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Heritage Reinvents Europe

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Edited by Dirk Callebaut, Jan Mařík and Jana Maříková-Kubková

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Heritage Reinvents Europe

Edited by Dirk Callebaut, Jan Mařík and Jana Maříková-Kubková

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The Provincial Heritage Centre in the archaeological park of Ename (Belgium), where the local past and the future Europe meet.
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10 | Identity ambivalences of monastic heritage and international networks: The case of the Cistercians and Trappists

Thomas Coomans

Abstract: In our postmodern and secularised Western world, monastic heritage carries complex and sometimes contradictory values. This article examines the case one of the most renowned religious orders, that of the Cistercians, which celebrated its nine hundredth anniversary in 1998. Several religious and lay international networks – associations of owners, study centres, routes, spiritual movements – have been founded during the two last decades in order to protect and promote different aspects of Cistercian and Trappist heritage, including spirituality, culture and art, but also food and alcoholic beverages. This broad spectrum leads to identity ambivalences and sometimes to conflicts between religious ideal and tourism economy. In one word, the process of 'heritagization' based on idealized medieval networks, monastic authenticity, and present (inter)national identity building is at a crossroad and needs some critical reflections.

1. Introduction

In his historical atlas "Fragments d'Europe", Michel Fouchier describes Europe as a community of cultures characterised by a great diversity and an impossible unity. Contrasting with this fragmented landscape, the idea of unity always had been present in the conscience of the Europeans to belong to a community of cultures, even though in the form of a utopia. Mutual transfers, borrowings and interbreeding between different cultures developed a complex and rich stratification. In this community of cultures, Michel Fouchier chose twelve cultural and intellectual episodes from the Middle Ages to present, which were constitutive of a common culture within the European space (Fouchier 1993, 22–23). His choice of course is limited and subjective, but it is interesting that the first map of his "palimpsest" is the monastic network of the Cistercians, as developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

This contribution examines the complex and sometimes contradictory values that this monastic heritage carries today. We will see that several religious and lay international networks have been founded during the two last decades in order to protect and promote different aspects of Cistercian and Trappist heritage, including spirituality, culture and art, but also cheese and beer. This broad spectrum leads to identity ambivalences and sometimes to conflicts between religious ideology and tourism economy. In one word, the on-going process of 'heritagization' or 'patrimonial memory' (Morisset 2010), based on idealized medieval networks, monastic authenticity, and present (inter) national identity building is at a crossroads and needs some critical reflections.

2. Ups and downs of a monastic history

The fascinating history of the Cistercian Order, more than 900 years long, was marked by remarkable spiritual and material achievements, both ups and down, and generated a remarkable heritage (Birkedal Bruun 2013; Lekai 1997; Pacaut 1993). The Cistercian Order was born in 1098 with the foundation of the abbey of Cîteaux in Burgundy, as a reform of the ancient Benedictine order. After a difficult first decade, the modest abbey began to attract more and more religious vocations: Cîteaux founded new abbeys and so became at the head of a family called Cistercians or White Monks. Thanks to the prominent role of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the order had a lightning and fascinating expansion during the first half of the twelfth century, and spread in a very short time over all Europe and counted no less than 700 abbeys for men and 300 nunneries at the end of the thirteenth century (van der Meer 1965; Locatelli 1997). (fig. 10.1) Within the Western Monasticism, the Cistercian Order gave a major contribution to Europe's religious, economic and cultural development in the Middle Ages. However, the original model had to adapt several times during the centuries. From the mid thirteenth century, the central power of the General Chapter was gradually contested and regional congregations developed in England, Scotland, Spain, Bohemia, Hungary, etc.

As a consequence of the religious wars of the sixteenth century, nearly all the abbeys were secularized in the countries that became protestant, that is to say the British Isles, Scandinavia, Northern Germany, and Holland. In the countries that remained catholic, the Counter-Reformation also influenced the abbeys. In 1665, the order split in two branches: the Cistercians of the common observance and the Cistercians of the strict observance, to which belonged the famous abbey of La Trappe in Normandy. The French Revolution suppressed all the abbeys, first in France and Belgium, later in all the countries conquered by the French.

