THE CISTERCIAN ARTS
From the 12th to the 21st Century

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CONTENTS

CONTRIBUTORS 7
PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS 8

INTRODUCTION 9
Terry N. Kinder

CISTERCIAN ORIGINS 11
Claudio Stercel

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX AND THE EXPERIENCE OF MYSTERY 17
Inas Biffi

A SUBLIME ALLIANCE SEALED BY THE HAND OF GOD: THEOLOGY
AND AESTHETIC ANTHROPOLOGY 21
Antonio Montanari

“DEFORMED BEAUTY” OR “BEAUTIFUL DEFORMITY”: THE AESTHETICS OF THE CROSS
AS A MYSTICAL ETHIC OF BEAUTY IN BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX 31
Pierre-André Burton

EARLY CISTERCIAN ARCHITECTURE: ORIGINALITY AND FUNCTIONALITY
OF A BUILDING MODEL 35
Xavier Barral i Altet

SAINT BERNARD, A BUILDER? THE PROBLEM WITH THE “BERNARDINE PLAN” 75
Roberto Cassanelli

THE DAWN OF CISTERCIAN ARCHITECTURE IN ITALY
(TWELFTH TO THIRTEENTH CENTURIES) 79
Roberto Cassanelli

TWO CISTERCIAN ABBEYS IN ITALY’S PO VALLEY 101
Roberto Cassanelli

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CISTERCIAN ABBEY OF SAINTS VINCENZO
AND ANASTASIO AT TRE FONTANE 105
Joan Barclay Lloyd

CISTERCIANS IN THE HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE NORTH OF THE ALPS 109
Jens Räffer

CISTERCIAN ARCHITECTURE IN THE IBERIAN PENINSULA 125
James D’Emilio

CISTERCIAN ARCHITECTURE IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND 145
David M. Robinson

CISTERCIANS AND THEIR ARCHITECTURE IN THE BALTIC REGION 157
Christine Kratzke

CISTERCIANS IN MEDIEVAL HUNGARY 165
Elek Benkó

CISTERCIAN NUNS AND ART IN THE MIDDLE AGES 175
Elisabeth Freeman

“ORNAMENTA ECCLESIAE CISTERCIENSES”: ORNAMENTAL ART
IN CISTERCIAN MONASTERIES OF THE MIDDLE AGES 187
Christine Kratzke

LITURGICAL LIFE AS ART: CISTERCIAN LITURGICAL OBJECTS 201
Emmanuelle Cazabonne
CISTERCIAN STAINED GLASS 207
Eric Ramirez-Weaver

THE MONASTIC ART OF LECTIO DIVINA 215
Michael Casey

CISTERCIAN MINIATURES 223
Joaquín Yarza Luaces

FROM STOREROOM TO STUDY: THE ORIGIN
AND DEVELOPMENT OF CISTERCIAN LIBRARIES 239
David N. Bell

MEDIEVAL CISTERCIAN SEALS 245
David H. Williams

CISTERCIAN REFORM OF LITURGICAL CHANT 251
Claire Maître

CISTERCIAN GRANGES 259
David H. Williams

THE PRINCIPAL GRANGE OF FOSSANOVA 275
Igino Vona

CISTERCIANS AND WATER: THE MODEL OF THE FRENCH AND SPANISH ABBEYS 285
Javier Pérez Embedtls

CISTERCIAN METALLURGY 293
Denis Cailleaux

IMAGES OF SAINT BERNARD AND CISTERCIANS IN MEDIEVAL ART 297
James France

CISTERCIANS, THE COMMENDA SYSTEM,
AND THE PERIOD OF THE CONGREGATIONS 309
Mario Sensi

CISTERCIAN ART IN THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES
IN THE GERMAN-SPEAKING REGIONS 323
Markus Thome

HEILIGENKREUZ 337
Markus Thome

ARMAND-JEAN DE RANCÉ AND THE TRAPPISTS 341
Dom M. Gérard Dubois

THE QUEST FOR A NEW CISTERCIAN ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY 349
Thomas Coomans

