

The charterhouse of Nonenque: a discussion of an existing medieval nunnery in the context of Carthusian architecture

Carol Steyn

Research fellow, Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology,

University of South Africa

E-mail: steynfc@lantic.net

The Charterhouse of Nonenque is one of the few remaining charterhouses for nuns in the world. It was built in the 12th century as a Cistercian Abbey and adapted in the early 20th century as a Carthusian charterhouse. In this article the buildings of Nonenque are described according to the plans of the layout after a brief history of the abbey. The structure of the buildings is discussed in the context of Carthusian architecture and also in the context of the Carthusian way of life. Carthusian architecture is shown to be unique in monastic architecture since the Carthusian way of life demands greater solitude than those of the other orders and buildings are constructed to make provision for this. Since Nonenque was adapted from a Cistercian building the measures needed to adapt buildings of other orders to Carthusian needs are discussed. These adaptations are more radical in the case of Charterhouses for monks than in those for nuns. Works of art at Nonenque are discussed briefly.

This article on Nonenque follows on a visit of a few days which I was allowed to make to the nunnery in 2004.

Die Kartuisiese klooster van Nonenque: 'n bespreking van 'n bestaande middeleeuse nonneklooster in die verband van Kartuisiese argitektuur

Die Kartuisiese klooster van Nonenque is een van die min oorblywende Kartuisiese kloosters vir nonne in die wêreld. Dit is in die twaalfde eeu gebou as 'n Cisterciënse abdy en in die vroeë twintigste eeu aangepas as 'n Kartuisiese klooster. In hierdie artikel word die geboue van Nonenque volgens die planne van die uitleg na 'n kort geskiedenis van die abdy beskryf. Die struktuur van die geboue word bespreek in die konteks van die Kartuisiese argitektuur en ook in die konteks van die Kartuisiese lewenswyse. Daar word aangetoon dat Kartuisiese argitektuur uniek is in monastiese argitektuur aangesien die Kartuisiese lewenswyse groter afsondering vereis as dié van die ander monastiese ordes en dat die geboue gestruktureer is om hiervoor voorsiening te maak. Aangesien Nonenque aangepas is van 'n Cisterciënse gebou word die maatreëls wat nodig is om geboue van ander ordes vir Kartuisiese behoeftes aan te pas, bespreek. Hierdie aanpassings is meer ingrypend in die geval van kloosters vir monnike as in dié vir nonne. Kunswerke van Nonenque word kortliks bespreek.

Hierdie artikel oor Nonenque volg nadat ek in 2004 toegelaat is om 'n besoek van 'n paar dae daar af te lê.

About two hours drive inland from Montpellier in the Aveyron, France, one comes to a small winding road turning off from the main road. Its entrance is bristling with signs exhorting motorists not to enter, and above all, not to make a noise. The main one reads: "Dear tourists, this is a hermitage where the nuns pray for you. Please respect the silence and calm of the valley" (my translation). When one nevertheless continues down the road, as I could do, one comes to a beautiful wooded and very quiet valley. The first thing one sees is a statue of the Virgin Mary, 200 metres up on a wooded hill, her hands stretched in perpetual benediction over the valley; then a medieval turreted chateau which stands out in the bottom of the valley. There is a high wall around the chateau and the only sound is the slight rustle of grass being cropped by three cows put to pasture in a field outside the wall. This is, however, no chateau, but the Charterhouse of Nonenque, where thirteen nuns, their prioress, vicar, an assistant and a few donated sisters (sisters who did not take public vows) live in total seclusion. Before 1789 two Benedictine monks who discovered Nonenque as a resting-place during the course of a voyage, described it as "a magnificent monastery in a frightful solitude in the heart of the mountains" (Bourgeois, 1997: 5).¹

The Chartreuse du Précieux Sang (Charterhouse of the precious blood), Nonenque, has only existed as a Carthusian nunnery since 1929. It was, however, founded as a Cistercian abbey for nuns between 1139 and 1146 and consecrated in 1232. It is situated in the commune of Marnhagues-Latour, towards the middle of the valley of Annou. A stream of water which comes from the foot of the high cliffs of Larzac, to the west, runs through the valley. The ancient abbey

is built on the right hand bank of the stream. Behind it tower the high hills to the north. The statue of the Virgin on the Rock is on the high hill behind the abbey, on a rock which juts out from the top. (Figure 1)

The abbey faces a large forest on the left bank of the stream. The situation of the building is ideally suited to the Carthusian way of life. The Carthusians lead a solitary, contemplative existence. The life of a Carthusian is almost that of a hermit. It is a mixture of the eremitic and communal life. Carthusian monks each live alone in his own cell. They do not talk to each other except during the recreation (of about one and a half hours) on Sundays and feast days, and during the communal weekly walk (about three or four hours). There are each day about eight hours which are dedicated to prayers and to religious exercises. Only the conventual Mass, Matins, Lauds and Vespers are sung together each day. On Sundays they sing together the entire Office of the day except Prime and Compline which are always prayed in the cell. They eat together only at noon on Sundays and feast-days. Meat is always forbidden, while milk products are forbidden on all Fridays and on all days in Advent and in Lent.

