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The late-medieval economic decline of ‘old’ monasteries and abbeys in Western Europe: inevitable or avoidable?

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Abstract

The old Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries of Western Europe faced new testing economic conditions by the late Middle Ages. Gifts and donations to the institutions had dried up, the manorial system and serfdom were on the wane, and furthermore, these old monasteries faced competition from new private and charitable foundations such as hospitals and mendicant houses. Many monasteries fell into economic decline as a result, suffering from a crisis in liquidity and from expropriation of their lands. Was this decline inevitable or avoidable, however? By focusing on some cases of institutional adaptation in the Low Countries and Italy, it is shown that these older monasteries could adapt and reinvent themselves to stave off crisis. However, as is later revealed, not all monasteries encountered the same favourable power and property constellations necessary to achieve the required levels of institutional flexibility.

Keywords: Monasteries, Decline, Italy, Low Countries, Crisis,

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Introduction

Benedictine, and latterly Cistercian monasteries and abbeys, rose up in the early Middle Ages under support and patronage from Kings, territorial lords and princes, and eventually nobles. Lay authorities, for a variety of economic, political¹ and spiritual reasons, granted large tracts of land to these ecclesiastical institutions, further supported by rights and privileges to areas of uncultivated woodland and waste, allowing for expansion. Through donation, purchase, and (at times) reclamation of new lands,² monasteries and abbeys throughout Western Europe grew to be powerful institutions.³ Landed estates were the most important sources of revenue for the Church.⁴ These institutions were often great landowners,⁵ supporting large numbers of in-living religious personnel, monks, and lay brothers,⁶ and exploited grand demesnes using grange farms worked by a combination of unfree tenant labour and wage workers.⁷ These older monasteries were further supported by an inflow of tithes from parish churches.⁸

These powerful ecclesiastical institutions, however, experienced a new set of challenges and conditions in the late Middle Ages that set in motion a process of economic decline. Monasteries and abbeys across Western Europe shared a set of common problems. By the thirteenth century, the gifts and donations of land that

¹ Elite patronage of monasteries to crystallise political power is discussed in S. Wood, *The proprietary church in the medieval West* (Oxford, 2006), 211.

² Though reclamation activities of the early monasteries has been brought into question in I. Alfonso, 'Cistercians and feudalism', *Past & Present*, 133 (1991), 3-30.

³ For a general overview on the economic strength of these ecclesiastical institutions, see J. Gilchrist, *The church and economic activity in the Middle Ages* (London, 1969).

⁴ E. Watson, 'The development of ecclesiastical organization and its financial base', in J. Bury & H. Gwatkin (eds.), *Cambridge Medieval History: victory of the papacy*, vi (Cambridge, 1968), 532-3.

⁵ An emphasis on landownership seen in a number of studies on the older monasteries; for example, E. Palmboom, *Het kapittel van Sint Jan te Utrecht: een onderzoek naar verwerving, beheer en administratie van het oudste goederenbezit (elfde-veertiende eeuw)* (Hilversum, 1995); D. Osheim, *A Tuscan monastery and its social world: San Michele of Guamo (1156-1348)* (Rome, 1989); A. Verhulst, *De Sint-Bataafsabdij te Gent en haar grondbezit (7e-14e eeuw): bijdrage tot de kennis van de structuur en de uitbating van het grootgrondbezit in Vlaanderen tijdens de middeleeuwen* (Brussels, 1958).

⁶ The inhabitants discussed in, for example, J. Kuys, *Kerkelijke organisatie in het middeleeuwse bisdom Utrecht* (Nijmegen, 2004), 246-7.

⁷ See, in particular, C. Berman, *Medieval agriculture, the southern French countryside, and the early Cistercians: a study of forty-three monasteries* (Philadelphia, 1986), chp. 4.

⁸ G. Constable, *Monastic tithes from their origins to the twelfth century* (Cambridge, 1964), 109-18; R. Burns, 'A medieval income tax: the tithe in the thirteenth-century Kingdom of Valencia', *Speculum*, 41 (1966), 438-52.

supported the older monasteries had dried up almost completely,⁹ which was partly linked to the competition they faced through the emergence of new ecclesiastical institutions: private religious and charitable foundations such as hospitals, poor tables, mendicant houses, and vicarages.¹⁰ In contrast to the rural monasteries, these institutions were increasingly based in the towns and cities.¹¹ The lack of donations was a problem exacerbated by the legislation which swept across Europe from the thirteenth century onward, preventing alienations to the church.¹² Furthermore, the late Middle Ages brought new difficulties for agricultural organisation and economic exploitation of the land. As has been noted in many general works, the old feudal structures began to collapse, extra-economic coercion no longer became viable, spelling the end for the

⁹ See, for example, J. de Keyser, *Quelques aspects de l'histoire économique de l'abbaye Saint-Michel d'Anvers aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles (1124-1284)* (Brussels, 1965), 4-6; I. Joester, 'Wirtschaftshöfe der Prämonstratenserstifte Steinfeld und Knechtsteden im XII.-XIII. Jahrhundert', in W. Jansen & D. Lohrmann (eds.), *Villa-Curtis-Grangia: Landwirtschaft zwischen Loire und Rhein von der Römerzeit zum Hochmittelalter* (Munich, 1983), 222-41.

¹⁰ For the explicit differences between old ecclesiastical institutions such as abbeys and monasteries and new ecclesiastical institutions such as hospitals and chapters see, A. Rijpma, 'Funding public services through religious and charitable foundations in the late-medieval Low Countries' (Utrecht University, unpublished PhD thesis, 2012), 37-41. For the increased competition faced by monasteries in the late Middle Ages, see B. Thompson, 'Monasteries and their patrons at foundation and dissolution', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4 (1994), 122. Also a distinction has to be made between 'old' monasteries (e.g. Benedictine or Cistercian foundations), and 'new' small monasteries founded from the thirteenth century onwards. See again Rijpma, 'Funding public services', 37.

¹¹ For example, see B. Rosenwein & L. Little, 'Social meaning in the monastic and mendicant spiritualities', *Past & Present*, 63 (1974), 18-32. The attraction of the city was in fact criticized by Benedictine monks, lamenting the loss of the austere joys of isolated contemplation. See in M. Rubin, 'Religious culture in town and country: reflections on a great divide', in D. Abulafia, M. Franklin & M. Rubin (eds.), *Church and city 1000-1500: essays in honour of Christopher Brooke* (Cambridge, 1992), 3-22. Hospitals were often founded by urban citizens; for example, see A. Tervoort, 'To the honour of God, for concord and the common good: developments in social care and education in Dutch towns (1300-1625)', in M. van der Heijden, E. van Nederveen Meerkerk, G. Vermeesch & M. van der Burg (eds.), *Serving the urban community: the rise of public facilities in the Low Countries* (Amsterdam, 2009), 94-7; K. Goudriaan, 'Die Frühgeschichte des Hospitalwesens in den Grafschaften Holland und Seeland und in Niederstift Utrecht', in M. Pauly, M. Uhrmacher & H. Pettiau (eds.), *Institutions de l'assistance sociale en Lotharinge médiévale* (Luxembourg, 2008), 213-5.

¹² E. Miller, 'The State and landed interests in thirteenth-century France and England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 2 (1952), 124-6; C. Gross, 'Mortmain in medieval boroughs', *American Historical Review*, 12 (1907), 736; G. Espinas, *Les finances de la Commune de Douai* (Paris, 1902), 348; S. Raban, 'Mortmain in medieval England', *Past & Present*, 62 (1974), 3; A. Oosterhoff, 'The law of mortmain: an historical and comparative review', *University of Toronto Law Journal*, 27 (1977), 257-334;

institution of serfdom.¹³ Former subordinate tenants began to assert their freedoms from signorial oppression, and the former rural elites were displaced by rising urban jurisdictions and consolidation of land. In effect, the old monasteries lost their ability to exploit demesnes through coerced (and wage) labour in the context of the late-medieval collapse of the manorial system in large parts of Western Europe.