EMBLEMS FOR A SEASON OF FURY: THE ART OF THOMAS MERTON 367
Paul M. Pearson

CISTERCIAN ARCHITECTURE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY 375
Maria Antonietta Crippa

HISTORIC CISTERCIAN ABBEY FRAGMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES 395
Terry N. Kinder

OUR LADY OF JOY: A CISTERCIAN COMMUNITY IN EAST ASIA 403
Anastasius Li and M. Theophane Young

OUR LADY OF THE REDWOODS ABBEY 407
Maria Christina Leaño

TAURTA MARIKLOSTER: THE ART OF RETURNING 411
Sheryl Frances Chen OCSO

NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHIES 415

INDEX 429
CISTERCIAN ARCHITECTURE ON THE IBERIAN PENINSULA

James D'Emilio

Spain and Portugal preserve a rich ensemble of medieval Cistercian buildings. While monasteries like Alcobaca, Poblet, or Las Huelgas are well known, others remain unfamiliar, even to specialists. These monuments attest to the Cistercians’ success as religious reformers, agents of architectural change, and mediators between the Iberian kingdoms and the culture of Latin Christendom. Moreover, the role of affiliations, the regional divisions between the daughters of Clairvaux and Morimond, the prerogatives of patrons, the importance of nunneries and the congregation of Las Huelgas, the appropriation of local artistic traditions, and the diversity of buildings all bear on current discussions of Cistercian institutions, practices, and aesthetics.

Debates have raged over the beginnings of Cistercian settlement in Iberia, ever since the seventeenth-century publication of Angel Manrique’s monumental history of the order. Since P. Maur Cocheril’s pioneering study surveyed the terrain, the early dates proposed for several houses and, specifically those championed for Oseira and Moreruela have been refuted convincingly. The restored monastery of Sobra do dos Monxes, affiliated with Clairvaux in 1142, has best withstood scrutiny as the earliest Iberian foundation. Still unsettled are rival claims of Fitero and the Portuguese monasteries of Lafões and Tarouca. Even with fuller documentation, precise dates would be elusive because of the stages in the establishment, endowment and approval of new foundations, the arrival of monks and selection of definitive sites, and the erection of temporary and, finally, permanent structures. Dating affiliations of existing communities is even more daunting, as the reforms that typically preceded formal affiliation passed largely unrecorded. These problems are aggravated by the ambiguities of Iberian charters written where understanding of Cistercian practices was incomplete and the Benedictine rule itself somewhat novel.

It is certain that the 1140s and 1150s saw a first wave of Iberian foundations and affiliations, despite the misgivings Saint Bernard had expressed to Abbot Artaud of Preuilly (circa 1129). Some would rank among the most illustrious Iberian monasteries: Alcobaca (1153) in Portugal: Huerta (1144), La Espina (1147), Sacramenia (<1147), and Valbuena (1151) in León-Castile; La Oliva (1149) in Navarre; Veruela (1146) in Aragón; and Santes Creus (1150) and Poblet (1151) in Catalonia. Early modern chroniclers strove mightily to link houses with Saint Bernard and King Alfonso VII (1126–57), self-styled emperor and ruler of a unified kingdom of Castile-León. In fact, the most dramatic growth of Cistercian houses and the remarkable flowering of nunneries followed the death of Alfonso VII, when, for two generations, Christian Iberia was split among five kingdoms: Portugal, León, Castile, Navarre, and Aragon/Catalonia. By 1243 there were nearly seventy men’s monasteries, from perhaps fifteen at Saint Bernard’s death, while over thirty nunneries embraced Cistercian practices.