The lifestyle of the nuns differs somewhat from that of the monks in that it is less strict, and this is reflected in the architecture. Until about 1975 they had in their houses none of the specific elements that characterize the charterhouses of the men. Most significantly, they do not live in separate little houses, like the monks do. (See, however, p. 11) They live a communal life like the other orders (Gaillard, 2005). (Figure 2)



Figure 1
A nineteenth-century picture of the Abbey of Nonenque, with an arrow indicating the rock on which the statue of the Virgin now stands.
(Source: Ginette Bourgeois, 1997:27)

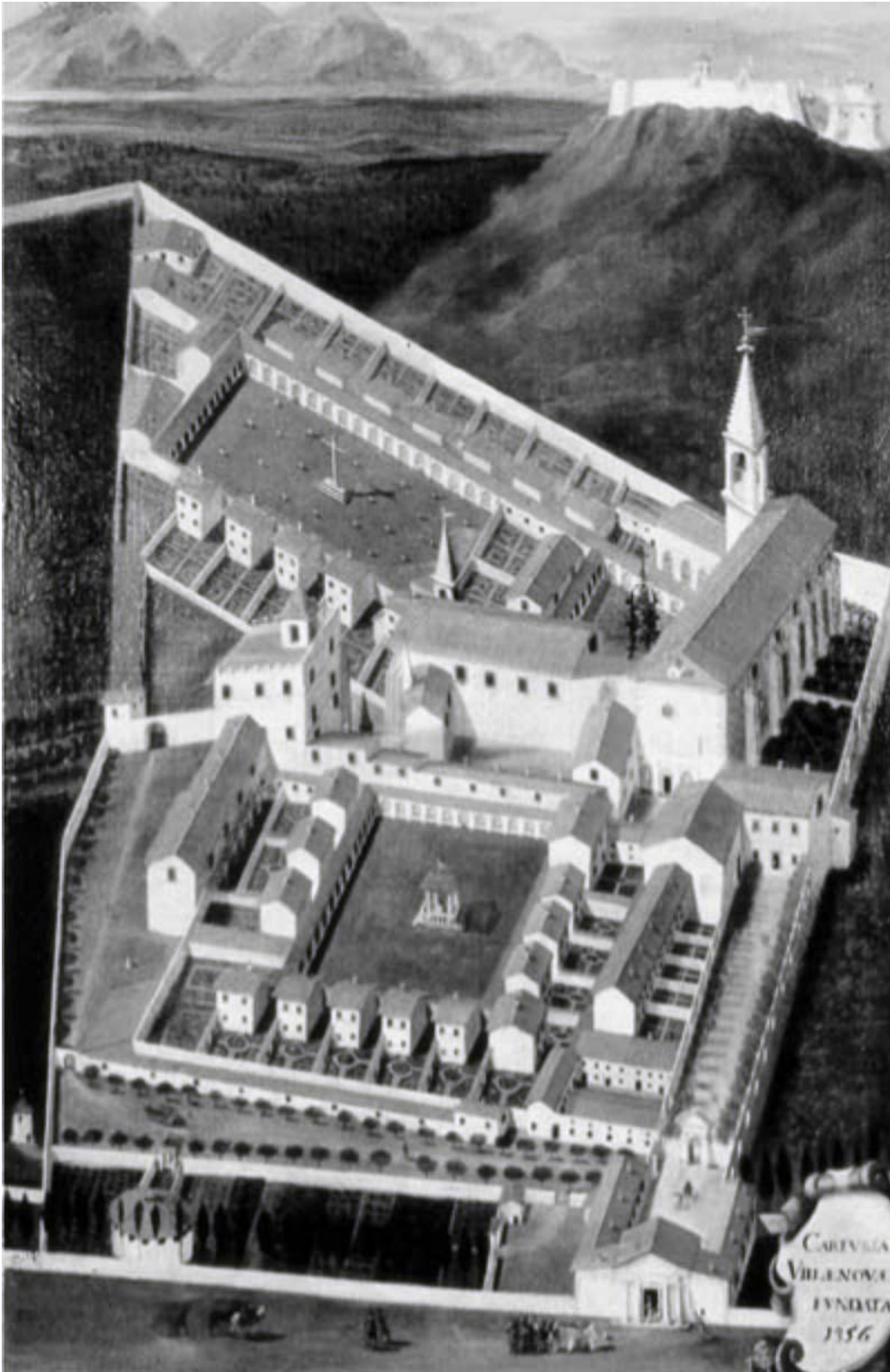


Figure 2
An example of the little houses of the Carthusians: the Charterhouse of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon. (Source: Girard and Le Blévec, 1986: 93)

History of the Abbey of Nonenque

The abbey of Nonenque is one of the least known ancient Cistercian abbeys for nuns. Disfigured by the religious wars, dismembered by the revolution, sold by lot in 1792 to 1794 as a “national property”, the buildings were bought by the Carthusians in 1927, were adapted to Carthusian use and has since been a charterhouse for nuns (Bourgeois, 1973: 139).

In 1139 Déodat de Montagnol, who had a chateau on the bank of the river Sorgues, near the present Nonenque, gave to the young Cistercian monastery of Sylvanès the valley of Annou and its surroundings, as well as other property, including a horse, its saddle and its bridle. The donation did not have a precise clause stipulating the use thereof, which was rare for those times; the monks could use it as they wished. The abbot of the time, Guiraud, immediately set about founding a feminine convent. In 1146 the nunnery of Nonenque must already have been in existence, because it received from another source additional land near Marnhagues. Local recruitment took place in all classes of society; the families, including noble families, were proud to have daughters professed at the priory of Nonenque. The abbey of Sylvanès functioned as consultant and teacher to the new establishment. By 1190 Nonenque was in possession of the entire valley, and occupied the plateau which was dominated by the hills.