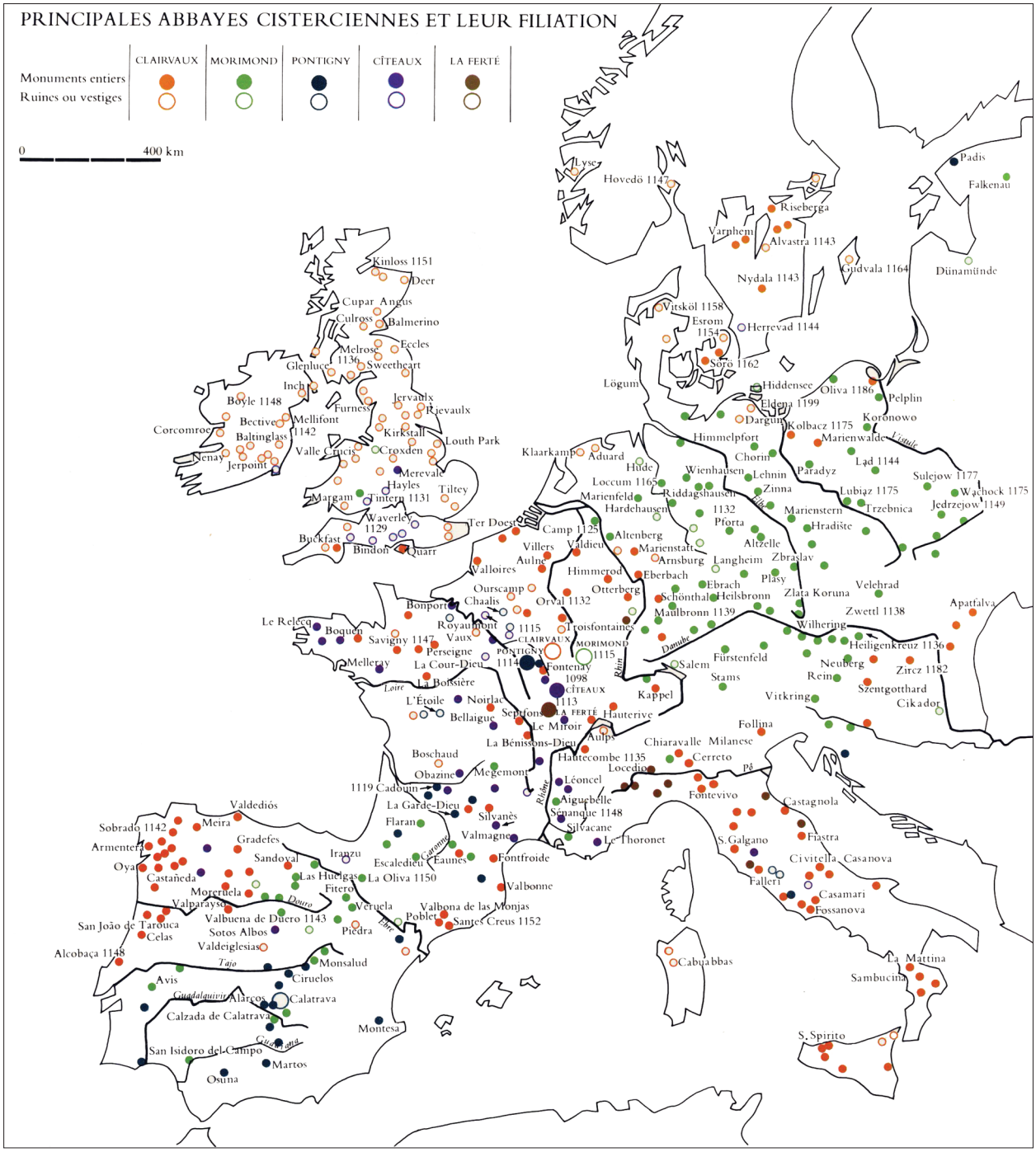


Fig. 10.1: Map of the Cistercian expansion in medieval Europe (from Duby, G. 1989: *L'art cistercien*, Flammarion, 6).

Except in some parts of the Austrian empire and Italy, the Cistercian order definitely seemed to be dead.