These old ecclesiastical institutions had (a) relied on a constant stream of gifts and (b) were originally set up for the manorial economy. When gifts dried up and the manorial system began to collapse (alongside the heightened competition from new religious institutions), these very same monasteries and abbeys faced a dilemma. They either had to adapt to the new conditions or face ultimate ruin. As it happened, many of the institutions did not adapt – thus falling irrecoverably into economic decline. Probably the most influential scholarship detailing this decline was the work of Italian economic historian, Carlo Cipolla, in a paper now published over 60 years ago. He showed that in Northern Italy, the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries brought about the widespread alienation of church lands to new lay encroachers, taking advantage of monasteries' long-standing shortage in liquid capital, so much so that by the mid sixteenth century these institutions owned only around 10 percent of the total land in Lombardy.¹⁴ In the late Middle Ages, monasteries' inability to adapt to the new economic conditions had led to liquidity problems, which in turn had made them susceptible to expropriation.¹⁵ This '*crise ignorée*' thesis was subsequently supported and extended for Western Europe in general by David Herlihy, who suggested the great era of ecclesiastical landownership was the ninth century, and that the church's grip over its property began to significantly weaken after the twelfth century.¹⁶ Furthermore, scholars have coupled the economic changes with a 'moral decay' narrative¹⁷ to create a largely negative picture of monasteries and abbeys in Western

¹³ Very generally, G. Bois, *Crise du féodalisme. Economie rurale et démographie en Normandie orientale du début du 14e siècle au milieu du 16e siècle* (Paris, 1974); R. Hilton, *The decline of serfdom in medieval England* (London, 1969); L. Genicot, 'Crisis: from the Middle Ages to modern times', in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe: the agrarian life of the Middle Ages*, i (Cambridge, 1966), 703-21.

¹⁴ C. Cipolla, 'Une crise ignorée: comment s'est perdue la propriété ecclésiastique dans l'Italie du nord entre le XIe et le XVI siècle', *Annales ESC*, 2 (1947), 317-27.

¹⁵ Lay aristocratic expropriation of ecclesiastical lands has been discussed in general in T. Bisson, 'The feudal revolution', *Past & Present*, 142 (1994), 29-33.

¹⁶ D. Herlihy, 'Church property on the European continent 701-1200', *Speculum*, 36 (1961), 98.

¹⁷ Suggesting a 'spiritual failure'. A classic (heavily debated) work being N. Cantor, 'The crisis of western monasticism, 1050-1130', *American Historical Review*, 66.1 (1960), 47-67. On the notion of monasteries going out of fashion as purgatorial institutions, see R. Hoyle, 'The origins of the dissolution of the monasteries', *The Historical Journal*, 38.2 (1995), 276; C. Harper-Bill, 'Dean Colet's convocation sermon and the pre-reformation church in England', *History*, 73 (1988), 197.

Europe after 1300.¹⁸ They were under pressure, financially crippled, out of date¹⁹ and outmoded, failing to recruit,²⁰ and essentially, dying a slow death.

Not everyone has subscribed to this thesis of total economic decline for the old ecclesiastical institutions of Europe in the late Middle Ages.²¹ In fact, Cipolla's evidence for the disintegration of the old ecclesiastical estates has been explicitly questioned.²² Furthermore, while Cipolla focused on the monasteries of the Mediterranean, it was noted even by observers in the thirteenth century that the same institutions were faring better north of the Alps.²³ Scholars have also cautioned us against a picture of total decline for the old order by pointing towards the relatively buoyant state of female convents adhering to the principles of the Cistercians.²⁴ Yet, we do not need to be as extreme as Cipolla in our views to recognise that many monasteries in Western Europe during the late Middle Ages were failing to adapt to circumstances which were altogether different from when they were founded.

Monasteries became caught in a web of debt. For example, the once flourishing Benedictine monastery of S. Fiora in Tuscany had by the thirteenth century contracted debts with Aretine banks, with wealthy Florentine burghers, and with suppliers, putting a massive strain on the finances needed to pay servants, workers, monks, and offer

¹⁸ D. Knowles, *The monastic order in England: a history of its development from the times of St. Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 940-1216* (Cambridge, 2004), 688-90; J. Burton, *Monastic and religious orders in Britain, 1000-1300* (Cambridge, 1994), 264-8.; R. Southern, *Western society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1970), 233-5. Although some recent work has tried to explicitly revise that perception, for example, see the introduction to M. Heale (ed.), *Monasticism in late medieval England, c.1300-1535* (Manchester, 2009).

¹⁹ Seen as unable to adapt to changing needs, for example, in M. Mollat, *Les pauvres au Moyen Age: étude sociale* (Paris, 1978), 177-208.

²⁰ U. Berlière, 'Le nombre des moines dans les anciens monastères', *Revue Benedictine*, 41 (1929), 231-61; J. Dubois, 'Du nombre des moines dans les monastères', *Lettre de Ligugé*, 134 (1969), 24-36.

²¹ A more nuanced and less pessimistic opinion has now been formed, which still nonetheless recognizes the difficult times for the old orders, as explained in A. Vauchez, 'The religious orders', in D. Abulafia (ed.) *The New Cambridge Medieval History c.1198-c.1300* (Cambridge, 1999), 222.

²² G. Chittolini, 'Un problema aperto: la crisi della proprietà ecclesiastica fra Quattro e Cinquecento', *Rivista Storica Italiana*, 85 (1973), 113-24; E. Stumpo, 'Problema di ricerca: per la storia della crisi della proprietà ecclesiastica fra Quattro e Cinquecento', *Critica Storica*, 1 (1976), 62-80; B. Hallman, *Italian cardinals, reform, and the church as property: 1492-1563* (Los Angeles, 1985). Some of the figures have also been questioned, for example, in B. Pullan, *Rich and poor in Renaissance Venice: the social institutions of a Catholic State to 1620* (Oxford, 1971), 133.

²³ Noted in S. de Adam, *Cronica*, i, ed. G. Scaglia (Bari, 1966), 306.

²⁴ See C. Lawrence, *The friars: the impact of the early mendicant movement on Western society* (London, 1994), 184-5; M. Fontette, *Les Religieuses à l'âge classique du droit canon. Recherches sur les structures juridiques des branches féminines des ordres* (Paris, 1967), 27-64.

religious services.²⁵ In fact by the end of the thirteenth century, there were only a few monks left – most of the order had relocated to the city of Arezzo to live there. Monastic lands were even usurped by peasant cultivators according to Giovanni Cherubini, apparently ‘no longer fearful of eternal damnation’.²⁶ Many institutions in this area of Tuscany went the same way: the monastery of Vescovato, the canon of S. Donato, and the abbey of Campoleone all faced ruination. On a wider scale though, the truly great monasteries all across Italy such as Subiaco, Farfa, and Montecassino fell into difficulties from 1200 onwards.²⁷ Elsewhere in Europe, in a desperate attempt to avoid financial ruin, monasteries in the late Middle Ages tended to fall increasingly under the direct power and control of their protectors and lay benefactors – much more than was seen earlier in the medieval period.²⁸ Monasteries became tools for aristocrats to use in their political machinations.²⁹ Furthermore, abbeys north of the Alps also began to lose substantial parts of their land, such as the abbey of Berne in the south of Holland and old ecclesiastical institutions in the Namur region of Wallonia.³⁰ Signs of decline and stagnation have been noted for a number of older monasteries in Northern Europe.³¹

²⁵ See P. Grossi, *Le abbazie benedettine nell'alto medioevo italiano* (Florence, 1957), 114-25; G. Penco, *Storia del monachesimo in Italia* (Rome, 1961), 430. Also Archivio di Stato di Arezzo (hereafter ASA), S. Fiora, no. 704; *Documenti per la storia della città di Arezzo*, ii, no. 481.

²⁶ G. Cherubini, ‘Aspetti della proprietà fondiaria nell’aretino durante il XIII secolo’, *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 121 (1963), ?

²⁷ Vauchez, ‘The religious orders’, 221. Also the great monastery of S. Vincenzo al Volturno as described in C. Wickham, *Il problema dell’incastellamento nell’Italia centrale: l’esempio di San Vincenzo al Volturno. Studi sulla società degli Appennini nell’alto medioevo*, ii (Florence, 1985), 4-5.

²⁸ For example, see J. Leclercq, ‘Il monachesimo femminile nei secoli XII e XIII’, in *Movimento religioso femminile e Francescanesimo nel secolo XIII* (1980), 61, esp. 79-92.

²⁹ For example, A. Bijsterveld, ‘Een zorgelijk bezit. De benedictijnenabdijen van Echternach en St. Truiden en het beheer van hun goederen en rechten in Oost-Brabant, 1100-1300’, *Noordbrabants Historisch Jaarboek*, 6 (1989), 17-8, 26-8.

³⁰ P. Hoppenbrouwers, *Een middeleeuwse samenleving: het land van Heusden (ca. 1360-ca. 1515)* (Wageningen, 1992), 340; L. Génicot, *L’économie rurale Namuroise au Bas Moyen Age (1194-1429): la seigneurie foncière*, i (Louvain, 1943), 824-7.

³¹ W. Braeckman, ‘De moeilijkheden van de Benedictijnerabdijen in de late Middeleeuwen: de Sint-Pietersabdij te Gent (ca. 1150 – ca. 1281)’, *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, 17 (1963), 37-103; N. Clegg & C. Reed, ‘The economic decline of the church in medieval England’, *Explorations in Economic History*, 31 (1994), 261-80; G. de Moor, *Verborgten en geborgen: het Cisterzienerinnenkloost Leeuwenhosrt in de Noordwijk region (1216-1574)* (Hilversum, 1994); Verhulst, *De Sint-Bataafsabdij te Gent*; L. Delisle, *Enquête sur la fortune des établissements de l’Ordre de Saint-Benoît en 1338* (Paris, 1910); R. Malfliet, ‘De domeinvorming van de Vlaamse abdijen Ten Duinen en Ter Doest in Zuid-Beveland en de Vier Ambachten tegen de achtergrond van het politieke conflict tussen Vlaanderen en Holland, 1167-1296’, *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis*, 9 (2006), esp. 78-9.