The nuns were initially poorly installed in huts. At the end of 1169 they approached a master of works for the construction of buildings in durable material, particularly a church, a cloister² enclosing the abbatial chapter, a chapter hall, a scriptorium, a refectory and other utility rooms. At the first stage two wings framed the sanctuary, the dormitories of the professed nuns and of the donated sisters. They were protected by a surrounding wall. On the ground floor, a passage gave access to the land which encircled the nunnery (Bourgeois, 1997: 7; Couderc et Rigal, n.d.: 49).

The observance of the Cistercian rule was strict: silence was compulsory; the offices of the day and of the night alternated with study and the meditation of the lives of the saints or the writings of the founding fathers. All the nuns attended Mass together; in the beginning, in the bare church, there was nothing to distract the praying. The nuns took a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience (Bourgeois, 1997: 9).

In 1232 the reputation of the nunnery and the growing number of nuns were such that the priory became an abbey, officially affiliated with the Cistercian order. Towards the end of the thirteenth century the kings of France started to penetrate the Mediterranean regions, the better to consolidate their sovereignty. In 1294 Philippe le Bel (King of France, 1268 - 1314) took the monastery under his protection. This resulted in material prosperity until the Hundred Years War (the struggle between England and France, from 1337 to 1453). The four towers on the corners of the abbey were erected in the 15th century.

Little by little the Reformation spread to the valley of the Sorgues and many of the surrounding villages converted to Protestantism. When Nonenque became a shelter for those who did not go along with the new ideas the abbey was pillaged and burnt.

Even after the Edict of Nantes in 1598 there was no peace because guerilla warfare and resulting insecurity continued until 1630. The nuns inhabited the nunnery, but it was difficult, since the buildings were damaged and the enclosure gutted, affording them no proper isolation. They had no money, until the general Chapter of Cîteaux itself undertook to have the most urgent work done. The vicar-general of Cîteaux, Gaston de Poutz, ordered the rebuilding of the church, the dormitory, the refectory, the cloister and the ramparts of the enclosure, in order that the nuns

might be able to live in the abbey according to the rules of their vocation. By 1650 the designated rooms had not been completely rebuilt, but provision was also made for a chamber for guests and an infirmary and, most important, a clock to measure the hours of the offices, and a bell to call the nuns to prayer. A place where the families of the nuns could stay when they came visiting was also provided for. Three of the four wings of the abbey were rebuilt. There were 23 nuns at the time.

In 1725 a new abbess, Charlotte d'Estaing, undertook the reconstruction of the church. Of noble proportions, it was surmounted by an elegant cupola, with open-work at its base. The abbey was also endowed with an organ -- now at the Grand Séminaire of Rodez -- and they received at last a bell necessary for the offices. The rhythm of the monastic life was recovered. The nuns no longer slept in a dormitory, but in individual cells. There were sixteen cells on the first floor, as many on the second, and, at the side, the lodgings for the servants.

During the 17th and 18th centuries entry to Nonenque was almost exclusively reserved for daughters of the nobility. The abbess belonged sometimes to the high nobility. And she lived "nobly". Before the arrival of the Carthusian nuns one could still see, at Nonenque, the spacious apartment of the abbess, furnished and decorated according to 18th century fashion, and with a superb inlaid floor. The nuns each occupied a large room (Couderc et Rigal, n.d.: 50). (These rooms were easily adapted for the Carthusian nuns in the 20th century, affording them the silence and solitude they required).

Then came the revolution. The nationalisation of the property of the Church was promulgated on 2 November 1789 and 16 April 1790. The buildings of Nonenque were put on auction on 3 June 1791, including the thousands of hectares of land belonging to the abbey. They were bought by Louis Liquier, a prominent merchant from Marseille, for close to a million livres. Of Protestant stock, his family had businesses in Paris, Millau and the lower Languedoc. A generous man, he offered to leave the possession of Nonenque to those of the occupants who wished to continue the conventual life, but the nuns departed at the end of 1792 (Bourgeois, 1997: 26; Couderc et Rigal, n.d.: 50).

The property remained in the possession of the family Liquier for more than a century through three generations. It was then divided by inheritance, and passed to the family of Fabrèques from whom it was acquired by the Building Society of Nonenque. That was the prelude to a spiritual renaissance. The buildings were bought by the Carthusians in 1927 (Serrou and Vals, 1984:206). After a period of restoring the conventual buildings and layout according to the specifications of the Carthusian order, the Charterhouse of the Precious Blood was founded in July 1929, and is still there today. There were then 20 nuns and a prioress, who was placed under the authority of the Grande Chartreuse (at Voiron, in the Alps of Dauphiné). The disposition of the Cistercian abbey was completely convenient for the Carthusian nuns. Only a few changes were necessary. The work consisted mainly of building a porter's lodge and a hostelry for visitors. The chapter was installed in the old vault of the abbesses, adjoining the church. Some sites were found for various domestic buildings or workshops (Gaillard, 2005).

When towards the middle of the 20th century the desire for increased solitude developed among Carthusian nuns, Nonenque did not find further changes necessary. The old Cistercian cells were still very convenient, with some minimal modification. The large cells were sufficiently isolated to stop noise. (Figure 3). The cells are arranged according to Carthusian custom, each with a prie-Dieu. Each nun has at her disposal one of the small gardens disseminated around the building in the enclosed park (Gaillard, 2005).

