very least, the acquiescence of the Church of Compostela in the role played by the monarchy, the nobility, and the Cistercians in the reorganization of the Galician territory (Renzi 2013: 65).

⁵ For a more detailed understanding of the process that culminated in the founding of the monastery of Santa María de Sobrado: Renzi 2013: 48–65.

⁶ As evidence of this parallelism, I reproduce the first possessions that were granted both in the document of 952 and in that corresponding to 1142: *...arboribus fructuosis et infructuosis undique per terminum designatis. adnectimus ibidem uillas qui ibidem deseruiant, uidelicet uilla Martiani, uillare Plano, uilla Gunderedi, uilla, que dicitur Codegio ad sanctum Iulianum...* (Pallares Méndez 1979, doc. 5: 258). *...Petro et monachis uestris presentibus et futuris, de monasterio integro Superaddi cum omnibus hereditatibus suis propriis, uidelicet, Marciam et Oyam, Uillar Planum, Gunderei. in Portu Carral, suam directuram de Superaddo. de Uillaribus et de Santi et de Santui...* (Pallares Méndez 1979, doc. 18: 279). In fact, in this last charter it is specified that *... Omnes alias que iacent in circuitu monasterii et ab antiquo eius fuerunt damus et concedimus iam sepe dicto monasterio...* (Pallares Méndez 1979, doc. 18: 279). Extract that directly relates the Cistercian endowment to the possessions of the old house monastery.

⁷ *...Petrus Helie ecclesie beati Iacobi decanus et archidiaconus confirmat; Petrus Cresconii ecclesie archidiaconus confirmat; Arias Munionis archidiaconus confirmat...* (Pallares Méndez 1979, doc. 18: 280).

The Cistercians in Galicia: Wealth Accumulation and Spread

The arrival of these White Monks was not accidental, since they were summoned by the king Alfonso VII himself. What interests motivated the king and his successors not only to facilitate the establishment of the Cistercians in Sobrado, but also to grant them land and jurisdictional powers? The answer must be sought in the interest of the monarchy to obtain loyal support to organize, control and colonize a rearguard territory in the process of reconquest (Pallares Méndez 1979: 119-123). In order to come up with a more complete explanation, it has to be taken into account the historical context in which Sobrado reappeared on the scene in 1142 as a Cistercian house.

The kingdom of Alfonso VII (1126-1157) hosted, first, a monarchy that sought to consolidate and strengthen the royal authority, greatly weakened during the turbulent previous reign of his mother, Queen Doña Urraca (1109-1126); secondly, an aristocracy that had reached during that convulsive stage a jurisdiction capable of contesting the king's own authority; and last but not the least, the continuous threat that the expansionist ambitions of Alfonso Henriques, the future Alfonso I of Portugal, posed to the stability of the kingdom. To reinforce the royal power, Alfonso VII carried out a remarkable policy of attracting the local lords through negotiation and feudal pacts. Negotiation that pursued to obtain their support and, therefore, their fidelity, avoiding conflicts and rebellions that could disturb the consolidation of the king on the throne. The key to the negotiation was to try and keep the nobles satisfied, facilitating political participation in the kingdom, but, at the same time, controlling the power they exercised. Undoubtedly, one of the Galician noble families that benefited the most from this policy was that of the Froilaz-Traba.⁸ Thanks to the allegiance to the king, this large lineage, along with other nobles eager to obtain royal favour, managed to gain undisputed supremacy in Galicia (Vital Fernández 2011: 117-119).

Once the territory to some extent was appeased with the support of an increasingly complacent aristocracy, it was time to ensure its effective control and organization. For this purpose, the best alternative found by Alfonso VII was that offered by the Cistercian monasteries. Especially if one takes into account that giving more power to the aristocracy was out of the question and trusting the episcopal sees had a double disadvantage: on the one hand and unlike the monasteries, they had little implantation in rural areas and, on the other, the accumulation of power in the hands of the bishops represented a risk for the monarchy (Portela Silva 1981: 325). Furthermore and, after all, the desire of the monks coincided with the policy of the crown:

⁸ For a better understanding of the power dynamics and growth of this family within the monarchy of Alfonso VII: Vital Fernández 2016: 53-69.

organization of the territory through the establishment of monastic centres that guaranteed the stability of the reign (Romani Martínez 1989b: 40).