The point emphasized so far is not that the old monasteries faced economic ruin in the late Middle Ages, but instead that a large proportion of these institutions were ruined, but it was not inevitable. All Western European monasteries by more or less 1300 shared a common set of problems; in particular the decline of donations, the disappearance of the manorial economy, and the competition of new religious institutions. The inability of many of the old monasteries to adapt to these conditions led to liquidity problems and the chances of expropriation; but it must be emphasized it was a failure to adapt to new circumstances. Old ecclesiastical institutions across Western Europe experienced economic decline because they were unable or unwilling to adapt to change. In this paper, this point is emphasized by focusing on one old monastery and one old abbey which unusually found solutions to the common set of problems. The monastery of Camaldoli (East Tuscany) and Marienweerd (Dutch river area) used adaptive strategies to stave off crisis and (in Camaldoli's case) actively thrive, showing that nothing was inevitable and the monasteries could have saved themselves if they had shown similar flexibility. In the final section of the paper, some consideration is given to the reasons why a large proportion of 'old' ecclesiastical institutions failed to implement adaptive strategies.

I: The rise of Camaldoli and Marienweerd (eleventh to thirteenth centuries)

The background to the foundation of both Camaldoli and Marienweerd has already been addressed in great detail in two large monographs written by two well-known medieval historians, Chris Wickham and Bas van Bavel respectively.³² Camaldoli was founded in 1005 as a reformation of the Benedictine order by Romualdo of Ravenna, a monk of noble lineage.³³ Marienweerd's foundation was confirmed by the Bishop of Utrecht (a territorial lord) in 1129 (over 100 years later than Camaldoli) and supported by patronage from the noble van Cuijk family.³⁴ The natural environments in which the institutions were first built were quite different. The monastery of Camaldoli was located in a peripheral and isolated mountain region about 40km to the east of Florence known

³² C. Wickham, *The mountains and the city: the Tuscan Appennines in the early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1988); B. van Bavel, *Goederenverwerving en goederenbeheer van de abdij Marienweerd (1129-1592)* (Hilversum, 1993).

³³ G. Tabacco, 'Romualdo di Ravenna e gli inizi dell'eremitismo camaldolese', in: *L'eremitismo in Occidente nei secoli XI e XII* (Milan 1965), 117-8; 'La data di fondazione di Camaldoli', *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia*, 16 (1962), 451-5; W. Kurze, 'Campus Malduli. Die frühgeschichte Camaldolis', *Quellen und Forschungen aus Italienischen Archiven und Bibliotheken*, 44 (1964), 1-34; G. Vedovato, *Camaldoli e la sua congregazione dalle origini al 1184. Storia e documentazione* (Cesena, 1994), 16-21.

³⁴ van Bavel, *Marienweerd*, 117-24.

as the Casentino Valley, and was hidden away high up in the dense ancient forests.³⁵ The abbey of Marienweerd was built in a flatter environment in a part of the central Dutch river area known as the West Betuwe; the building itself lying close to the winding Linge River.

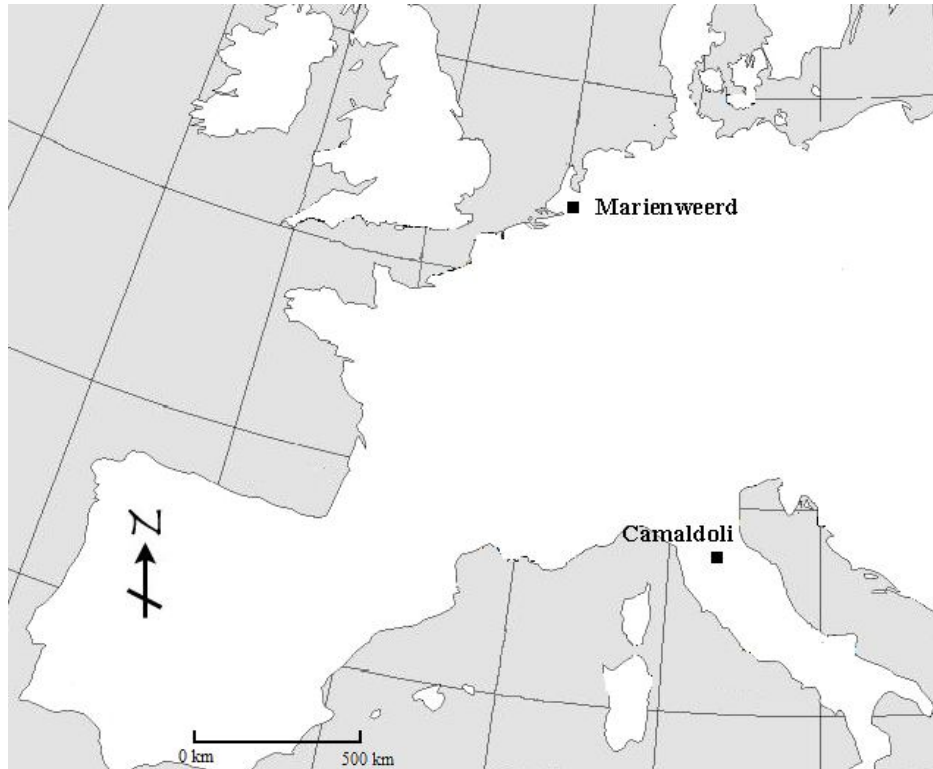


FIGURE 1. Locations of Camaldoli and Marienweerd

There were similarities to the early trajectories of both institutions. Upon foundation, both slowly increased their span of landownership through donations from elites and common folk. Although starting from quite humble origins, Camaldoli benefited from support by the Bishop of Arezzo, securing rights to vast portions of the forest which surrounded the monastery and receiving signorial jurisdictions to certain local territories.³⁶ Indeed, 55 of the earliest 140 mentions of landholding in a book of charters belonging to Camaldoli confirmed that the land bordered the Episcopal lands of the Bishop of Arezzo.³⁷ Camaldoli, however, probably had less reliance on feudal

³⁵ The isolation of the monastery is highlighted in a series of letters sent by two monks back to Gasparo Contarini in Venice. See C. Furey, 'The communication of friendship: Gasparo Contarini's letters to hermits at Camaldoli', *Church History*, 72.1 (2003), 71-101.

³⁶ Wickham, *Mountains*, 184-6.

³⁷ Contained within L. Schiaparelli, F. Baldesseroni & E. Lasinio (eds.), *Regesto di Camaldoli*, i (Rome, 1907).

relationships and patronage from connected families than other nearby monasteries such as Strumi, which rose up through the patronage of the influential aristocratic Guidi family.³⁸ Marienweerd grew (probably at a quicker rate than Camaldoli) through gifts of land and jurisdiction by territorial lords but also local noble families such as the van Cuijks. The Marienweerdse Veld, the land surrounding the abbey to the north and which came to be their most significant demesne, was given to Marienweerd by the Bishop of Utrecht and the Duke of Gelre by 1231.³⁹ Marienweerd also received a variety of lands in the nearby territories of Enspijk, Rumpt, Buurmalsen, Deil and Beesd, through a grant by Pope Urbanus IV.⁴⁰ In another later case, the feudal lord of Buren granted the abbey the right to pasture animals on his property and make free use of his drainage system.⁴¹

In the years after its foundation, Camaldoli benefited most of all from numerous small gifts of land by commoners, particularly from a network of villages in the central part of the Casentino Valley (the Archiano). Wickham showed this was not a consistent process, but rather a cyclical, stop-start development, where periods of intense gift-giving were interspersed by periods of inactivity.⁴² These tended to be tiny morsels and scattered plots rather than coherent estates, indicative of smallholder activity. In that case, Camaldoli built up a wide geographical span of landholding between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, although it was difficult to arrange these plots into coherent productive units. Marienweerd did not receive many gifts of land from lower down the social hierarchy. Instead, after the initial large gifts from elites during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Marienweerd at the end of the thirteenth and into the fourteenth century began to purchase land from elites and common folk. These plots ranged in size, and though many were small, they were generally larger than the tiny morsels taken by Camaldoli. Thus, although there were differences, Camaldoli and Marienweerd in the high Middle Ages grew in strength through land accumulation via a combination of donations and purchases. They both were supported financially by parish tithes as well; a ninth of the produce in Camaldoli and some farms owned up to a third of their produce to Marienweerd.⁴³

The early economic exploitation and agricultural organisation also offered some points of similarity and difference between the institutions. Using both the large donations from territorial and feudal lords and the purchase of new lands, during the

³⁸ Wickham, *Mountains*, 200.