Therefore, in the beginning of the 21st century, the nuns of Nonenque are satisfied with the state of affairs. They do not want to live in the small houses, similar to those of the monks, which had been built in other communities since the middle of the 20th century (Gaillard, 2005).

When I visited the abbey of Nonenque in July 2004, there were fourteen nuns (two Argentinian, two Spanish, one English, two Portuguese, one Dutch and six French), four novices and two postulants.

Description of the nunnery³

Numbers in brackets refer to the three floor-plans (figures 4, 5 and 6). Like all Cistercian and Carthusian monasteries, Nonenque was (and is) composed of two connected but distinct parts: the convent reserved for the nuns who have taken their vows and the convent where the donated sisters and even donated brothers live and are active. Only some religious visitors have access to the convent, for instance, the bishop of the diocese on the occasion of a nun taking the veil. The convent is preceded by a western part which gives access to the farm and artisan premises, the domain of the donated sisters and brothers.



Figure 3
Part of a cell at Nonenque. (Photo: La Carterie, Amélie les Bains)



Figure 4

Ground plan of the Charterhouse of Nonenque. (Source: Ginette Bourgeois, 1997: 19)

Behind the entrance, one can reach the lodge of the porter (6)⁴ and a stable (5) through a fore-court. Another small court gives access to a stable for horses (4) and the infirmary (3). The workshop of the farrier (9) has disappeared. Agricultural machines are now kept in the hay-lofts. Facing a large portal, a small door opens on a large court of 20m. long by 10m. wide, bordered on the north by 10 small lodges (10). The horse-stables (4), empty now, with chambers above them, are to the west and north of the convent. A wall separates the large court to the south from the kitchen-garden. The access to the convent is situated to the west in the middle of a façade consisting of a ground floor plus two upper floors.

The convent is in the shape of a rectangle of 31m. by 26m. on the ground-level, and a side-view of 9m. by 10m. in height, 9m. for the roofs of the façades, 10m. for the four towers on the corners of the building, 3,50m. for the roofs of the towers measured obliquely. The ground-floor consists of: to the right of the vestibule, the kitchens of the nuns (11) and their refectory (12¹), then the refectory of the donated sisters (12²) and their kitchens (11). To the west one finds the bakery,

the wood-house and the laundry (13, 14) and to the north the store-rooms and the wine-cellar (15). All these large rooms are vaulted. They date from the 12th century.

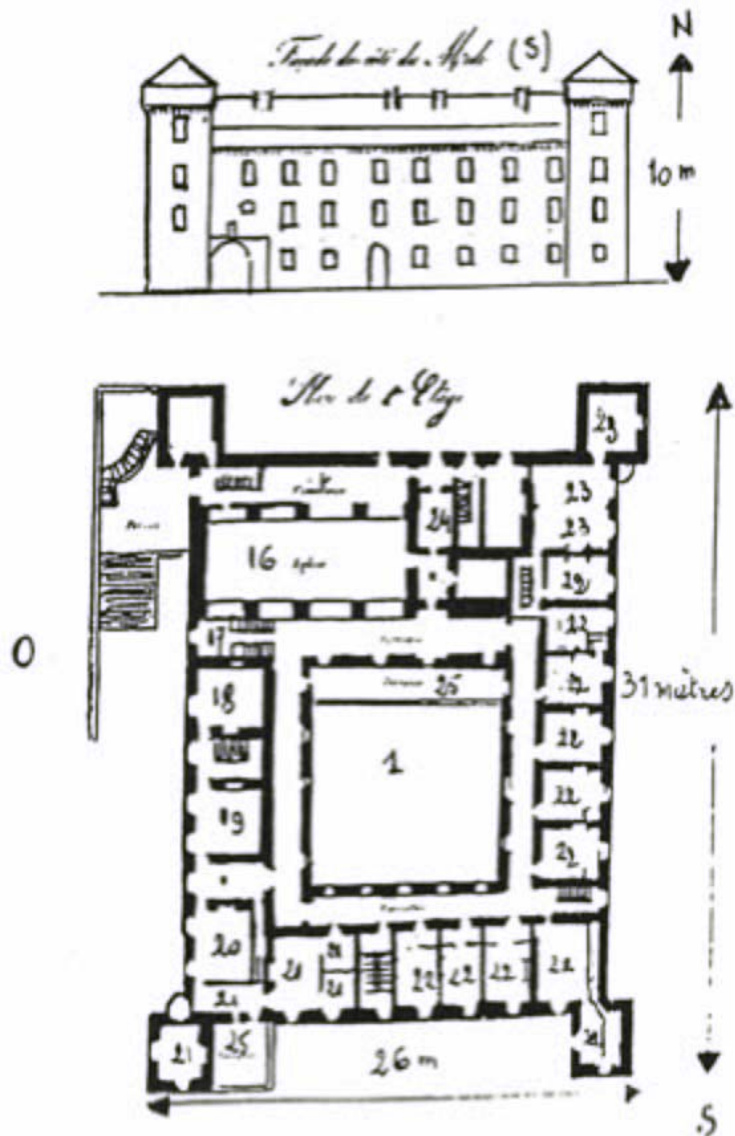


Figure 5
The first floor. (Source: Ginette Bourgeois, 1997: 20)

A cloister of 1,50m. wide is separated on one side from a square courtyard of 8m. The cloister has semi-circular arches separated by pillars. It is probably original because the columns resemble those which exist in Sylvanès. They were not replaced at the restoration of the 17th century. A fountain occupies the middle of the courtyard.