Regional patterns marked both the arrival of the Cistercians and their expansion, hinting at a coordinated approach. In the westernmost regions of Galicia, the new kingdom of Portugal, and the Leonese heartland, communities were linked directly to Clairvaux and soon organized their own daughter houses. La Espina set up Sandoval (1167) and Valdeiglesias (1177). In Portugal, Alcobaca was mother to seven communities, Tarouca founded or reformed another four, and, by the early
1. Meira, Santa Maria, north wing
2. Valbuena, Santa Maria, western facade
Following pages:
3. Carrizo, Santa Maria, apse
4. Fitero, Santa Maria, eastern apse
thirteenth century, Galician houses were reforming local monasteries, including San Clodio, Monfero, and Xunqueira de Espadañedo. Such activity continued intermittently through the later Middle Ages. Sobrado reached beyond Galicia, establishing Benavides (1176) in León and Valdediós (1200) in neighbouring Asturias. In León, Carracedo was exceptional for its direct affiliation to Cîteaux (circa 1200) with its congregation of houses.12

In Castile, Navarra, and Aragón, daughters of Morimond held sway. L'Escale-Dieu was the mother house of Fitero, Sacramenia, Veruela, La Oliva, and other monasteries. Valbuena and Huerta were affiliated with Berdoues, and Mataallana, Ovila, and Rueda were affiliated with other houses of Morimond. Valbuena, in turn, founded Rioseco, Bonaval, and Palazuelos. In Catalonia, Santes Creus and Poblet were established from Grandseve and Fontfroide, respectively, within the family of Clairvaux, and both Catalan houses founded several communities. Among the most favourable regions were the borderlands where Castile, Aragón, and Navarre met. Here, Huerta, Fitero, Veruela, and La Oliva won patronage from competing monarchs, and the monasteries were the settings for negotiations, marriage arrangements, and peace treaties.13

The first Iberian nunnery to follow Cistercian customs was founded at Tulebras in Navarre in 1157.14 Castile, León, and Portugal were fertile ground for Cistercian nunneries.13 Many were sponsored by nobles, who generously supported men's houses, too.16 The widowed Fronilde Fernández, for example, placed the nunnery of Ferreira de Pantón under the tutelage of Meira in 1175 and distributed gifts to men's communities throughout Galicia.17 Several convents were founded by widows whose family members ruled for decades. Countess Estefanía Ramírez and her husband, Count Ponce de Minervia, founded the monastery of Sandoral in 1167. After her husband's death in 1175, she established a men's house at Benavides in 1176 and founded and entered the nunnery of Carrizo months later. Her daughter, María Ponce, succeeded her as abbess.18 She had been wed to Count Rodrigo Álvarez, son of the founder of Meira and
founder of the Order of Mountjoy, one of several Iberian military orders to adapt Cistercian practices. Rodrigó's cousin, the widowed countess, Aldonza, entered the Castilian nunnery of Cañas, which she had founded with her husband, Count Lope Díaz de Haro. Later, three of her daughters governed Cañas, San Andrés de Arroyo, and Vileña.20

This important women's religious movement won attention of the Crown, papacy, and local ecclesiastics. After Cardinal Hyacinth's legate visit in 1173, assemblies of churchmen witnessed the subjection of Ferreira de Pantón to Meira and the foundation of Carrizo.21 In 1175, the archbishop of Toledo accepted the petition of King Alfonso VIII of Castile and of Queen Leonor, daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, to approve Cistercian usages at the nunnery of San Clemente in Toledo.22 In 1187, the royal couple established Las Huelgas.23 Their nunnery received authority over others whose abbeses gathered there for annual chapters. In 1199, it was made a "special daughter" of Citeaux and royal pantheon. The nuns' prerogatives and worldly engagements sparked friction with local prelates and with Clairvaux itself.24 Women of the royal family enjoyed special privileges at Las Huelgas, and the nuns' wealth and prestige owed much to the traditional Leonese infantazgo, which gave royal princesses (infantas) authority over important monastic estates.25 In Portugal, Princesses Teresa, Sancha, and Mafalda, daughters of King Sancho I, were patrons of nunneries at Lorvão, Celas, and Arouca.26

The Cistercian buildings of Iberia reflect the order's ideals and illustrate their role in linking Iberia with Latin Christendom. Not only did the Cistercians import characteristic building types, but they spread numerous structural and decorative features, from the pointed arch and ribbed vault to rose windows, chevron ornament, and dogtooth. There is no simple evolution or sequence of styles, but several tendencies stand out: the use of designs common to Cistercian buildings, like the so-called Bernardine plan; the austere aesthetic; the selective
Above:
5. Gradvic, Santa María la Real, eastern apse