³⁹ J. de Fremery (ed.), *Cartularium der abdij Marienweerd* (The Hague, 1890), nos 49, 51; S. Muller, A. Bouman, C. Brandt & F. Ketner (eds.), *Oorkondenboek van het Sticht Utrecht*, i (Utrecht, 1920), 18.

⁴⁰ Fremery (ed.), *Cartularium*, no. 79.

⁴¹ *Idem*, no. 157.

⁴² Wickham, *Mountains*, 180-220.

⁴³ van Bavel, *Marienweerd*, 462-4.

twelfth and thirteenth centuries Marienweerd moved towards a manorial economy with direct demesne management of agriculture. The abbey created a network of coherent productive units known as granges or '*uithoven*', which they directly exploited through a combination of unfree serf labour, wage workers, and lay brothers.⁴⁴ The first granges such as Ganshoevel and De Woerd were located on the older-cultivated lands close to the abbey building in the Marienweerdse Veld. Granges further away like the Haag Spijk in Buurmalsen, however, were built up by purchase from local smallholders and medium-sized proprietors, a chronology in line with Norbertine and Cistercian institutions elsewhere in Europe.⁴⁵ Camaldoli, likewise, established a network of granges or manorial '*curtes*'. These were rarely coherent units, however. At best they were 'collecting centres' for gathering up the tithes and rents owed to the monastery from across the valley, places for applying private monastic justice,⁴⁶ but the scattered distribution of plots belonging to Camaldoli and the mountain terrain prevented these granges from becoming large consolidated units for arable production.

Despite certain differences in their early economic and agricultural organisation, probably these were outweighed by their similarities. Both had built up extensive spans

⁴⁴ See van Bavel, *Marienweerd*, 216.

⁴⁵ See for a comparative perspective, A. von Boetticher, *Gütererwerb und Wirtschaftsführung des Zisterzienserklosters Riddagshausen bei Braunschweig im Mittelalter* (Braunschweig, 1990); R. Comba, 'I cistercensi fra città e campagne nei secoli XII e XIII. Una sintesi mutevole di orientamenti economici e culturali nell'Italia nord-occidentale', *Studi Storici*, 26.2 (1985), 245-6; Berman, *Medieval agriculture*; W. Janssen, 'Zisterziensische Wirtschaftsführung am Niederrhein. Das Kloster Kamp und seine Grangien im 12.-13. Jahrhundert', in W. Jansen & D. Lohrmann (eds.), *Villa-Curtis-Grangia: Landwirtschaft zwischen Loire und Rhein von der Römerzeit zum Hochmittelalter* (Munich, 1983), 205-11; C. Bouchard, *Cistercians, knights and economic exchange in twelfth century Burgundy* (London, 1991); C. Dekker, 'De komst van de Norbertijnen in het bisdom Utrecht', in *Ad Fontes. Opstellen aangeboden aan prof.dr. C. van der Kieft ter gelegenheid van zijn afscheid als hoogleraar in de middeleeuwse geschiedenis aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam* (Amsterdam, 1984), 167-87; G. Despy, 'L'exploitation des '*curtes*' en Brabant du IX^e siècle aux environs de 1300', in Janssen & Lohrmann (eds.) *Villa, Curtis, Grangia*, 185-204; H. Wiswe, 'Grangien niedersächsischer Zisterzienserklöster', *Braunschweigisches Jahrbuch*, 34 (1953), 7-134; F. Daelemans, 'De vorming van het domein van de Norbertijner abdij van Grimbergen (vanaf haar stichting tot ongeveer 1300)', *Eigen Schoon en de Brabander*, 61 (1978), 48-62; W. Rösener, 'L'économie cistercienne de l'Allemagne occidentale (XIIe-XVe siècle)', in *L'économie cistercienne: géographie – mutations du moyen âge aux temps modernes* (Auch, 1983), 135-56; C. Higounet, 'Le premier siècle de l'économie rurale cistercienne', in *Istituzioni monastiche e istituzioni canonicali in Occidente (1123-1215)* (Milan, 1980), 345-68; M. Untermann, 'Zur frühen Geschichte und Baugeschichte des Prämonstratenserstifts Knechtsteden bei Köln', *Jahrbuch der Rheinischen Denkmalpflege*, 33 (1989), 143-72; H. Janssens, *De premonstratenzer abdij van Averbode. Ontstaan en vroegste ontwikkeling* (Louvain, 1988); D. Lohrmann, 'Die Wirtschaftshöfe der Prämonstratenser im hohen und späten Mittelalter', in H. Patze (ed.), *Die Grundherrschaft im späten Mittelalter*, i (Sigmaringen, 1983), 205-240.

⁴⁶ Wickham, *Mountains*, 225-6.

of landownership by the end of the thirteenth century. Both had also made use of feudal jurisdictions and extra-economic coercion to support their economies. Up to the thirteenth century, the Dutch river area was one of the most heavily manorialised areas of the Low Countries.⁴⁷ Marienweerd certainly made use of their unfree serfs, inducing them to perform customary works on their demesnes. By the second half of the thirteenth century, however, extra-economic coercion began to wane as seen for example, in an episode from the abbey's manor at nearby Zoelmond in 1259, where 70 men refused to accept their serf status and deserted.⁴⁸ Camaldoli also used feudal jurisdictions, and some levels of unfreedom and demesne agriculture in fact lingered on into the sixteenth century.⁴⁹ However, we must be careful not exaggerate Camaldoli and the region of the Casentino as a 'backward' or 'conservative' place.⁵⁰ Most of Camaldoli's demesnes were small, the customary labour obligations were not particularly onerous, and the *corvées* were symbolic rather than having real economic significance.⁵¹ In any case, we can sum up the early development of the two institutions by asserting the fact that by 1300, Camaldoli and Marienweerd had used a combination of land accumulation, direct management of agriculture, feudal jurisdictions and extra-economic coercion (supported by wage labour and lay brethren), and a constant stream of rents and tithes to create for themselves powerful economic positions within their local environments.

⁴⁷ See, in particular, B. van Bavel, 'Land, lease and agriculture. The transition of the rural economy in the Dutch river area (fourteenth - sixteenth centuries)', *Past & Present*, 172 (2001) 8; *Transitie en continuïteit: de bezitsverhoudingen en de plattelands-economie in het westelijke gedeelte van het Gelders rivierengebied, ca. 1300-ca. 1570* (Hilversum, 1999), 432-68.

⁴⁸ B. van Bavel, *Manors and markets: economy and society in the Low Countries, 500-1600* (Oxford, 2010), 86.

⁴⁹ For example, in the mountain village of Moggiona. Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter ASF), Camaldoli, no. 183, fo. 13.

⁵⁰ As has been done in E. Baldari & S. Farina, 'Il Casentino. Una vallata montana dallo sfruttamento feudale all'annessione al contado urbano', in: *Città, contado e feudi nell'urbanistica medievale*, ed. E. Guidoni (Rome, 1974), 64-99.

⁵¹ For extent of demesne between 1000 and 1250 see *Regesto di Camaldoli*, i, nos 50, 106, 153, 170, 266, 376, 503, 535, ii, no. 713, iii, no. 1231; U. Pasqui (ed.), *Documenti per la storia della città di Arezzo nel medio evo*, i (Florence, 1899), no. 169; C. Manaresi (ed.), *I placiti del 'regnum Italiae'*, i (Rome, 1955), 373. For the light obligations see an inventory in *Regesto di Camaldoli*, ii, nos 724, 750. For symbolism of labour works see P. Jones, 'An Italian estate, 900-1200', *Economic History Review*, 7 (1954), 30.

II: Two 'success stories': late-medieval economic change and adaptable institutions

By the end of the thirteenth century, both Camaldoli and Marienweerd had forged strong economic positions. This was not unusual for 'old established' ecclesiastical institutions in Western Europe – numerous monasteries had come to dominate their surroundings over the early and high Middle Ages. However, both institutions by the fourteenth century had to contend with new economic changes such as the declining power of serfdom, the drying-up of gifts and donations, and the rise of new ecclesiastical institutions as competition – challenges exacerbated by the generally poor agricultural conditions caused by plague epidemics and poor harvests. What did these changes mean for monastic institutions and their future direction?