* On the first floor (Figure 5), on both sides of the landing, one finds the parlour and a waiting-room (18, 19). In the south-east corner are the apartments of the abbess (20, 21). To the south and the east are the cells of the nuns (22). The north-eastern corner is empty (23). To the north is the room of the organist (24), empty now, the chapel (16) and the sacristy (17), connected by a fairly large corridor. A terrace overhangs the gallery to the north of the ground floor (25).

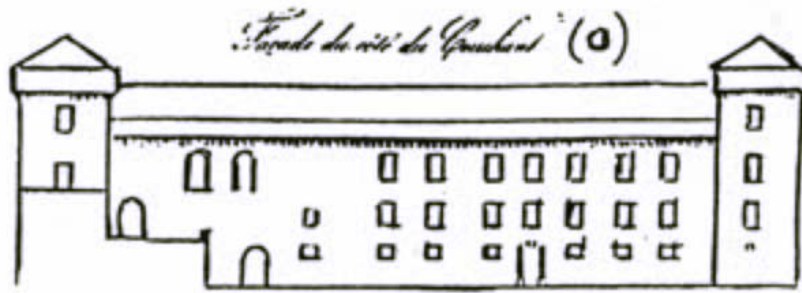


Figure 6
The second floor. (Source: Ginette Bourgeois, 1997: 21)

* The second floor (Figure 6) contains, apart from the church, fifteen cells for nuns (22), and rooms for visitors, abbots, or bishops.

To the south and east of the convent are a kitchen garden and the verger's room. The convent is separated from a road which runs along the Anjou by a wall of about 2,50m. in height. A double portal forms a screen to allow vehicles to enter and leave, without the drivers having to see the nuns who receive the merchandise of whatever nature necessary to the life of the community. Another precaution of the same kind is the square apertures containing turntables at various places in the walls which allow a nun to receive or hand over a small item to someone outside the wall without being seen. A tunnel connects the nunnery to the river and passes under the road to give access to a fishpond, safe from indiscreet eyes. At the south-western extremity of the convent, an arched bridge leads to the ancient washing-house where formerly the donated sisters could talk to one another.

Adaptation of the Cistercian abbey for the Carthusian order

As mentioned, the disposition of the Cistercian abbey was perfectly convenient for the Carthusian nuns. Charterhouses for nuns did not have a characteristic plan like the charterhouses for men. The nuns had a communal life which was much more important than that of the monks, with communal meals and daily recreation. The only medieval charterhouse for women which remains today (that of Gosnay) differs only slightly from the Benedictine abbeys in that the dormitory is divided into individual cells. A cloister of normal dimensions connects the buildings; the domestic quarters are pushed into the wings without any fixed plan (Devaux, 1998:1,44).

There are similarities between the Cistercian and Carthusian orders and their architecture and it has happened in more instances that a former Cistercian abbey had been taken over by the Carthusians. That there had been contact between the Carthusians and the Cistercians through the ages is proved by the fact that in 1452-54 reciprocal prayers were agreed upon between the charterhouses of Frankfurt and Stettin, and soon afterwards with the Cistercians of Neuzelle (Schlegel and Hogg, 2004: 767). The charterhouse of Sierck was founded in the former Cistercian nunnery of Marienfloss in 1415. The charterhouse for the nuns of Gard (Somme) was a Cistercian abbey occupied firstly by the Trappists and then by an orphanage: the Carthusian community therefore found the buildings well adapted to monastic use, and it was sufficient to divide the dormitories into cells (Devaux, 1998: 1, 317). In 1967 a colony of nuns who professed in San Francisco were installed at Bonifaça (Castellón de la Plana), an ancient Cistercian abbey (Devaux, 1998: 317). There the buildings were restored and the cells put in order: two with an adjoining garden (Gaillard, 2005).

Acquiring a monastery from another order was and is nothing unusual for the Carthusians. Acquiring a nunnery is less common, but only because there are so few Carthusian nunneries. There are today only five charterhouses for nuns and 75 nuns in total. They are all in France, Italy and Spain. Throughout the history of the order, there had been much fewer nuns than monks. There are today nineteen charterhouses for monks, with a total of 370 monks.

Instances of foundations acquired from other orders are the following: the charterhouse of Ittingen was originally a fortress, then an Augustinian foundation, which the Carthusians purchased in 1461; the charterhouse of Konradburg was originally Benedictine, incorporated into the Carthusian order in 1477; that of Crimmitschau was founded in 1478 as successor to a foundation of Augustinian canons; Koblenz was a former Benedictine Abbey transferred to Carthusian use in 1331; in 1431 the Benedictines offered the Abbey of St Sixtus at Rettel on the right hand bank of the river Mosel to the Carthusians; the Marshal Gerhard of Keppel donated his moated castle Weddern for a Carthusian foundation to pray for the souls of his family and the house was incorporated into the order in 1480 (Schlegel and Hogg, 2004: 681, 527, 532, 536, 682, 705).

When a convent was taken over from another order, it had to be adapted, although in the case of the nuns fewer changes were necessary than in the charterhouses for men. What was done at Nonenque in 1928 was to ensure that a room was available for each nun, with preferably an empty room next to it as a storeroom, so that the nun would have no noise from an occupied room next door. In the following years everything was arranged better: the empty room was also a wash and bathroom etc. The church and the refectory were arranged in the way the Carthusian nuns were used to (Van Dijck, 2005).