The spirit of the Cistercians of the strict observance survived thanks to a group of monks from La Trappe that founded small communities during its exile from 1791 in Switzerland, Russia and even the United States in 1813. As soon as the political circumstances made it possible and in the context of the Catholic Revival, new Trappist abbeys were founded in France, Belgium, Spain and England. (fig. 10.2) The abbeys that had survived in Italy and the Austrian empire formed other congregations of Cistercians. In 1892, the Cistercian family again split into two separate orders: the Cistercians of the common observance and these of the strict observance also called Trappists (Delpal 1998). The latter were able to recover the original site of Cîteaux and made it the head of an order of which the core was in France and Belgium. Before the First World War, Trappists founded several abbeys in Holland, the United States, Canada, Algeria, Lebanon, Congo and even in China.

Both Cistercian orders flourished until the 1950s, but declined slowly from then. Inversely they are continuing to develop on all the other continents. In 1998, a celebration was held at Cîteaux at the occasion of the ninth centenary of the foundation of the order (Plouvier & Saint-Denis 1998). Presently the Cistercians of the strict observance count 159 abbeys and the



Fig. 10.2: The chapter house at the abbey of La Trappe: catholic, monastic and gothic revival (Postcard, about 1900).

Cistercians of the common observance 103 abbeys in the world. Laymen and woman, who are admitted into spiritual union and affiliation with Cistercian communities, also adopt Cistercian spirituality.

3. A varied and dispersed monastic and post-monastic heritage

During the 912 years of the existence of the Cistercian Order, Cistercian and Trappist communities of men and woman have produced and still continue to produce a considerable tangible and intangible heritage. This heritage is varied and dispersed over the world, not only in living abbeys, but also in private property and in public museums, libraries and archives.

In first instance, the Cistercian heritage is an original contribution to the spiritual heritage of mankind. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167), Armand-Jean de Rancé (1626–1700), or Thomas Merton (1915–1968), the most illustrious Cistercians, not only marked their generation, but also still today guide people in their daily life. Cistercian authors not only were theologians but include hagiographers, liturgists, historians and scientists. The order also counted artists in its ranks, architects, musicians, painters, book illuminators, as well as craftsmen and engineers. At least there were saints, that is to say men and woman who lived in the light of God and therefore can serve as model for other people. Their lives are written in books and illustrated with images. The film *Of Gods and Men* (*Des hommes et des dieux*) on the Trappist monks of the monastery of Tibhirine in Algeria is a recent contribution to this secular heritage (Beauvois 2010).

It is commonly accepted that Cistercian heritage is above all Romanesque architecture in beautiful remote sites and austere art, in particular the illumination of books. The standard works *L'Art Cistercien* (Dimier 1962; Dimier 1971), and *Saint Bernard: l'Art Cistercien* (Duby 1976) greatly contributed to the creation of the artistic paradigm of the Cistercian aesthetic, which would have been developed by St. Bernard himself. Literary fictions and artistic publications popularized this stereotype (Pouillon 1964; Cali 1972). An important exhibition held at Aachen in 1980 stressed the international dimension of the order's heritage (Elm *et al.* 1980). Nevertheless, the association of Cistercian heritage and St. Bernard was consecrated in 1990, when the French culture made the nine hundredth anniversary of St. Bernard's birth a 'célébration nationale', with an official program and a great exhibition at the Conciergerie in Paris (Pressouyre & Kinder 1990).

From then the scope of the interest for Cistercian matters broadened considerably, became more and more international, including economy – farming, breeding and vineyards – and all aspects of material culture – tiles and bricks, hydraulic works, landscapes, urban houses, etc. – as well as intellectual culture – libraries, medicine, books, etc.

Some regions outside of France with a rich Cistercian heritage, like Yorkshire in England and Catalonia, as well as regions from post-communist Central Europe, like Poland, Brandenburg or Bohemia, developed specific programs. In less than twelve years, UNESCO inscribed five former Cistercian abbeys on the list of World Heritage: Fontenay in France (1981), Fountains in England (1986), Alcobaça in Portugal (1989), Poblet in Spain (1991) and Maulbronn in Germany (1993).