Certainly Camaldoli and Marienweerd experienced difficult times and periods of crisis during the late Middle Ages. Indeed, financial pressures meant that Marienweerd were forced to sell off many of their distant lands, including important *uithoven* at Schalkwijk to the Oudwijker St. Stevensabdij in 1327 and at Naaldwijk to the knight Hendrik van Naaldwijk in 1406.⁵² Similarly Camaldoli knew periods of debt,⁵³ and at times were forced to sell-off distant peripheral lands, such as at Borsemulo in 1319.⁵⁴ Yet for all the difficulties Marienweerd faced during the late Middle Ages, it maintained its landholding base well into the sixteenth century, and only lost 10 percent of its property during the difficult financial crisis around 1400.⁵⁵ In fact, Marienweerd maintained a strong position in the Dutch river area all the way up to the 1560's, when it was eventually reduced to a fraction of its former size by repeated plundering resulting from the great political and religious upheavals of the Reformation period. Camaldoli arguably performed even better over the late Middle Ages. As well as showing resilience in the face of crises, Camaldoli went a step further than Marienweerd by actively improving their economic position within the Casentino Valley by the sixteenth century. As we learn from the following paragraphs, the late Middle Ages may have spelt the end for the old monastic organisation, but it also stimulated some institutions into new directions, effectively reinventing themselves.

⁵² van Bavel, *Marienweerd*, 282-5.

⁵³ P. Jones, 'From manor to mezzadria: a Tuscan case-study in the medieval origins of modern agrarian society', in N. Rubinstein (ed.), *Florentine studies: politics and society in Renaissance Florence* (London, 1968), 216.

⁵⁴ G. Mittarelli & A. Costadoni (eds.), *Annales Camaldulenses ordinis S. Benedicti*, ix (Venice, 1773), no. 271.

⁵⁵ van Bavel, *Marienweerd*, 552.

A: Marienweerd

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Marienweerd exploited its lands directly using demesnes, granges (*uithoven*), and a combination of wage and coerced labour. In contrast to the perception of Norbertine and Cisterican institutions as big land reclaimers,⁵⁶ Marienweerd built up its estates through firstly donation and secondly acquisition of already cultivated land.⁵⁷ In fact, Marienweerd continued to acquire small plots of land from rural people lower down the social hierarchy all the way up to 1350, much later than other comparable institutions.⁵⁸ The late Middle ages, however, brought many changes. Marienweerd could no longer enforce customary labour works on its serfs by the thirteenth century, leading to a break-down of its manorial mode of exploitation. Rapidly developing urban centres and reclamations of the marshes in Holland offered subjected peasants new opportunities for freedom.⁵⁹ Taken together with increased bouts of pestilence and plague,⁶⁰ some poor harvests, and the precarious state of the natural environment and water management systems,⁶¹ the onset of the fourteenth century presented the abbey of Marienweerd with some real challenges.

⁵⁶ A misconceived generalisation in S. Andreae Fockema, 'De grote of Zuidhollandse waard', *Studien over Waterschapsgeschiedenis*, 3 (1950); A. Saint-Denis, 'Les débuts du temporel de Saint-Martin de Laon, 1124-1155', *Actes Officiels du Colloque du Centre d'Études et de Recherches Prémontrées*, 14 (1988), 37-55; M. Mostert, 'De goederen van de abdij Berne in het Land van Heusden tot 1236', *Holland*, 14 (1982), 133-9; F. Niermeyer, 'Het klooster Berne en de ontginning van de oostelijke Meierij omstreeks 1200', in N. Addens, S. Fockema Andreae & J. Kuperus (eds.), *Ceres en Clío, zeven variaties op het thema landbouwgeschiedenis* (Wageningen, 1964), 113-28.

⁵⁷ Much land which came into the abbey's hands had already been reclaimed by aristocratic families and territorial lords. See B. van Bavel, 'Stichtingsplaats, ontginning en goederenverwerving. De economische ontwikkeling van Norbertijner abdijen in de Nederlanden', *Ideaal en Werkelijkheid: Verslagen van de Contactdag van de Werkgroep Norbertijnse Geschiedenis in de Nederlanden*, 3 (1993), 46.

⁵⁸ Although Marienweerd were not entirely alone in this. For example, a spate of exceptional fourteenth-century gift-giving was recorded for the Tuscan abbey of Settimo in C. de la Roncière, 'A monastic clientele? The abbey of Settimo, its neighbors, and its tenants (Tuscany, 1280-1340)', in T. Dean & C. Wickham (eds.), *City and countryside in late medieval and Renaissance Italy: essays presented to Phillip Jones* (London, 1990), 63.

⁵⁹ van Bavel, *Manors and markets*, 86-7. For the reclamation of the marshes, see the classic work of H. van der Linden, *De cope: bijdrage tot de rechtsgeschiedenis van de openlegging der Hollands-Utrechtse laagvlakte* (Assen, 1956), 160-82; 'Het platteland in het Noordwesten met de nadruk op de occupatie circa 1000-1300', *Algemene Geschiedenis der Nederlanden*, 2 (1982), 48-82.

⁶⁰ See the description in W. Blockmans, 'The social and economic effect of the plague in the Low Countries', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 58 (1980), 833-63.

⁶¹ Particularly severe in the fifteenth century. Marienweerd lost most of their winter supplies in grain when the Linge dike broke in 1432 and 1433. M. Gottschalk (ed.) *Stormvloeden en rivieroverstromingen in Nederland*, ii (Göttingen, 1974), 261-91; Gelders Archief Arnhem (hereafter GELA), Abdij Marienweerd en

As a result of these new conditions, Marienweerd needed to change its approach. Its biggest achievement as an institution was its ability to rapidly switch from direct to indirect economic exploitation during the fourteenth century, while at the same time consolidating and maintaining its landholding base. In many parts of Western Europe, the decline of manorialism strengthened the position of the peasantry to the detriment of the feudal lords and ecclesiastical institutions.⁶² The development of Marienweerd bucked that trend and the peasants made no gains in terms of landownership, despite casting off the shackles of serfdom. Instead of exploiting their demesnes themselves, Marienweerd began to divide up their estates into plots (generally 2 or 3 hectares in size), suitable for leasing-out to rural farmers or peasants, stimulating the emergence of a fluid and flexible short-term lease market in land.⁶³ While at the beginning of the fourteenth century Marienweerd directly farmed nearly all of its lands (within its vicinity)⁶⁴, by 1442 around 70% of that was out to lease.⁶⁵ At its highest level between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, that proportion of lease land moved to around 90%. The fact that some land was always kept in hand by the abbey can be explained by the persistence of at least one solitary demesne located in the Marienweerdse Veld which surrounded the abbey buildings to the north and fluctuated in size around the 340 hectares mark.⁶⁶ The move towards leasehold, however, did not impact significantly on the size of Marienweerd's landed estate over the long term of the Middle Ages. From the height of its land accumulation around 1350 to the mid sixteenth century (before the disastrous plundering), Marienweerd only conceded around a tenth of its entire estate.

Marienweerd's decision to indirectly exploit its property probably accounts for its resilience over the late Middle Ages. The twin developments of the decline of extra-economic coercion and the dramatic drop in population caused by plagues and the Black Death would have led to the employment of scarce wage labourers, who inevitably would

Beesd 2, 1170, 112. Also see the terrible episodes described in J. Kuys (ed.), *De Tielse kroniek. Een geschiedenis van de Lage Landen van de volksverhuizingen tot het midden van de vijftiende eeuw, met een vervolg over de jaren 1552-1566* (Amsterdam, 1983), 164-7.

⁶² The change in the balance of power noted in a number of key works across Western Europe. For example, C. Dyer, *An age of transition?*; 'The ineffectiveness of lordship in England, 1200-1400', *P&P*, 195.2 (2007), 69-86; Bois, *Crise du féodalisme*; R. Hilton, 'A crisis of feudalism?', *P&P*, 80 (1978), 8-10; T. Iversen & R. Myking (eds.), *Land, lords and peasants. Peasants' right to control land in the Middle Ages and the early modern period – Norway, Scandinavia and the Alpine region* (Trondheim, 2005), 20; Genicot, 'Crisis: from the Middle Ages'.

⁶³ van Bavel, 'Land, lease', 23-31.

⁶⁴ Of course, Marienweerd had more land away from the Dutch river area, for example, at Mill in Brabant. See van Bavel, *Marienweerd*, 289-311.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, 396.

⁶⁶ See GELA, Abdij Marienweerd te Beesd 2, 1170, no. 67, no. 116, fos 35-36.

have commanded high wages. Merely turning over to leasehold did not predicate any sort of inevitable success for Marienweerd, however – plenty of lords and institutions moved towards indirect exploitation of their farms in the late Middle Ages, which was accompanied by the alienation and sale of vast portions of their estate as a result of financial difficulties. Indeed, just as Marienweerd would have suffered from a lack of labour and high wages in a system of direct exploitation, they suffered instead from a lack of potential tenants and low lease prices paid. Although there is no data until 1442 to confirm it, one would think that the lease prices were terribly low in the likely population nadir after the Black Death. The sales of land around 1400 are testament to the likely financial difficulties that followed.