Facing:
6. Gradvic, Santa María la Real, ambulatory

Following pages:
7. Gradvic, Santa María la Real, ambulatory, capitals
8. Las Huelgas, Santa María la Real, choir, keystone
9. Sandoval, Santa María, north transept, keystone
appropriation of local formulas; the popularity of ambulatories and radiating chapels; and the introduction of Gothic elements.\textsuperscript{27}

Cistercian buildings contrasted sharply with contemporary Romanesque architecture. The church at Meira (fig. 1) exemplifies this style.\textsuperscript{28} Count Álvaro Rodríguez of Sarria and Countess Sancha Fernández founded the Galician monastery between 1151 and 1154. The choir, transepts, and eastern bays of the nave were built in the last third of the twelfth century, while the nave was completed and vaulted in a second campaign in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. It presents a semicircular apse flanked by two rectangular chapels enclosed by one wall on each transept; a rib-vaulted crossing; a two-storeyed nave with a pointed barrel vault pierced by clerestory windows; groin-vaulted aisles; and a rose window dominating the west facade. Many elements were new to Galicia, but, more importantly, the austere lines, plain capitals, and arches without mouldings expressed a novel aesthetic and spiritual sensibility.

That spare architectural language reverberated through Cistercian churches across Iberia: from bare expanses of sheer walls unrelieved by mouldings, to the massive piers and arches at Huerta, Valbuena, or Santís Creus, or the rigorous exclusion of even plain capitals at Oia and Armenteira, and the insistence on the stark purity of architectural form in the multiple arches of deeply recessed portals, as at Valbuena (fig. 2) and La Oliva. These ideals were realized in a remarkable variety of designs. Classifying them as "variants" of types overlooks their subtlety and originality.\textsuperscript{29} The Galician church of Oia, for example, presents an unusual stepped choir whose outer chapels are shallower than the inner ones, while transverse barrel vaults cover the aisles of the nave, as at Fontenay. At the modest church of Armenteira, massed chapels and neighbouring bays ascend rhythmically to the crossing in a marked departure from Galician triple-apsed churches with similar ground plans.\textsuperscript{30}

Cistercian churches integrated local features into imported designs. At Meira, Huerta, and La Oliva, a semicircular apse, common in Iberian Romanesque churches, is flanked by rectangular chapels enclosed by one wall. At Sacramenia, the stepped transept chapels are rectangular outside but semicircular inside. Semicircular chapels flank the semicircular apse at Valbuena, but the slight curvature of their walls barely interrupts the rectangular walls of the outer chapels. In Galicia, the arcade choir and transepts at Melón recall the arched buttresses of Compostela. More striking, perhaps, is the appropriation of formulas from Islamic art, like the strapped ribs of the crossing vault and the cusped arch of the portal at Armenteira, the decorative brickwork and arcading at Santa María de la Vega and the nunnery at La Lugareja, and the ornate funerary chapels and stucco adornment at Las Huelgas.\textsuperscript{31} In many Cistercian churches, an ample repertory of masons' marks, shared with nearby buildings, indicates a large local workforce.\textsuperscript{32}

Nonetheless, their conformity with the strictures of Cistercian decor attests to the careful oversight of Cistercian projects.\textsuperscript{33} Local craftsmen, in turn, learned and spread
10. La Oliva, Santa María la Real, northern chapel of the choir, capitals of the chancel arches

11. San Andrés de Arroyo, southern chapel, capitals of the chancel arches
12. Las Huelgas, Santa María la Real, south transept chapel, capital of the chancel arch
13. Las Huelgas, Santa María la Real, north wall of the choir

14. Las Huelgas, Santa María la Real, the first cloister (Las Claustros)

Following pages:

15. Huerta, Santa María, refectory

16. Las Huelgas, Santa María la Real, chapter room

17. Alcobasa, central nave
Figural carving in Iberian Cistercian churches is sometimes decried as a compromise with local practices and a relaxation of monastic ideals. In fact, such carving remained exceptional throughout the thirteenth century. Usually, it is discreetly placed (fig. 8) or limited to isolated sacred subjects (fig. 9) in glaring contrast with the abundant grotesque imagery and prolix biblical narratives in other Iberian monasteries. In the first cloister (Las Claustrillas, fig. 14) at Las Huelgas the foliate capitals and extraordinary architectonic motifs on the piers seem a polemical retort to the exuberant Romanesque cloister at nearby Silos. Similarly the proliferation of sacred and profane subjects in the vicinity of the nunnery of San Andrés de Arroyo highlights, by contrast, the strict guidelines adhered to there (fig. 11). The exquisite detailing and technical virtuosity of foliate carving in some Cistercian churches (fig. 10) are more noteworthy, perhaps, than the occasional intrusion of figurative art. Sculptors in Cistercian buildings elevated routine pieces, like the crochet capital (fig. 12) into eloquent meditations on abstract forms.

Figural art, judiciously employed, was more prominent in Cistercian nunneries. Their sanctuaries held statuary and splendid objects like the thirteenth-century wooden casket from Carrizo painted with the apostles and the life of Jesus. Masks and grotesques adorn capitals at Gradefes (fig. 7), while the richly sculptured apse at Ferreira de Pantón draws upon the moralizing bestiary and aviary whose popularity in women’s communities is demonstrated by illuminated manuscripts from Cistercian nunneries in Portugal. The apse at Pantón predates its subjection to Meira, but the unfounded assumption that nuns’ churches were normally erected before affiliation has affected their study. They have been marginalized, unfairly, as relatively modest projects, constrained by limited resources, rooted in local traditions, and less faithful to Cistercian norms. Such generalizations need qualification. The choir at Gradefes (figs 5, 6), the ashlar apses at Carrizo (fig. 3) where building stone was scarce, the brick dome at La Lugareja, and the refined sculpture at San Andrés de Arroyo (fig. 11) show no lack of means or ingenuity. Difficulties that scaled back their plans by the mid-thirteenth century relate
more specifically to the nunnery’s increasing subordination to the General Chapter.  

The church at Gradefes, begun in 1177, is remarkable among Cistercian nunnerys for its ambulatory and radiating chapels (figs 5, 6). Santiago cathedral had the only such choir in Castile-León before the mid-twelfth century. The Cistercians’ novel choice of this design, as a model, was likely inspired by Clairvaux, a model strictly followed only at Alcobaca, where one semicircular wall enclosed the chapels. At Moreruela, Fitros (fig. 4), Veruela, and Poblet subtle variations provide instructive glimpses of builders wrestling with problems of vaulting, lighting, and the handling of bays and supports. In Galicia, Melón and Oseir are seen as imitating Santiago. The utter foreignness of the church at Melón, however, argues against mere influence. By citing the apostolic shrine, the Cistercian planners expressed their understanding of the church of Clairvaux III as a fitting setting for commemorating Saint Bernard and laying claim to the heritage of Christian antiquity. At Gradefes, the church’s singularity is obscured by deriving it from the wholly different choir at Moreruela. In fact, the ribs, paired responds, and bundled shafts of the piers loosely relate this highly original creation to Santo Domingo de la Calzada and buildings of Navarre, home to the mother convent, Tulebras.