In 1998, the nine hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the abbey of Cîteaux was the occasion of a second Cistercian 'célébration nationale' in France, which is quite exceptional in a lay state. (fig. 10.3) This proves indeed that Cistercians are not only religious, but that they belong to French culture and identity, and can contribute to place France as the centre of a European movement. The celebrations of 1990 and 1998 gave a considerable impulse to all fields of Cistercian studies (Pressouyre 1994; Kinder 1997; Coppack 1998; Wiliams 1998; Leroux-Dhuys 1998), including new media (Coomans 2004). After 1998, studies became more and more critical about the idealised view on Cistercian medieval architecture, art and history (Berman 2000; Untermann 2001, Coomans 2013).

Nevertheless, this remarkable wave of 'heritagization' of Cistercian culture was above all dedicated to the medieval past – as the "fragment d'Europe" (Fouchier 1993), that is to say the apogee of the Cistercian Order at the time before the first secularisations of the sixteenth century. The medieval period corresponds indeed with a shared Christian unity in which monasticism in general played a capital role. This means that Cistercian baroque, gothic revival, and twentieth-century modernity remain largely unknown fields. This is all the

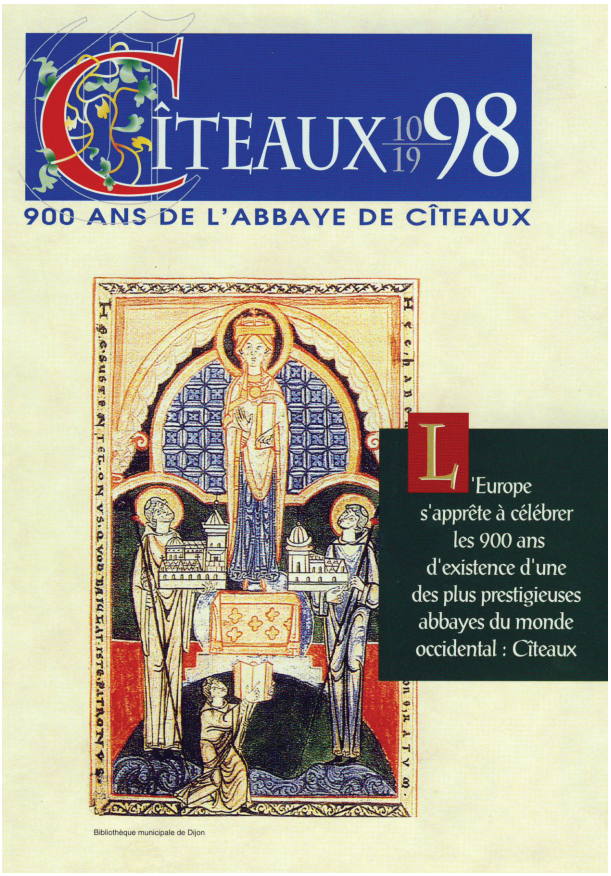


Fig. 10.3: In 1998, the nine hundredth anniversary of the abbey of Cîteaux led to numerous and international commemorations (flyer of the celebration).



Fig. 10.4: Cistercian monk welcoming the visitor of the website of Langwaden abbey, 2011 (http://www.zisterzienser-langwaden.de/ accessed March 2011).

more a paradox that these fields concern almost living abbeys with aged communities.

This overview of a varied and dispersed Cistercian heritage would be incomplete if one omitted the Cistercian gastronomy, especially the world famous Belgian Trappist beers from Orval, Chimay, Rochefort, Westmalle and Westvleteren (Van den Steen 2003). When a wing of the abbey of Rochefort burned on 29th December 2010, the main concern of the media was to ensure that the brewery had not been damaged! Beer brewing is a business and highly contributes to the present ambivalent perception of monks. Indeed, people do not believe that beer brewing is a non-profit activity for the monks. It is part of the monastic economy of subsistence, just like the production of cheese, honey, chocolate, shampoo, bread, etc. and the benefit, conforming with the rule of the abbeys, is used for charity both on local and international level.

Another ambivalence resides in the fact that in today's materialist and virtual world in crisis, many abbeys present themselves as places of tradition and authenticity, and their products as ecological and healthy. This post-modern version of the monastic devise "pray and work" (*ora et labora*) surprisingly attracts on the present secularized society. Sociologists have proven that this relationship confines the monks in a certain role, as if they were associated with their heritage and, in a certain way, became part of their own heritage (Jonveaux 2010).

