The Tironensian Monastic Order

The Tironensian monastic order takes its name from its mother house, the Abbaye de la Sainte-Trinite de Tiron, which was established in the forest of Tiron (present-day Thiron-Gardais) some 60 kilometers to the west of Chartres in northern France. The Abbaye de Tiron was founded in 1109 - only a very short time before Tironensian monks arrived at Selkirk (1113) and eventually at Kelso (1128).

Within ten years of its creation the Order of Tiron owned some 117 abbeys and priories, principally in France but also to a significant extent in Scotland (with major abbeys at Kelso, Arbroath, Kilwinning and Lindores) and to a much lesser extent in Wales, Ireland and England.

Bernard de Ponthieu, also known as Bernard d’Abbeville, (1046-1117) was the instigator. He was born at Ponthieu, near Amiens, in Picardy. A Benedictine monk, he had various disputes with his superiors before living as a hermit from 1101-1106. Bernard’s idea for Tiron was a very particular understanding and very strict observance of the Rule of St Benedict - a major element of which appears to have been his insistence that the monks themselves perform all the manual labour necessary for the maintenance of their community. Whilst other monastic orders (such as the Cistercians at Melrose and the Premonstratensians at Dryburgh) did not entirely share this Tironensian interpretation of the Benedictine Rule (the masons’ marks on the remains at Melrose and Dryburgh strongly suggest that the builders were not the monks themselves but tradesmen being paid ‘piece work’ for their labours) and while there may have been very considerable adjustments in its observance over the subsequent centuries at Kelso, this original insistence on working monks - bringing their continental building, glazing, plumbing and other skills to a more backward Scotland - may lie at the root of the legend that Tironensian Kilwinning is the birthplace of modern freemasonry.

A better understanding of the Tironensian architectural achievement can be gained by visiting not only Thiron-Gardais itself but also the impressive remains of the Abbaye D’Hambye near St Lo in Manche, the Abbaye Bois Aubry near Tours in Indres et Loire and the Abbaye D’Asnières at Cizay La Madeleine near Saumur in Maine et Loire.

We know that Tironensian monks wore grey habits but we do not know anything for certain about their daily lives and routines. In following the Rule of St Benedict, it seems that at least some of the monks at Kelso would have spent the greater part of each day in religious services. These services began at midnight with Matins, followed by Lauds at 03:00, Prime at 06:00, Terce at 09:00, Sext at 12:00, None at 15:00, Vespers at 18:00 and Compline at 21:00. Such an emphasis on prayer would appear to leave little time for ordinary work - the other main component in the Benedictine ora et labora (pray and work) creed. It may be therefore that at some point the Tironensians adopted the Cistercian practice of distinguishing between choir monks who carried out the religious services and lay brothers who performed much (if not all) of the manual labour needed to ensure that the monastic community thrived.