These choirs offer insights, too, into the Cistercians’ role in Iberia, as elsewhere in Europe, as “missionaries” of Gothic style, introducing ribbed vaults, pointed arches, and slender proportions. Sometimes their innovations outstripped the abilities of local workmen. At Melón, for example, windows are funnelled into the half barrel vault of the ambulatory, dimming the lighting they were intended to provide. Evidently the builders shrank from the ribbed vaults that the choir’s design, its acutely pointed arches, and elongated proportions demand. Elsewhere, ribbed vaults seem awkwardly matched with supports, whether because of changes in plans, incomplete understanding of the new vaulting, or an unconventional approach to its articulation. Some artists found an opportunity to indulge in the pure architectural forms that nourished Cistercian spirituality (fig. 16). The nuns’ church at Las Huelgas (fig. 13), begun in the 1190s, was the first complete adaptation of Gothic architecture to Cistercian tastes in Iberia. Numerous features reflect the architecture of the Île de France: the buttressed polygonal apse with two tiers of lancets, the delicate shafts, and deeply webbed vaults of the luminous choir, and the finely tooled carved capitals, consoles, bosses, and dogtooth (figs 12, 9). The elegant churches of Villamayor de los Montes and Cañas show that nunnerys remained at the forefront of Gothic architecture throughout the thirteenth century.

Among men’s houses, Alcobaca illustrates most dramatically the embrace of Gothic architecture (fig. 17). Founded in 1153, the church was begun, according to a modern inscription, in 1178 and dedicated in 1252. The dates and sequence of campaigns remain controversial.
Manuel Luis Real assigns the choir, transepts, and eastern bays of the soaring nave to the late twelfth century, following the inspiration of Clairvaux III. The upper parts of the choir and transept and the western bays of the nave and tall aisles belong to a second campaign, carried out under King Alfonso II (1211–23), who made Alcobaça a royal cemetery. The production of the abbey’s customary in 1231 may signal completion of most of the church. The pantheon was frequently remodelled, most notably with carving of the remarkable tombs of Pedro I and Doña Inés de Castro in the 1360s. After Portuguese independence was restored in 1640, the monastery was enlarged with diverse dependencies and embellished with images celebrating its ties to the Crown and weaving the Cistercians into legends surrounding Portuguese origins.

Cistercian houses in other Iberian kingdoms also sheltered royal tombs. The Aragonese kings, Alfonso II (1162–96) and Jaime I (1213–76) were buried at the Catalan monastery of Poblet, while Pedro III (1276–85) and Jaime II (1291–1327) rested at Santes Creus. Pedro IV (1336–87) fashioned a dynastic pantheon at Poblet that eventually included his tomb and those of three wives and several late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century kings and queens. Funerary chapels were among the earliest constructions at Las Huelgas. In the Gothic church, the magnificent double tomb of King Alfonso VIII and Queen Leonor anchored a pantheon with tombs of several children and other members of the Castilian royal family. The monument is likely the product of a refurbishment of the royal cemetery and abbesses’ pantheon in the 1320s and 1330s in preparation for the coronation of King Alfonso XI. The nobility also turned to the Cistercians for care of the dead. The Finojosa family, for example, had a burial place at Silos in the early twelfth century. Martín de Finojosa became abbot of Huerta in 1167, and the monastery became a family cemetery. Other monasteries received their founders’ tombs, and the funeral of Count Bermudo Álvarez, mayor-domo of King Fernando II, was held at his parents’ foundation at Meira, 1187. At Gradeves and San Andrés de Arroyo, the first abbesses’ tombs have yielded fine shrouds and clothing. On the tomb (fig. 18) of Abbess Úrrea Díaz de Haro de Cañas, the solemn clerics and grief-stricken mourners are a masterpiece of medieval Iberian funerary sculpture.

An inscription at Huerta credits the Finojosa family with the spacious rib-vaulted refectory (fig. 15), one of the most impressive Cistercian cloistered buildings in Iberia. Huerta also preserves its medieval kitchen and domus conversorum. Other noteworthy medieval dependencies include the kitchen at Sobrado, the dormitory at Santes Creus, the monks’ common rooms at Moreruela and Valbuena, and the armarium at La Espina. Abbots with royal cemeteries preserve especially lavish cloisters and dependencies. At Alcobaça, an inscription dates the Gothic cloister, financed by royal gifts, to 1308–11, and the upper cloister in the Manueline style was added in the early sixteenth century. It preserves a stately lavabo, and its medieval dependencies include a large early thirteenth-century
dormitory. Behind the fourteenth-century walls of its precinct, Poblet retains medieval cloisters, an elegant lavabo with a rib-vaulted baldachin, a severe barrel-vaulted refectory of the late twelfth century, a chapter house with a delicate canopy of tall ribbed vaults springing from slender octagonal piers, and the kitchen, dormitory, and rib-vaulted scriptorium (fig. 16). Its scale and courtly elegance befit its role as a meeting place for the abbesses of the congregation, and it spurred experiments at other nunneries, like San Andrés de Arroyo. There, a lofty eight-part ribbed vault crowns the unbroken space of the chapter house: the soaring ribs spring from consoles and short corner responds, and oculi pierce the webs. Many men’s monasteries preserve medieval chapter houses: those at Sacramenia, Verea, and La Oliva reproduce the distinctive designs of that at their mother house, L’Escole-Dieu.