On the same path, perhaps Marienweerd would have fell into ruin. The abbey was saved, however, by the particular configuration of the lease market in which they operated – and a configuration which they actively supported. The fluidity and flexibility of the lease market (with its frequent transfers of parcels), the clear and secure property rights enhanced by the public auctions, and prevailing philosophy of the ‘highest price paid secures the lease land’ created new property constellations in the countryside. Successful local farmers began to rearrange the small three-hectare plots into more coherent and larger units. By the sixteenth century, an entirely new social group had been formed, the large tenant farmers, who were leasing from large landowning institutions like Marienweerd, sizeable consolidated farms.⁶⁷ Over the long term, lease books show how these farms were pieced together from small random lease plots into coherent units.⁶⁸ Now society was entirely polarised between a small band of elite farmers and a growing band of landless labourers, priced out of the lease market and probably had given up the last of their lease land to their more successful neighbours.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ As described in detail in van Bavel, ‘Land, lease’, 31-4; ‘Elements in the transition of the rural economy: factors contributing to the emergence of large farms in the Dutch river area (15th-16th centuries)’, in P. Hoppenbrouwers & J. van Zanden (eds.), *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages - 19th century) in the light of the Brenner debate* (Turnhout, 2001), 275-338; *Transitie en continuïteit*, 586-8.

⁶⁸ Of those formed on Marienweerd’s land, see for the farm of the Haag Spijk (Buurmalsen), GELA, AMtB 2, 1170, no. 68, fos 5v-6r, no. 69, fo. 3; no. 73, fo. 177, no. 74, fos 133-4, no. 171. For the Treeft (Buurmalsen), see GELA, AMtB 2, 1170, no. 68, fo. 6r, no. 69; de Fremery (ed.), *Cartularium*, no. 363; GELA, AMtB 1, 0283, no. 9. For the Ganshoevel (Marienweerdse Veld), see de Fremery (ed.), *Cartularium*, nos 49, 51, 347; GELA, AMtB 2, 1170, no. 68, fo. 2, 6r, no. 73, no. 38; GELA, Oud Archief Tiel, 0001, nos. 852-7. For De Woerd (Marienweerdse Veld), see de Fremery (ed.), *Cartularium*, no. 349; GELA, AMtB 2, 1170, no. 68, fos 1r-8r, no. 38. For the Dijstelcamp (Marienweerdse Veld), see GELA, AMtB 2, 1170, no. 68, fo. 3v, no. 73.

⁶⁹ The band of landless labourers well-discussed in B. van Bavel, ‘Rural wage labour in the 16th-century Low Countries: an assessment of the importance and nature of wage labour in the countryside of Holland, Guelders and Flanders’, *Continuity & Change*, 21 (2006), 45-50; ‘The transition in the Low Countries. Wage

As a result, these developments made the farms more valuable and suitable for commercialised agriculture, and pushed the prices of Marienweerd's lease land to new highs. The average price paid for a hectare of Marienweerd's lease land in 1442 was almost trebled before the onset of plundering in 1567.⁷⁰ Marienweerd clearly benefitted from these new property constellations, and actually actively supported the trends by investing in the farms which they were leasing out. In fact, Marienweerd may have reinvested up to a fifth of its gross income in the lease farms, making repairs, building brick farmhouses, and constructing and maintaining dikes.⁷¹ Furthermore, Marienweerd, like many lay landowners in the Dutch river area, stimulated the situation by offering large tenant farmers favourable credit arrangements in times of hardship.⁷² Thus, in sum, Marienweerd escaped a possibly dismal end during late Middle Ages through its capacity to rapidly move towards indirect exploitation of agriculture, but also through its active support of the dynamic changes to the property structure caused by short-term leasing within the Dutch river area.

B: Camaldoli

From the thirteenth century, Camaldoli had to respond to a new set of pressures and conditions. The lands and rights to the forests that the Bishop of Arezzo had given to the monastery after its foundation were now a point of contention. Aware of losing his grip over the Casentino Valley, the Bishop now wanted these lands back; cue a series of chartered disputes.⁷³ Tensions grew to such a level that the Bishop instigated a robbery of the monastery and their *castello* in the village of Soci: the Bishop was urged to return the stolen glassware, books, money and animals.⁷⁴ More than this, however, Camaldoli had to face up to increasing jurisdictional pressures from the urban government of Florence after 1300. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Florentine government was anxious to extend its span of jurisdiction into wider and more

labour as an indicator of the rise of capitalism in the countryside, 14th-17th centuries', in P. Coss, C. Dyer, & C. Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages: an exploration of historical themes* (Oxford, 2007), 295-6.

⁷⁰ van Bavel, *Marienweerd*, 316.

⁷¹ van Bavel, 'Land, lease', 30.

⁷² A general process described in P. Brusse, *Overleven door ondernemen. De geschiedenis van de Over-Betuwe 1650-1850* (Wageningen, 1999).

⁷³ Pasqui (ed.), *Arezzo*, ii, nos 474, 638.

⁷⁴ *Idem*, ii, no. 615.

peripheral areas of the Tuscan countryside: the so-called *distretto*.⁷⁵ The Casentino Valley, the mountainous area in the east of Tuscany where Camaldoli was situated, was one of these places. Some villages were conceded to the Florentine administration in the mid-fourteenth century, such as Pratovecchio in 1343, Castel San Niccolo in 1348, or Bibbiena in 1359,⁷⁶ while others took longer to bring to heel such as Guidi (lay aristocratic family) strongholds of Stia in 1402 and Poppi in 1440.⁷⁷ In some mountain villages which put up stronger resistance against the Florentine authorities, troops were sent in to burn houses to the ground.⁷⁸ Lay aristocratic families such as the Ubertini only clung onto their jurisdictions over the villages of Chitignano, Rosina, and Taena, by making tactical concessions elsewhere.⁷⁹ The point is that the late-medieval monastery of Camaldoli had to face up to a significant new alignment of pressures and challenges; the likes of which had already brought other older ecclesiastical institutions to ruin.

In the face of these challenges, Camaldoli thrived during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however. Indeed, by the time of the Florentine Catasto in 1427, the monastery supported around 300 resident monks, who resided slightly further up the mountain at the isolated hermitage.⁸⁰ Camaldoli achieved this by transforming itself from the isolated, peaceful, spiritual sanctuary typified by the hidden-away hermitage, into an institution orientated towards the commercialised production of agricultural and mountain produce. Indeed, the monastery fought off the challenges described above by adapting to general economic changes brought about by the rise of Florence into a powerful city-state by 1300. The eleven-fold growth in the Florentine urban population during the thirteenth century led to an increasingly harsh domination of their close rural hinterlands known as the *contado*.⁸¹ However, mountain areas of the *distretto* further from Florence such as the Casentino Valley, benefited from the rise of Florence and the

⁷⁵ On the late territorial jurisdictions, see G. Brucker, *Renaissance Florence* (Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1969), 5; C. de la Roncière, *Prix et salaires à Florence au XIVe siècle (1280-1380)* (Rome, 1982), ix-x.

⁷⁶ Pasqui (ed.), *Arezzo*, iii, no. 832.

⁷⁷ C. Beni, *Guida del Casentino* (Florence, 1983), 250-1; M. Bicchierai, *Una comunità rurale toscana di antico regime: Raggiolo in Casentino* (Florence, 2006), 13.

⁷⁸ S. Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State: peasants and rebellion, 1348-1434* (Cambridge, 1999), 125.

⁷⁹ G. Cherubini, 'La signoria degli Ubertini sui comuni rurali casentinesi di Chitignano, Rosina e Taena all'inizio del Quattrocento', *Archivio Storico Italiano*, 126 (1968), 151-69.

⁸⁰ ASF, Camaldoli, no. 191, fo. 255v.

⁸¹ For Florentine population growth, see G. Petralia, 'Lo sviluppo dell'economia toscana medievale', in: *Storia della toscana: dalle origini al Settecento*, eds. G. Petralia, E. Guarini & P. Pezzino, i (Rome, 2004), 119-20. On the domination of the *contado*, see S. Epstein, 'Cities, regions and the late medieval crisis: Sicily and Tuscany compared', *Past & Present*, 130 (1991), 3-50.

emergence of a buoyant urban market for agricultural and mountain produce.⁸² Not only did the East Tuscan mountain villages flourish under these new economic stimuli, but the great landowning monastery of Camaldoli also profited from this development. Indeed, while the traditional narrative has tended to focus on the monasteries struggling to deal with the loss of their extra-economic powers, little attention has been paid to the emerging dynamic between the city and the monastery.