The house for nuns of La Bastide-Saint-Pierre near Montauban, which was built in 1854 on a site which had never been occupied by a monastic establishment, is an example of the construction of a charterhouse for nuns at the time, because that is the only one which was not

encumbered by pre-existing buildings. The plan which was adopted was that which is common to all the western monasteries: a church flanked by a cloister which surrounds the conventual rooms on the lower floor, the cells above that (Devaux, 1998: 316).

The Carthusian nuns were not really “tempted” by the solitude until the middle of the 20th century. Towards 1975, the houses for nuns began to adapt their observance according to a more severe line of solitude: eating in the cell, less frequent recreations. The General Chapter authorized the nuns who desired to do so, to have a prolonged experience of effective solitude in the cell. Some cells with an adjoining garden were built in the park of Beauregard and in that of Riva. When the monks abandoned the charterhouse of Vedana, several nuns occupied the cells.

When the order constructed new houses for nuns in the 20th century, the traditional plan of the masculine houses was adopted: this happened in 1978 when Beauregard was transported to Reillanne (Alpes-de-haute-Provence) under the name of the Chartreuse Notre-Dame, and in 1996, when San Francisco was taken to Dego, in the valley of the Appennines. Both houses are innovative in that they are constructed exactly according to the model of the charterhouses for monks, with individual little houses united by a large cloister (Devaux, 1998:330).

In the charterhouses for men, when an abbey of any other order was taken over by the Carthusians, extensive adaptations were necessary to render the buildings suitable for Carthusian life. An instance is the Charterhouse of Regensburg/Prull. The Carthusians moved in on 22 June 1481. A fundamental reconstruction of the Benedictine abbey was undertaken. This meant that most of the Benedictine building which had been erected at considerable expense, was demolished in order to accommodate the charterhouse. In 1489 the large cloister was built in which were situated fourteen small houses each with its garden; the cells of the monks. Each house was separated from its neighbour by a three meter high wall, so that no connection was possible with the neighbouring cell or with the world outside. A new wall was also built through which the monks could move from the cloister to the church without being seen. At Portes (Ain), acquired in 1856, and at Vauclaire (Dordogne), two years later, the state of the conventual buildings also necessitated the construction of a large cloister and cells (Devaux, 1998: 315).

The Carthusian houses, which are different from the cells of the other orders, are usually the main reconstruction. In Koblenz, for instance, the Carthusians could take over the cloister and other parts from their predecessors, the Benedictines. Reconstruction could be confined to the typical Carthusian living quarters. Rich citizens facilitated the conversion of the existing building for Carthusian use by financing the construction of a cell and providing a dotation for its occupant. The same thing happened at Konradsburg, Crimmitschau and Rettel (Schlegel and Hogg, 2004: 563, 425, 432, 623). Existing abbeys could with relative ease be adapted to Carthusian needs. The same was not possible, however, when a castle or fortress was donated to the Carthusians. The moated castle donated to the Carthusians by Marshal Gerhard of Keppel in 1480 could not be used. The charterhouse was erected around the castle (Schlegel and Hogg, 2004: 645). William IV, Duke of Juliers, together with his first wife Elizabeth, founded the charterhouse of Vogelsang on their property near Juliers in 1478. The incorporation in the order followed in 1480, but the Carthusians erected new buildings, adjacent to the ducal residence, in the following years (Schlegel and Hogg, 2004: 653).

Carthusian architecture

Conspicuously little had been written about the medieval architecture of the Carthusians, which is the more surprising when we compare it with the extensive literature that exists about the architecture of the other order which arose at the same time, the Cistercians. Not even the large works about European architecture mentions the architecture of the Carthusians. Only a few authors have until now touched this special section of the monastic architecture (Zadnikar, 1983: 58 and 59).

The first attempt to approach the architecture of the Carthusians and their specific problems seriously, was the study of the architect Otto Völckers from München. The author analyses all aspects of the elements which contributed to the organization of the functional disposition of a charterhouse. In the introduction to his study he says that the Carthusians embodied their lifestyle in their architecture. Because the model of the Carthusian lifestyle has its home in the East, one has to look there for examples of the structural organization of their abbeys. The point of departure is the Laura, a narrow street of small houses, found in monasteries where monks live as hermits and anchorites. The word “Laura” is therefore also used for a monastery. The Laura is different from a monastery in which a communal life is led, however. The residents of the Laura lead the life of a hermit, in that each one lives in his own little hut or cell (Völckers, 1921: 313).

The Carthusians combined the Eastern Laura with the coenobium of the western convent structure in a completely new type of building. In a charterhouse the large cloister with the separate cells for the monks on the outer side is reminiscent of the Eastern Laura. Here the church had lost its central place and has been moved to the side. From the convent type developed by the Benedictine monks, the small cloister which adjoins the church and some communal rooms, had been preserved. The adoption of the Eastern elements was therefore the logical result of the specific way of life which this type of convent structure expressed best. The peculiar characteristic of the new type of Carthusian monastery was the large cloister which connected the separate cells. By this the charterhouses preserved their characteristic appearance (Völckers, 1921: 314). (Figure 7)



Figure 7

The large cloister of the Charterhouse of Naples. (Source: J.Hogg, 1978. *The Charterhouses of Naples and Capri*. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg: 2, 47)