It is no wonder, then, that under the protection of this royal policy, in addition to the monasteries of Sobrado and Oseira, the Cistercian Order spread across Galicia through the monasteries of Santa María de Melón in 1142, Santa María de Monfero in 1147 (although admitted in 1201), Santa María de Montederramo in 1153, Santa María de Meira around 1154, Santa María de Armenteira in 1162, Xunqueira de Espadanedo in 1170, the feminine of Ferreira de Pantón in 1175, and Santa María de Oya in 1185 (Torres Balbas 1954: 15). On the other hand, the possible religious explanation of this striking flowering of Cistercian monasteries in the twelfth-century Galicia was due to three factors: the proximity between the austere uses of the Order and Visigothic monasticism, the late penetration of the Rule of Saint Benedict, and the shallow roots of the Cluniac reform (Iradriel et al 1995: 194).

Apart from the socio-political explanations for the success of the Cistercian movement in Galicia, the economic causes that motivated it were also of great importance.⁹ This fact leads to answering another question: What differentiated the Cistercians from the rest of the monastic orders regarding the economic use of the territorial property? Firstly, the close relationship between the establishment of the Cistercians in Galician lands and the loss of influence and economic decline of the Black Monks must be pointed out. It is worth noting that precisely from the middle of the twelfth century to the first third of the thirteenth –concurring with the Cistercian expansion – a turning point of stagnation was reached in terms of acquisition of new lands and wealth accumulation by the great Benedictine monasteries of the period.¹⁰ Both Benedictines and Cluniacs were for a time completely relegated to the background due to the greater impulse and “modernity” of the White Monks. The main economic reason that traditional Castilian and Portuguese historiography uses to explain this decline is the little weight that direct exploitation had in the organization and the work of their dominions (Mattoso 1975, 2: 182). The exponential growth of the great Benedictine lordships towards the end of the eleventh century made their exploitation unthinkable only through the work of the monks on their own, leaving this task to domestic servants and serfs whose number did not increase parallel to the acquired lands which, in turn, had an adverse effect on seigneurial revenues (García de Cortázar 1969: 225). In this circumstance, we must add the little importance that the Galician Cluniacs gave to manual labour, dedicating themselves above all to prayer (Ríos Ro-

⁹ A deeper analysis about the socio-political explanation of the arrival and expansion of the Cistercian Order in Galicia can be found in: Portela Silva 1981: 319–330.

¹⁰ As evidenced in the cases of Samos and Celanova: Andrade Cernadas 1997: 52, 73.

dríguez 1993: 13). Thus, with regard to Galicia, two different periods can be drawn: one between the tenth and eleventh centuries characterized by the existence of certain spaces exploited by groups of serfs, and another, from the middle of the eleventh century in which direct exploitation, if it occurred, should have been of little significance (Andrade Cernadas 1997: 111).

The decreasing trend of direct exploitation, evident in the Benedictine lordships, marked a stark contrast with the new policies implemented by the Cistercians in the twelfth century. The direct exploitation of the patrimony, through the organization of granges and converts' workforce, was one of the most significant novelties of the White Monks. The incidence of this model in the Castilian, Leonese and Galician territory is more than obvious (Fortún Pérez de Ciriza 2002: 223).

In the case of Galicia, economic management was also a transcendental part of the life of any Cistercian monastery, and the most visible manifestation of this was the establishment of the network of granges. The Cistercian grange – as ruled by the *Exordium Parvum* and the *Carta Caritatis* – was a satellite agrarian unit of the monastery. The exploitation was carried out by the *conversi* and was run, at least at first, by one of them, the *magister grangiae*, always under the orders of the *cellarius* of the monastery. The appearance of these farms, so numerous in Galicia, implied the existence of exploitation units with characteristics very different from those that belonged to peasant families. Different in terms of the amount of cultivated land, in terms of the work employed -i.e. the team of monks and converts to which a contingent of permanent or temporary wage-earners was added since the beginning of the thirteenth century, far exceeded the available workforce within the framework of the peasant household- definitely different, because these granges were the preferred scenario of the intensification of agriculture.¹¹

As it is logical to think, the success of resource management through direct exploitation of the lands initially donated by the monarchy and the nobility led to a large accumulation of wealth in the form of a vast territorial expansion thanks to the acquisition of new land. In this respect, the growth of the Galician Cistercian monastic dominions compared to those of Cistercians or Castilian Cistercians was spectacular. Thus, for instance, during the twelfth century, the acquisitions of the monastery of Sobrado developed a sixfold increase with regard to those of the Benedictine monastery of San Martín Pinario. Similarly, the monasteries of Sobrado, Os-eira, Meira, Armenteira, Oia and Melón reached a number of acquisitions that –

¹¹ To get a more precise understanding of the running of these granges in Galicia: Pallares Méndez 1979: 193–194; Mariño Veiras 1983: 120–122, 166; Pascua Echegaray 1999: 64–71.

until 1250 – was nine times higher than that of the seventeen Castilian Cistercian monasteries (Portela Silva 1980: 31).