Camaldoli completely refocused its economic activity in response to late-medieval change. Key to Camaldoli's commercial ventures was a new larger-scale pastoral economy.⁸³ Indeed, the Casentino Valley became so renowned for its grazing in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that outsiders began to periodically pasture animals there too.⁸⁴ In 1419, one Florentine put 600 sheep on Camaldoli's pastures, in that year narrowly more than the monastery itself.⁸⁵ Camaldoli profited from this venture by charging very high cash rents for the privilege. Furthermore, the monastery began to systematically reorganise its pastures into coherent blocks (in contrast to the scattered arable plots), such as the 12-hectare unit at Campo Drezze in Serravalle or the 10-hectare unit they created at Siepi by 1576 at the very latest.⁸⁶ In fact demand for pasture in the region was so high that Camaldoli leased out some of its remaining meadows at Asqua (near the Arno River) in 1515 to local farmers.⁸⁷ Camaldoli also benefited from the development of the long-distance sheep walks (transhumance); enticing local people into the system by offering transit rights and better regulation of grazing.⁸⁸ The development of this pastoral economy in turn supported a blossoming local production

⁸² D. Curtis, 'Florence and its hinterlands in the late Middle Ages: contrasting fortunes in the Tuscan countryside, 1300-1500' (unpublished paper, Utrecht University, 2012), 10-3.

⁸³ In contrast to the view that pastoral farming was a 'traditional subsistence economy' in the eastern mountains argued in D. Herlihy & C. Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans and their families: a study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (New Haven, 1985), 121.

⁸⁴ N. Pounds, *An historical geography of Europe, 450BC-AD1330* (Cambridge, 1973), 383-4.

⁸⁵ P. Jones, 'A Tuscan monastic lordship in the later Middle Ages: Camaldoli', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 5 (1954), 180.

⁸⁶ ASF, Camaldoli, no. 183, fo. 114v; ASF, Corporazioni religiose soppresse dal Governo Francese, no. 39, fo. 9.

⁸⁷ ASF, Camaldoli, no. 123, fo. 173.

⁸⁸ G. Cherubini, 'La società dell'Appennino settentrionale (secoli XIII-XV)', in: *Signori, contadini, borghesi: ricerche sulla società italiana del basso medioevo* (Florence, 1974), 133.

in wool,⁸⁹ with looms and dyeing equipment appearing all along the banks of the Arno River in the Casentino.⁹⁰

In the late Middle Ages, Camaldoli also began to more commercially exploit the great forests that surrounded the monastery. Lumber cut in saw mills was put on rafts and floated down the Arno River into Florence.⁹¹ Camaldoli was a big player in the timber trade: for example, they offered a concession to a Florentine buyer in 1317, selling 3000 pieces of wood to him for 2000 florins (normally they were 2500 florins).⁹² The profits to be made from timber led the monastery to request that parts of the rents from their leased farms were to be paid in wood in the fifteenth century.⁹³ Wood became so economically valuable to the monastery that the forest began to be more stringently regulated. Already in 1279, the Prior of Camaldoli had been forbidden to cut down trees for wood to repair the hermitage without first consulting the wider monastic community.⁹⁴ Some 300 years later, the woods were still being regulated (perhaps even more closely) as a series of charters between 1563 and 1575 strictly forbade the monks at Camaldoli to cut trees in the forest without consultation with the local communities and the monastery.⁹⁵

Camaldoli commercialised other aspects of their economic portfolio in the late Middle Ages. The monastery's wine was highly prized and found a willing urban market. Vineyards were common in the valley and were the highest valued of all lands in the *catasto*. Unlike the fragmented pieces of arable, these were more often coherent units kept *in clausura*. Camaldoli saw the commercial sense in producing good wine and kept vineyards in demesne well into the sixteenth century, such as the '*Vigna dei Romiti*' at Pratovecchio.⁹⁶ Members of the monastery also caught fish to sell at market, much to the displeasure of the Florentine government who was concerned not only about losing a potential supply of food upstream but also the poisoning of the river.⁹⁷ In 1450 the city threatened the people of the Casentino with substantial fines if caught poisoning the

⁸⁹ See P. Della Bordella, *L'arte della lana in Casentino. Storia dei lanifici* (Cortona, 1996), 59-131.

⁹⁰ Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze (hereafter BNF), Magliabechi, no. 359, *Descrizione delle cose più essenziali e rilevanti del Casentino con diversi ragguagli delle famiglia e persone, scritto l'anno 1666 da Giuseppe di Scipione Mannucci*, 112.

⁹¹ ASF, Reale Arcispedale di Santa Maria Nuova, no. 475, fos 81r-82v.

⁹² G. Cacciamani, *L'antica foresta di Camaldoli. Storia e codice forestale* (Arezzo, 1965), 56.

⁹³ ASF, Camaldoli, no. 589, fo. 13.

⁹⁴ *Annales Camaldulenses ordinis S. Benedicti*, eds. G. Mittarelli & A. Costadoni (vol.6, Venice, 1773), no. 242.

⁹⁵ Archivio Storico dell'Eremo e Monastero di Camaldoli, Atti Capitolari, no. 156, fos 3r, 5r, 14v, 18r-19r, 21r, 25v, 36r, 43r, 45r-50r, 54r-60r, 68r-69r, 76r, 84r-87r, 95r.

⁹⁶ Jones, 'Camaldoli', 179.

⁹⁷ R. Trexler, 'Measures against water pollution in fifteenth-century Florence', *Viator*, 5 (1974), 462-7.

river with lime and nut shells, and in particular, 'Priests, clerks or other religious lay brothers' were revealed as the main guilty parties.⁹⁸

Camaldoli was able to respond to the new economic circumstances presented before them by commercialising their mountain economy in the late Middle Ages. More than this though, the monastery was able to show great flexibility in its modes of exploitation. After 1300, granges and curtes (relics of a previous manorial exploitation) were subdivided and transformed into a new series of coherent farms known as *poderi*. These were exploited indirectly through fixed short-term leases (in contrast to the sharecropping farms of the *contado*) with rents pre-agreed amounts rather than percentages of surplus.⁹⁹ Although part of a commercialising economy, Camaldoli clearly had one eye on sustaining the large monastic community; adapting the rents to the produce needed the most. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, tenants paid in combinations of cash, piles of wood, grain, legumes, eggs, bread, chickens, beans, oil, pork, and even a few days labour on the monastery's demesnes.¹⁰⁰ In contrast to the declining rents shown by David Herlihy on the *poderi* of Impruneta in the *contado* (landlords lowered the amounts to attract tenants), the rents on the Casentinese *poderi* increased between the middle of the fourteenth and the end of the fifteenth century, indicative of a buoyant economy and population. For example, the Castaldo Benedenti for the 'Podere Cutrino' at Monte paid Camaldoli a rent of 110 staia of grains and 25 staia from his vineyards and orchards in 1349 but in 1481 the rent was 188 staia of grains, 300 pounds of pork, two chickens, a pair of capons, 200 eggs and one cell of wood.¹⁰¹ The number of *poderi* also increased substantially; Camaldoli had just six documented in 1328 but over 30 by the onset of the sixteenth century.

What was striking about Camaldoli's modes of exploitation was their great flexibility in tenurial structures. The monastery was not afraid of simultaneously employing a great variety in tenurial forms; some ancient rents based more on custom and fidelity, alongside newer tenancies more linked to the market value of the land and paid in cash or kind. Indicative of this flexibility in modes of exploitation was the constant and rapid switching between direct and indirect agricultural management. For example, one *podere* in the mountain village of Monte was worked by a former *castaldo* (lay brother) as a tenant in 1328, in 1332 it returned back to the monks of the hermitage at Camaldoli, and then in 1334 it once again was worked by the same tenant, the former *castaldo*

⁹⁸ ASF, Provvioni Registri, nos 175-6.

⁹⁹ ASF, Camaldoli, nos 117-8, 136, 183, 589, 935; ASF, Corporazioni religiose soprese dal Governo Francese, no. 39, fo. 7r.

¹⁰⁰ See also Jones, 'Camaldoli'.

¹⁰¹ ASF Camaldoli, no. 117, fo. 123; no. 136, fo. 4.

Benuccio.¹⁰² In sum, the monastery of Camadoli was prepared to create adaptations to their economic portfolios, their property structures, and the ways in which they exploited resources, in the face of economic change and new political pressures and alignments in the late Middle Ages, allowing the institution to solidify and even improve its position within the east Tuscan mountains.

III: Why were many old ecclesiastical institutions in Western Europe unable to adapt to the late Middle Ages?

A main feature of the old Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries across Western Europe was their ability to build up large landed estates after their foundation. When the gifts dried-up and the manorial system disintegrated, these lands came under pressure of usurpation. As seen from the paragraphs above, however, Camaldoli and Marienweerd reinvented themselves in order to limit the damage to their landed portfolios in the late Middle Ages. If Camaldoli and Marienweerd were able to rearrange their economic and agricultural direction to adapt to the new challenges they faced, an obvious follow-up question is why were they able to do it when so many other monasteries and abbeys failed or were unwilling to change? What did these institutions have, that the monasteries teetering on the brink of collapse and financial ruin did not?