In contrast to the Eastern the Western monasticism developed in a completely different direction. Although in the West pure contemplation and solitude had been preferred, in the year 500 there came a distinct change. Benedict of Nursia, the father of the Western monasticism, reformed it thoroughly and especially in the sense that pure contemplation was no longer the most important aspect, but religion and labour in the sense of the famous maxim “Ora et labora”, pray and work. This meant a widespread departure from the Eastern principles which also found

its expression in the architecture of the orders. Instead of the Laura with the adjoining single hermitages around the periphery, the principle of communal life of all the inmates of the convent with communal sleeping and dining quarters originated. The Laura, established reputedly by the Holy Basilus, the father of the Eastern orders, in the fourth century, was replaced in architecture by the Benedictine coenobium, where it became a model for the medieval convent architecture of the European West, especially the Benedictine monasticism with its later reformed branches of Gorze and the Cistercian orders. The center of the coenobitic⁵ convent is the claustrium, the cloister, around which the communal rooms are arranged such as the church, the chapter, the refectory, the communal bedrooms etc. The domestic buildings, where the lay brothers lived, were situated outside the enclosure (Zadnikar, 1983: 69).

The Carthusians established a new architectural type, the charterhouse, which differed completely from the Laura as well as from the coenobitic convent, being a kind of synthesis of both. In a charterhouse two different forms of Christian monastic life are united: the Eastern anchoritic and the Western coenobitic. The personal solitude in which the Carthusian lives in his cell, and also the collective separation from the world have elements of real eremiticism. The Carthusian is no real hermit, however, since he lives in a convent community and is cared for in what he needs for his daily sustenance (Zadnikar, 1983: 69).

The Carthusians had no architectural school of their own. The Carthusian monasteries are not subject to rules like the constructions of other orders. Charterhouses are established in solitary valleys in forests, (e.g. Bonpas, Grünau and Christgarten), as well as on mountaintops (e.g. Pierre-Châtel, Tüchelhausen), in towns (e.g. Astheim) and near to cities (e.g. Mainz and Würzburg), where they were often drawn inside when the cities expanded (e.g. Erfurt, Nürnberg). The novelty which the Carthusians introduced was that they combined many cells into a unity and that thereby an entirely new type of monastery came into existence: the charterhouse (Zadnikar, 1983: 62). Dimier remarked that the Carthusians, in their architecture, always adapted to the customs of the country, provided that the principle of extreme simplicity was not relinquished (Dimier, 1964: 101).

The resources of the residents of each house did not permit the Carthusians to construct the edifices by themselves. That is why the charterhouses were regarded as part of the local or regional architectural schools, which are of an infinite diversity. This diversity was influenced by the nature of the terrain, the course of the water and the state of pre-existing buildings, where present. These architectonic details are revealed in the systems of the arches, the form of the steeples, the elevation of the cloister and the facades, the role of the fortifications and the development of the domestic buildings (Devaux, 1998: 333). The builders also followed the customs of the time. That is the reason why many 18th century charterhouses look more like castles than ascetically conceived abbeys. The splendour of the Baroque was in contrast to the simplicity and humility of the order and the silence of the monks (Goder, 2000: 61).

The plan of the charterhouse is completely different from that of the other orders. Cistercian convents, for instance, follow, according to the Benedictine tradition, a repetitive layout of regular rooms. The charterhouse, however, constantly adapts itself to its surroundings, through a variety of solutions and free forms in separately composed plans. The overall plan shows two separated convents, of which the “upper” has two cloisters, the large cloister with the cells for the monks, and the small cloister with the church and the communal rooms around it, and the “lower” convent where the domestic buildings can be found. These characteristics follow from the strictness of the order. The architectural singularities are not merely a whim, but have functional reasons. The charterhouse, as a type of convent, is a mirror of the way of life of the Carthusians and results from the requirements of the residents (Zadnikar, 1983: 51 and 52).

The church and small cloister can be found already in the oldest charterhouses, since they

were adopted from the Benedictine abbeys. The large cloister, with the single cells next to one another and these connected again in a particular way with the church and the other communal rooms was, however, a completely new element. The cells were already present in the first French charterhouses. In difficult climactic circumstances, as in the Grande Chartreuse, in the French Alps near Grenoble, France, where they had to reckon with large snowfalls, one finds an enclosed passage, which -- particularly during the night -- makes protected access to the church possible. The large cloister secludes the monks from the world and the cells are attached to this cloister. The cells for the monks are the most important aspect of the charterhouse. Living in peace and solitude in the cloister cell is the most important task for each Carthusian monk (Zadnikar, 1983: 54).

The existence of the two cloisters constitutes the main characteristic of a monastery of the order. The small Carthusian cloister is among the smallest cloisters which have ever been built, in contrast to the large cloister, which is the largest. The large Carthusian cloisters are immense corridors of perspective which are often very beautiful (Devaux, 1998: 88).

Parkminster, in England, which has 36 cells, possesses the largest cloister in the world, 250m. obliquely. The architect was concerned more with the beautiful perspective than by the inconvenience which meant that 1 km had to be travelled to serve a meal or go to the choir. The large cloister of the Grande Chartreuse is of a similar length, but at least it is provided with transverse passages (Devaux, 1998: 318).

The interior wall of the large cloister is regularly pierced by the doors of the cells of the monks and by *guichets* (spy-holes) destined for the receiving of food. In the larger convents the doors are very spacious and constitutes a decorative element of the cloister (Devaux 1998: 99). (See figure 7).

These norms do not apply to charterhouses for nuns. They have only one cloister like the small Benedictine monasteries, since the charterhouses for nuns almost never have the small separate houses as cells. It should be noted that the charterhouses for nuns are generally small. Mélan (Haute Savoy) in spite of its late date of 1530 measures only 23 m. by 17 m. (Devaux, 1998: 80); the upper convent of Nonenque measures 31 m. by 26 m. on the ground level.