Several cloisters or dependencies were built in the later Middle Ages. Notable projects of that period complicate simple narratives of Cistercian decadence, even if they depart from earlier norms. On the early fourteenth-century cornice of the west façade at La Oliva (fig. 19), corbels and metopes mix sacred scenes like the Annunciation and Crucifixion, moralizing symbols like the Wheel of Fortune, images of secular and monastic life, and grotesque figures. Green men and other grotesques populate
capitals of the fourteenth-century cloister at Santes Creus. At Sandeval, the west portal capped a final building campaign, launched under Abbot Pedro de la Vega in 1462. Figures of monks decorate the capitals of the slender colonnettes, and the tympanum presents a monk kneeling before Christ crucified and a crowned Virgin with the Christ child. Eduardo Carrero Santamaría has identified this as Saint Bernard meditating before visions or images that underscore the centrality of Jesus’s humanity in Cistercian spirituality. Other late fifteenth-century projects, like those in the dependencies at Oseira, anticipated the far-reaching revival that would accompany affiliation to the newly formed Congregation of Castile. Elsewhere, sumptuous funeral chapels, like that of the Vega family at La Espina, intruded into the monastic sanctuaries.

The reforms that led to the creation of the Congregation of Castile began with Fray Martín de Vargas’s foundation at Montesión in 1427, and continued with the reform of Valbuena in 1430 and the affiliation of abbeys across the kingdom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was followed in the later sixteenth century by the reforms that led to the foundation of the Congregation of Aragon and Navarre, and, in Portugal, the Congregation of Alcobaça. These congregations fostered a spiritual, intellectual, and artistic renaissance, marked by the extensive rebuilding of churches, cloisters, and dependencies,
and a transformation of their medieval topography. Characteristic reforms included the addition of upper cloisters, of which Huerta offers a superb example (fig. 20), the elevation of choirs over the western bays of churches, and the addition of cloisters for novices and guests. Even as these buildings erased portions of the medieval past, monastic chroniclers reinterpreted that heritage, anchoring it in narratives of a heroic age and of decadence and reform, that would cast a long shadow over modern scholarship.
Errata

Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to review page proofs. Please note the following corrections:

text:
p. 125, col. 1: Sobra do dos Monxes should be Sobrado dos Monxes
p. 128, col. 1: son of the founder of Meira should be son of the founders of Meira
p. 132, col. 1: The church at Meira exemplifies this style. should be The church at Meira exemplifies this.
p. 142, col. 1: ...scriptorium (fig. 16). should be ...scriptorium. Most remarkable at Las Huelgas is the rib-vaulted chapter house with circular piers ringed by en-deli shafts (Fig. 16).

Photography credits:
Photo James D’Emilio: 126–136, 140–141

The brief footnotes were apparently retranslated from the Italian version. The following bibliographic revisions or updates were omitted:

1. ...Oliver (2008); García Flores (2010)
4. For Moreruela...Larren Izquierdo (2008)
15. ...Baury (2012)
20. ...Baury (2012), 53–6, 290
23. ...Baury (2012), 137–50
24. ...Baury (2012), 161–72
42. ...Baury (2012), 115–89
48. ...Abella Villar (2008)
61. ...Baury (2011)

García Flores 2010: A. García Flores, Arquitectura de la Orden del Cister en la Provincia de Valladolid (1147-1515), Valladolid 2010.