At this point, another question arises: What were the main defining features of the spread of these domains? It seems that ownership concentration in a few hands was the characteristic trait that best portrayed the territorial expansion of these monasteries. The main mechanisms to reinvest income were through purchase and sale contracts as well as exchange agreements whose main objective was to round off or marginally improve the properties so that they were more compact, manageable and profitable (Lucas Álvarez & Lucas Domínguez 1996: 109–113). Of course, this expansion policy was not only typical of Galician lands. Professor Berman has described for the French Midi region the two strategies that governed the economic performance of the entire Order. She calls “horizontal compacting” the attempt of the Cistercians to endow the domanial property with new lands adjacent to others they already owned and “vertical compacting”, referring to the progressive redemption of any prospective right or claim to ownership on the same holdings where the Order already enjoyed prerogatives, reducing in this way the number of people, from lords to peasants, with entitlement to own land (Berman 1986: 46).

These two complementary ways of acting or “horizontal and vertical compacting” were also quite common on the part of the great Galician Cistercian monasteries. Among them, I have chosen Santa María de Montederramo as a clear exponent of this strategy to concentrate the surrounding lands.¹² Several contractual clauses – aimed at clarifying the property rights of the parties involved in the transactions – proved the monastery’s interest in preventing families and communities from being able to claim future rights over the land. Often the grantor of the documents explicitly renounced to dispose of the property from then on.¹³ The clause that was consolidated already by the thirteenth century was as follows: “that from this day and later (the inheritance/estate) be removed from our right and included in your domain”.¹⁴ In the course of time, the waiver of all the progeny’s rights over the holdings for sale would be successively included.¹⁵ It is evident that these clauses were intended to leave in

¹² The cartulary of Santa María de Montederramo is already transcribed and published: Ramón Lorenzo. 2019. *Mosteiro de Montederramo, Colección Documental e Índices*. Santiago de Compostela: Consello da Cultura Galega. From now on I will refer to this text as CDM and the subsequent abbreviation will be doc. for document.

¹³ *...Ita quod ab hac die et deinceps non possumus ipsam hereditatem uendere nec supignorare, sed ipsi fratres debent eam ab hac die et deinceps libere et absolute possidere et nos tenemur supradictos fratres cum memorata hereditate quam eis pedegauimus in perpetuum tueri...* (CDM, doc. 96: 279).

¹⁴ *...ut ab hac die et deinceps de iure nostro sit exempta et abrasa et in uestro dominio sit tradita...* (CDM, doc. 99: 281).

writing the irreversible nature of transferring eminent property, the rupture of ties between the seller and the land, and the restriction of family rights. Another policy of the monastery was to acquire full jurisdiction of certain villages through exchange agreements with local lords and proprietors. In such a way, Montederramo obtained absolute control of the villages of San Martín (CDM, doc. 69: 250) and Peredo (CDM, doc. 77: 258). This manner of proceeding would guarantee Montederramo and the rest of the Galician Cistercian monasteries the ownership of rights over land, labour and surpluses, thus becoming political and cultural centres and, laying the institutional foundations of at least one century of agricultural expansion throughout the region (Reyna Pastor de Togneri et al 1999: 19).

The Cistercians in Galicia: Growth, Consequences and Ideals

In this section a question must be answered: What impact did the Cistercian expansion have on the ideals of the Order as well as on the practices of direct farming?

It was predictable that the scrupulous observance of the Rule of San Benedict, as well as the institutions of Chapter XV of the *Exordium Parvum*, would be infringed due to the increase in the patrimony of the different Cistercian monasteries settled in Galicia. Soon the direct exploitation gave way to the transfer of land by the abbots to people outside the Order for ploughing and farming. This way of working the land, handing it over to peasants, was in contradiction with the norms of the Order that valued above all else manual labour and direct exploitation through granges with *conversi* as the main workforce (Burton & Kerr 2011: 149–188).