Analysing home pages of monastic websites is very instructive about how communities present themselves to the world. A subtle example is the home page of the Cistercian abbey of Langwaden in North Rhine-Westphalia that combines several symbolic meanings. A monk stands near a half open door, which is the symbol of both welcome and enclosure. He seems looking at a terrace where people eat and drink under sunshades. The welcoming word says: "Many love our monastery's gastronomy. Others are searching our spiritual offer. Experts cherish both as treasures" (www.zisterzienser-langwaden.de accessed 15/03/2011, fig. 10.4).

4. Present networks and identity ambivalences

The third part of this paper is dedicated to the present Cistercian networks. We will see that they are various and increased during the last decade.

The oldest network, of course, is the order itself, with its characteristic arborescence structure with mother and daughter abbeys defined in the early twelfth century legislation, and its organisation around the Chapter General (Waddell 1999; Waddell 2002). The basic texts of the Cistercian Order still are the same as nine hundred years ago and define the Cistercian spirit and solidarity: the Rule of St. Benedict or *Regula monachorum*, written by St. Benedict about 650, and the Charter of Charity or *Carta caritatis*, written by St. Stephen Harding about 1113–1114. In the historical overview, we have seen that the Cistercian family evolved and presently is composed by two different orders. Both organise their own chapter general, which is no more annual. The Trappists have a centralised structure, with Cîteaux as first abbey, while the Cistercians of the common observance are grouped in autonomous regional congregations. This is a heritage from the past. Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the feminine branches of the Cistercian orders also participate in the Chapter General and in the central administrations. The abbots general still are men.

Religious orders are not sects, but according to the fact that contemplative abbeys are submitted to silence and enclosure, they could look like secret societies or hidden networks. (fig. 10.5) In order to avoid this misunderstanding, abbeys adopt modern tools of communication with the world. A website of an abbey



Fig. 10.5: Dutch Trappist monks and nuns during a heritage trip in Belgium: a visit to the former abbey of La Cambre in Brussels (THOC, August 1999).

can be compared with a gatehouse that protects the contemplative community from the world and informs the world about the community. The same can be said about the websites of both Cistercian and Trappist orders, that provide information about spiritual life, liturgy, history, art, monastic products and publications, give links to the sites of individual abbeys, but also inform about the order's life (www.cfc-liturgie.fr accessed 15/03/2011).

Websites also are tools of evangelisation and communication with the world, what offers new possibilities for communities that were "out of the world" to share their faith and their liturgy with people "in the world". *The International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities* also has a website and platform (www.cistercianfamily.org accessed 15/03/2011).

The image of the monk is used and misused to promote beer, cheese and other products for which monastic authenticity is a commercial argument. This phenomenon increased the last decades. Therefore Cistercians and Trappists developed specific networks in order to protect both their name and heritage. The *International Trappist Association* has been created as an international non-profit association promoting the deeper evangelical values of economic activities within the abbeys (www.trappist.com accessed 15/03/2011). Because this issue is crucial for the monastic image, the website is very explicit about the work of monks and nuns at the service of the human person, but also about the protection of the "Trappist" name and label.

Another monastic network groups monastery stores and other services. Contemplative communities of Cistercian and Benedictine monks and nuns created the *Association Monastic* in 1989 in France (www.monastic-euro.org accessed 15/03/2011). These communities wanted to join their effort and coordinate their marketing in order to guarantee the monastic origin of their production and so to protect their work against all industrial pseudo-monastic products, especially cheese. In 2011, the *Association Monastic* groups more than 220 communities including other monastic orders and communities out of France. The logo 'Monastic' is protected. At the production level, they value the quality of their products more than the quantity. They also have a special concern for the environment and their approach to publicity and advertising is moderate and marked by integrity.

Networks of scholars and specialised scientific publications on spirituality or history also wear the name Cistercian and have their own website: *Cistercienser Chronik* since 1889, *Collectanea Cisterciensia* since 1934, *Analecta Cisterciensia* since 1945, *Cistercium. Revista monastica cisterciense* since 1948, *Cîteaux: Commentarii cistercienses. A Journal of Historical Studies* since 1950, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* since 1966, *Rivista Cisterciense. Periodico quadrimestrale di letteratura, storia, arte, liturgia, spiritualitá, cultura e vita monastic* since 1984, etc. Most of these journals were founded by abbeys or specialised commissions composed with competent monks and nuns. Some opened their board of redaction to academics and today reach an international high level of scholarship. Specific sessions on Cistercian history, architecture and art are yearly organised at the *International Medieval Congress* at Leeds and the *International Congress on Medieval Studies* at Kalamazoo.