The point emphasized in this section is that the economic decline of the older monasteries (in the face of late-medieval change) could have been halted through active institutional adaptation such as in the case of Marienweerd and Camaldoli. However, the flexibility of these institutions to create an effective response to save themselves was dependent on the freedom they had to make those decisions. Some old ecclesiastical institutions were more restricted by the particular power and property constellations present in the area in which they operated. Indeed, Camaldoli and Marienweerd had the freedom to adapt thanks to the absence of two key restrictive pressures. Both encountered (a) an absence of coercive and domineering urban jurisdictions and an absence of urban consolidation of jurisdiction and property-ownership in the countryside where they were located, and (b) a freedom and distance from their lay founders.

Strong cities tended to have a negative effect on the older monasteries, not just because urban institutions and burghers were more likely to support new foundations such as hospitals or mendicant houses in the late Middle Ages instead, but cities were

¹⁰² ASF, Camaldoli, no. 117, fos 123-43.

frequently a source of restrictive anti-ecclesiastical legislation.¹⁰³ Indeed, it has been empirically shown that there was often a negative relationship between late-medieval landownership of the old ecclesiastical institutions and the level of urbanisation in a particular territory.¹⁰⁴ Marienweerd and Camaldoli, however, escaped these urban pressures. Marienweerd was located in the western part of the Dutch river area; a region typified by very little urban growth and very minimal urban landownership and encroachment.¹⁰⁵ Even where urban landownership was significant, it was not typical absentee exploitation: in fact, townspeople of Culemborg bought small plots just outside the town and farmed them themselves.¹⁰⁶ Dorestad had long declined in the tenth century, and Tiel entirely failed to expand from its eleventh-century foundations.¹⁰⁷ Camaldoli similarly was located in an area which did not experience any sort of urban consolidation of land or encroachment. Many of the settlements in the mountains became (eventually) incorporated into the Florentine jurisdiction, but land transfer into the hands of wealthy Florentine burghers or institutions was entirely rare this far out.¹⁰⁸ Urban jurisdictions frequently failed to puncture through the assorted layers of village, ecclesiastical, communal, signorial, and territorial jurisdiction present in the Casentino Valley.

¹⁰³ Rijpma, 'Funding public services', 113.

¹⁰⁴ *Idem*, 102-13.

¹⁰⁵ See D. Curtis, 'Pre-industrial societies and settlements from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century. A new theoretical framework for understanding settlement development' (unpublished PhD thesis, Utrecht University, 2012), 226. Only from the late sixteenth century did urban landownership become more significant in the western part of the Dutch river area (West Betuwe); for example, see the fiscal registers contained in GELA, Staten van het Kwartier van Nijmegen en hun Gedeputeerden, 0003, nos 368-72. Also GELA, Huis Ensipijk, 0390, no. 39; P. Leupen, 'Zaltbommel en zijn waarden: een verkenning van de relatie tussen een kleine stad en het platteland in het begin van de zestiende eeuw', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen Gelre*, 69 (1976/7), 80-101.

¹⁰⁶ van Bavel, *Transitie*, 509-11.

¹⁰⁷ For the end of Dorestad, see W. van Es, 'Dorestad centred', in J. Besteman, J. Bos & H. Heidinga (eds.), *Medieval archaeology in the Netherlands. Studies presented to H.H. van Regeteren Altena* (Assen, 1990), 151-82; R. Hodges, 'Dark Ages economics revisited. W.A. van Es and the end of the mercantile model in early medieval Europe', in H. Sarfatij, W. Verwers & P. Wolterin (eds.), *In discussion with the past. Archaeological studies presented to W.A. van Es* (Zwolle, 1999), 227-32; S. Coupland, 'Trading places: Quentovic and Dorestad reassessed', *Early Medieval Europe*, 11.3 (2002), 209-32. For the rise and decline of Tiel, see H. Sarfatij, 'Tiel in succession to Dorestad', in Sarfatij et al. (eds.), *In discussion with the past*, 267-78; J. Oudhof, 'De handelsfunctie van Tiel in de periode late negende eeuw tot en met het begin van de elfde eeuw. Een historisch-archeologische verkenning aan de hand van vier stadskernopgravingen in de binnenstad van Tiel' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1996).

¹⁰⁸ S. Cohn, *Creating the Florentine State: peasants and rebellion, 1348-1434* (Cambridge, 1999), 22-4. For the peasant property structures see G. Cherubini et al., 'La proprietà fondiaria in alcune zone del territorio senese all'inizio del Trecento', *Rivista di Storia dell'Agricoltura*, 14 (1974), 2-176.

Secondly, Marienweerd and Camaldoli had a certain freedom of decision-making thanks to their ability to maintain a distance from their elite lay donors and founders. Although they were built up through aristocratic gifts, they were not dominated by any one particular family. For Camaldoli, this was in contrast to the Guidi's links to the monastery of Strumi or the Bishop of Arezzo's links to S. Fiora. They built up their power slowly through the high Middle Ages, taking advantage of noble donations initially, but enhancing their position very slowly through purchase and small gifts from members of their local communities. This stood them in good stead when economic conditions changed (for the worse for many monasteries) in the late Middle Ages. Neither Camaldoli nor Marienweerd were drawn into any feudo-vassalic ties of dependence with lay aristocrats.¹⁰⁹ They were not militarised, and indeed, in the case of Camaldoli, while many castles had appeared around them during the eleventh and twelfth centuries,¹¹⁰ none of this had anything to do with the monastery. As a result, the monasteries did not have to alienate large parts of their land to lay lords in the difficult economic climate of the late Middle Ages. Non-military strategies did not guarantee success for older monasteries, but it helped.¹¹¹ Many monasteries not far from Marienweerd in the Nedersticht (around Utrecht) or Holland found themselves in the late Middle Ages embroiled in disputes with the noble families; a network of aristocrats who argued for greater control over the monastic institutions because they were originally created to support their families.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Wickham, *Mountains and the city*, 306.

¹¹⁰ See C. Molducci, 'L'incastellamento dei conti Guidi nel Valdarno superiore fra X e XII secolo', in G. Vanini (ed.), *Rocca Ricciarda, dai Guidi ai Ricasoli. Storia e archeologia di un castrum medievale nel Pratomagno aretino* (Florence, 2009), 53-69; R. Bargiacchi, 'I castelli dei conti Guidi in Casentino: storia di un contesto archeologico', in F. Canaccini (ed.), *La lunga storia di un stirpe comitale: I conti Guidi tra Romagna e Toscana* (Florence, 2009), 211-44; 'I conti Guidi e l'incastellamento del Casentino: il caso di Poppi', *Archeologia Medievale*, 35 (2008), 255-73; GAS, 'Incastellamento e pievanie in Casentino nei secoli XI e XII', <<http://www.casentinoarcheologia.org/AIC/pieviecastelli1.html>>, (2006); M. Cortesi, 'L'incastellamento nel territorio di Arezzo (secoli X-XII)', in R. Francovich & M. Ginatempo (eds.), *Castelli. Storia e archeologia del potere nella Toscana medievale* (Florence, 2002), ?

¹¹¹ An example of a famous monastic decline using a non-military strategy is Wickham, *Il problema dell'incastellamento nell'Italia centrale*, ii, 4-5.

¹¹² J. van Beeck Calkoen, 'Onderzoek naar de rechttoestand der geestelijke en kerkelijke goederen in Holland na de Reformatie', (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1912), 235-40; D. Rengers Hora Siccama, *De geestelijke en kerkelijke goederen onder het canonieke, het gereformeerde en het neutrale recht: historische-juridische verhandeling, voornamelijk uit Utrechtsche gegevens samengesteld* (Utrecht, 1905), 645-60.

IV: Conclusion

Thus, to conclude, the old ecclesiastical order of monasteries and abbeys in Western Europe faced some testing conditions by the late Middle Ages. The conditions in which they had been founded such as the prevalence of gift-giving and the manorial system had disappeared, and furthermore, they faced increasing competition from new ecclesiastical institutions focused more on the urban milieu. Many monasteries began to fall into economic decline as a result, suffering from a crisis in liquidity and from expropriation of their lands. Such crisis was not inevitable, however. Monasteries could adapt to the new economic conditions, effectively reinventing themselves. In this paper, it has been shown that the abbey of Marienweerd and the monastery of Camaldoli did precisely that, which allowed them to preserve their valued landed estates into the sixteenth century. How was it then that a great quantity of Western European old ecclesiastical institutions failed or chose not to make these institutional adaptations? The answer probably can be found in the restrictive pressures that hindered the freedoms needed for flexible responses. Marienweerd and Camaldoli successfully implemented change, working through favourable property and power constellations. They operated outside a coercive and dominant urban presence, and furthermore, had managed to put some distance between themselves and their lay founders – giving them the autonomy required to change direction as they pleased.