However, it should be noted at this point that strict compliance with the rules of the Order was already in question at the time of affiliation with the Cistercian movement. The truth is that of the ten Galician Cistercian monasteries of the twelfth century, only two -Meira and Melón- were ex-novo foundations while the rest were the result of monastic reform or refoundation in pre-existing abbeys (Pérez Rodríguez 2008: 192). This means that from the first moment, most of these monks ignored the search for one of the purest -along with poverty- form of monasticism: inhabiting the most isolated and unexploited places. Instead, they did not hesitate to settle or remain in preestablished monasteries, accept donations and receive ownership of the existing lands at the time of the new affiliation.¹⁶

¹⁵ *...ita ut ab hac die et deinceps a nostro iure et ab omni nostra progenie sit exempta et abrasa et in uestro dominjo in perpetuum tradita...* (CDM, doc. 137: 319).

¹⁶ On the other hand, it must be remembered that the traditional view of white *monks as pioneers, reclaimers of waste* and creators of new arable land out of the wilderness is strongly contested by many local studies by arguing that Cistercian settlements were mostly located on land previously inhabited and cultivated. A synthesis of this line of historiographical thought

Nevertheless, it seems that this change towards indirect management was not only a consequence of the increase in arable land and the decrease in the monastic labour force. It would also have something to do with a provision of the General Chapter, issued in 1208 for the regions of Eastern Europe, by which monks were authorized to lease the least useful lands, extending this authorization to any type of lands in 1224 (Lekai 1957: 280). The provision of 1208, in view of the facts, was not only put into practice in the eastern countries but also in the West. For instance, of the twenty contracts signed by Oseira from 1205 to 1223, only one is prior to 1208 (Romani Martínez 1989a doc. 114: 125). It is evident that as early as the first third of the thirteenth century, this monastery took advantage of provisions that, in principle, undermined the foundations of Cistercian doctrine.¹⁷ It was throughout this century that Western Europe underwent a gradual process by which the Cistercians developed a course of action by turning their demesnes and granges into tenures and thus living on the incomes generated by their dependent peasants. This turn towards forms of a more complete seigneurial organization was also visible in France (Higounet 1983: 162), Germany (Rösener 1983: 152), and Wales (Williams 1984: 243, 267).

In Cistercian Galicia, the old serfdom system tended to fade away. A process that culminated in 1219, the year after which any mention of serfs disappears from the documentation of Sobrado (Pallares Méndez & Portela Silva 2007: 77). Indirect exploitation would gain prominence in this monastery from 1162 through certain agrarian agreements (*praestimonium*, *precaria*, *complanatio*, *ad laborandum*, *ad populandum*, sharecropping, and tenancy) whose final result was to turn the neighboring peasantry into monastery's vassals over time (Polaris Méndez 1979; 197–202). Such an outcome would be in complete contradiction with what is stipulated in Chapter XV of the *Exordium Parvum* by which it was mandatory to renounce both any type of seigneurial income and any possession of dependent peasants (Rixheim ed. & Berga Rosell trans., 1953: 38).

Conclusion

In February 1142 twelve monks arrived directly from Clairvaux and received the monastery of Sobrado as a donation from its owners, the Earls of Traba. This is how the first Cistercian house in the entire Iberian Peninsula was founded. Both Alfonso VII and Ferdinand II relied on the Cistercian monasteries as control centres of the

can be found in Alfonso Antón 1991: 8–9.

¹⁷ Portela Silva 1980: 33. This author points out the contradiction between the austere Cistercian doctrine and the practice that led the communities to benefit from the lands worked by others, to the point that the practice ended up dragging the doctrine.

territory and sought their collaboration mainly due to the independence they maintained with the lay powers. Thus, since 1142, and cemented on the foundation, re-foundation or reform of ten monasteries throughout this century, a process of expansion of the Order began. It was the moment of a colonizing movement based principally on agricultural exploitation through a network of granges worked by *conversi* and a policy of land consolidation through new acquisitions received through purchase and exchange agreements. Soon, the Cistercians accumulated land and jurisdictions in compacted ownerships, left behind direct exploitation, stabilized agrarian relations through rental agreements, and ultimately laid the institutional foundations for a century of agricultural expansion. Over time these monastic houses became the main economic accumulators and redistributors of surpluses in the Galician countryside. They were also subject of interest by a historiography that has been trying to combine two visions regarding the Cistercians: that of pioneers committed to abstinence, prayer and hard manual labour in the “desert” and that of a seigneurial organization forging dependency bonds with the peasant communities. What is unequivocal is that the white monks were a key part of the transformation of the countryside in Galicia, the humanization of the agrarian landscape and, in short, the growth of the Galician rural economy.

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