Some university centres focus on Cistercian studies and have own series, like The Institute of Cistercian Studies at Western Michigan University and the famous *Cistercian Studies* series (www.wmich.edu/cistern accessed 15/03/2011), the German *Studien zur Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der Zisterzienser* (www.lukasverlag.com/schriftenrheien/zisterzienserstudien accessed 15/03/2011), or other broader monastic research networks (www.cercor.france.com accessed 15/03/2011). Several sites of secularized abbeys have a newsletter, a museum and a local research centre in particular when there are excavations, sometimes organize conferences, and publish a journal or diffuse a digital newsletter. Articles on Cistercian matters and heritage are published in a wide range of publications. We will not discuss here the scientific quality of all these publications, but observe that they reach a broad public and contribute to involve people in Cistercian heritage. The same can be said about the numerous exhibitions dedicated to aspects of Cistercian heritage such as medieval manuscripts, regional clusters of abbeys, and excavations on Cistercian monastic sites.

The abbey of Cîteaux, as head and "name-giver" of the Order, has founded in 1996 the *Association pour le Rayonnement de la Culture CIStercienne* (ARCCIS), with the aim of "informing and diffusing all the aspects of the Cistercian culture, to defend it against wrong interpretations, and to stimulate Cistercian spirituality" (www.arccis.org accessed 15/03/2011). The members are in first instance other abbeys and religious communities that are interested in placing heritage in the perspective of present faith and spirituality. In 2000, the association has created at Cîteaux the *Centre Européen pour le Rayonnement de la Culture CIStercienne* (CERCCIS), a documentation centre that

offers a platform for researchers and scholars as well as for religious interested in Cistercian heritage. CERCCIS conserves Cistercian heritage and archives, organises meetings and publishes a journal.
In Austria, the Cistercian abbey of Heiligenkreuz has founded in 2007 the *Europainstitut für cisterciensische Geschichte, Spiritualität, Kunst und Liturgie* or *Forschungsinstitut EUCist* (www.hochschule-heiligenkreuz.at accessed 15/03/2011), of which the aims are similar with those of ARCCIS. Both centres are partners in collecting and sharing information about Cistercian heritage. The abbey of Heiligenkreuz is developing a virtual platform called *CISTOPEDIA Encyclopaedia Cisterciensis*, a very ambitious project building up serious information about 3000 sites, with illustrations, connections with university libraries, etc. *Cistopedia* works as a 'wiki' encyclopaedia: people are invited to input information according to rules (www.cistopedia.org accessed 15/03/2011).
A very different network started in France in 1988 by some owners and managers of ancient abbey buildings and sites, with the aim to share experience about organising visits, obtain subsidies, promote tourism, optimise relations with administrations, and collect historic information. This group of owners and managers founded an association in 1993, named *La Charte des Abbayes et Sites Cisterciens*, that produced an itinerary of Cistercian sites in France, and organises annual training sessions for guides (www.cister.net accessed 15/03/2011). Thanks to the dynamics of the nine hundredth anniversary of Cîteaux in 1998, the association benefited of the internationalisation, expanded to other countries, and changed its name in: *Charte europeenne des Abbayes et Sites Cisterciens*. Contrary to the networks emanating from the Trappist and Cistercian orders, La Charte is not a religious association and does not ambition promoting spirituality. Most members of La Charte are confronted with Cistercian heritage that has been secularised at the time of the French revolution, some sites being ruins, other having been turned in castle, factory, farm and even prison (Clairvaux). The present statistic of la Charte mentions 175 members of which 40 are out of France. Interesting is to note that only 8 members on the 175 are living abbeys. A specialised guide mentioning about 520 Cistercian sites in France, Belgium, Switzerland and Luxembourg was published (Peugniez 2001).
This overview shows that Cistercian heritage is much more than only the heritage of living monastic communities. The largest part of the Cistercian tangible heritage no longer belongs to the order and has developed its own varied post-monastic history, in secularised private or public hands. Nobody can contest this evidence. However, the debate about the role and the meaning of this heritage in the present world is on another level. The spiritual dimension, that is to say the intangible heritage, still is in the hands of the religious who therefore have another vision on heritage according to their own identity and worldview. Religious do not want to consider themselves as keepers of a heritage or curators of museums. In a

Fig. 10.6: The abbey of Le Thoronet, one of the archetypes of Cistercian Romanesque architecture, is a national monument belonging to the French State (THOC, August 2009).





Fig. 10.7: Fake monks, real beer and historical abbey ruins: the 'Hostieux moines de Villers', Easter 2010 (http://www.hostieux.org/ accessed March 2011).

certain sense, they are a living part of a heritage that they call "monastic tradition".

A last point that must be evoked here is the relative specificity of Cistercians and Trappists in the much larger phenomenon of monasticism. There are, of course, numerous other religious orders in the World (Johnston 2000; Laboa 2003; De Maeyer *et al.* 2004). Why give such an importance to Cistercian heritage? The reasons of this historiographical distortion are historical. They are for a large part the result of nationalist French scholarship (in particular around the figure of St. Bernard) and modernist admiration of Cistercian Romanesque architecture (fig. 10.6).

Thanks to the development of international identities, this model has changed for the twenty last years, despite the two "célébrations nationales" in France. A good example is the *Cistercian route*, developed by the European Institute of Cultural Routes, which depends on the Council of Europe. "It is at the request of France, during the celebrations of the 9th centennial of the birth of Bernard de Clairvaux, that in 1990 the Council of Europe elected 'the Cistercian route'. With this theme, Poland also inaugurated its entry within the Cultural Co-operation Council in November 1990. (…) Later, the theme of the Cistercians was extended to that of "monastic influence" (www.culture-routes.lu/ accessed 15/03/2011).

In May 2010, the "Monastic Route" has received the official certification of the Council of Europe and is one of the 29 certified cultural routes in Europe. The route also includes the rich heritage of Orthodox monasteries. The website of the European Institute of Cultural Routes mentions that the routes of monastic influence "will encourage the revaluation of the relation that we have established between public and private, intimacy and exteriority, patriotism and European spirit" (…) "The routes will support the consolidation of tolerance and the development of a European consciousness by means of artistic forms, historical testimonies, declarations of those who chose to deviate from the world to better understand the world and the meaning of human existence" (www.culture-routes.lu accessed 15/03/2011).

5. Conclusion

We would like to conclude this overview of Cistercian history, heritage and networks with two cases, which both are radical, and therefore illustrate the extreme ambivalences of Cistercian heritage.

The first case is the *Confrérie des hostieux moines de Villers*, a group founded in 1995 in a Belgian village that conserves outstanding ruins of a medieval Cistercian abbey. This "brotherhood" aims to valorise gastronomic specialities, in particular (abbey) beer and sausage, as well as local folkloric traditions (www.hostieux.org accessed 15/03/2011). The group is composed of about twenty men and is a parody of a monastic community, with an abbot, monks and novices, wearing Cistercian habits and holding an annual chapter in the ruins of the abbey (fig. 10.7).

The second case comes from Portugal, a country that has a very rich Cistercian heritage, but that is the only country in Western Europe where the Cistercian Order never revived since the secularisation. A group of rather nationalistic catholic laymen is militating for the foundation of a Cistercian abbey in Portugal that would diffuse Portuguese Cistercian spirituality (www.cisterportugal.blogspot.com accessed 15/03/2011). The group received the support of the Cistercian abbot of the Spanish abbey of Oseira, but there are no monks available for a foundation in Portugal.

So we have, on the one hand, fake monks dealing with commercialized pseudo-monastic gastronomy, in real ruins of a former Cistercian abbey. On the other hand, we have a virtual project searching for real monks that should start a new abbey. What do these two cases have in common, except using the term Cistercian? Both belong to a post-modern and neo-romantic vision of monasticism and heritage. Fortunately, Cistercian heritage is much more than that, despite ambivalences and different views on the essence of its meaning.

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