The indication "cell", which today characterizes a narrow, dark and bleak room, sounds disparaging and gives no real picture of the good and comfortable accommodation of the Carthusians, in which they spend their lives. The cell of a Carthusian is a small house with a little garden in front, tended by the monk himself. It is planned in such a way that the quarters are demarcated by the large cloister, the opposite outer wall and the side of the neighbouring cells. All rooms are thereby sheltered from the outer world and also from the neighbouring cells. The built up area is considerably smaller than the small garden, making provision for sufficient physical recreation for the monk (Devaux, 1998: 79).

According to Serrou and Vals the Carthusian cell complies with Le Corbusier's idea of an apartment which contains all that is necessary to live (1984: 77). Almost all the time of a monk is passed in the cell where they have all the furniture necessary to limit to the maximum the necessity of going out (Devaux, 1998: 11). Like the outside, the inside of the houses is also a distinguishing feature and has remained the same through the ages. The hermitage of the Carthusians is organised in such a way that everyone is out of reach of everyone else and nobody needs to be seen. Even the small garden that is attached to each cell is surrounded by a high wall. The house has a ground floor consisting of two rooms: a wood-house and a workshop. The monk warms up his food, cleaves and saws wood kept in the woodhouse even today. In the workshop is a bench to do joiner's work and turn wood. The first floor also has two rooms. In the first is a statue of the Virgin Mary and a small bench. At the side as an alcove for the bed. In the corner is a bureau where he can study and an iron stove which he can light if he is very cold. There is also

a chest for wood, a chair, and a small oratory where he says the part of the office which is not chanted in church. The Carthusian eats on a board in front of the window, while he reads (Serrou and Vals, 1984: 79). In the garden the monk can cultivate what he wants, flowers, fruit or vegetables. It is possible during the hours of meditation to walk there or sit on the stone bench and recite the rosary. In total, the habitation is spacious. (Figure 8)



Figure 8

Part of a typical Carthusian cell. (Source: J. Picard, 1986. *La Grande Chartreuse, et les Chartreuses de Portes, Sélignac, et Pierre Chatel*. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, Universität Salzburg: 145.)

The small cloister does not have such an important role in the charterhouse as in a Benedictine or Cistercian convent, where it is the center of the entire structure. In the charterhouse it only connects those rooms which are not used daily. In the small cloister one finds apart from the church also the other coenobitic rooms: the refectory with the kitchen, the chapter hall and library (Zadnikar, 1983: 54 and 78).

The Carthusian churches are usually very small: those of Vallon and d'Oujon are the largest with measurements of 25 m. by 8 m. That is already large for thirteen monks and a dozen lay brothers, the latter of which come to the upper house almost only for Sundays and feast days. All the churches have only one nave, without lower sides, transept, or gallery, but some of them end in a shallow apse, while others have a polygonal apse. This is in complete contrast with the Cistercian tradition where most churches have three naves and a length of more than 40 metres (Devaux, 1998: 20, 51, 55).

The Carthusian order was the first monastic order to renounce the basilican plan and to be content with the “imaginative hall building” of the later mendicant type of convent church. In the interior of the church there had to be enough room for the high altar as well as for two separate spaces for the priest monks and the lay brothers. They are divided by a screen. Only the priests have access to the altar space. In this way the long inner space of the church originated, consecutively from east to west: altar space, monk’s choir⁶, choir barrier, laymen’s choir. The

church is therefore rectangular. In the eastern part of the church, in the monk's choir, are the choir stalls with at least 10 stalls on each side along the sidewalls. Between the benches and the raised altar space there has to remain enough room to allow the celebrant and the assistants entry to the church through their own door. The choir of the lay brothers to the west is not significantly smaller, since all the lay brothers congregate there in their own choir chairs, when they take part in the church service and the communal prayers. The narrow, rectangular space of the church is always vaulted with different forms of vaults, but not with domes, which were not consistent with the long rectangular space. Usually vaults reaching to the floor are used (Zadnikar, 1983: 73). The absence of lateral naves in the Carthusian churches requires the use of supports to hold up the vaults (Devaux, 1998: 46). Because the choir screen divided the church in two sections, two entrances were required at the sides (Zadnikar, 1983: 62).

The hall churches of the Carthusians reminded one of the similarly conceived church space of the earlier buildings of Cistercian nuns (Zadnikar, 1983: 62). This explains why it was easy to adapt the church of Nonenque to Carthusian use. The plans of the Carthusian churches are therefore characteristic: only one nave, division of the two choirs by a screen, rectangular shape.

Devaux pointed out the extreme simplicity of the inner spaces of Carthusian churches. This simplicity is the expression of the strict spirit of the order. Like the customs of Cîteaux, the Carthusian customs of which Guigues was the editor, was conceived in the 12th century in a large measure in a reaction against the forms of the contemporary monastic life and the Clunisian spirituality of "lux pour Dieu" (luxury for God) (Devaux, 1998: 334). The architecture and the accompanying stonemasonry are confined, according to the ascetic nature of the order, to what is necessary and renounce all wealth. The walls are bare and not painted, the vaults are simply defined, end stones and vault ends are not figurative, but decorated with geometric patterns. Often there are no buttresses, which are possible only with thick walls. Devaux points out the different possibilities of curves except for domes (Devaux, 1998: 22). The Carthusians, like Cluny and the Cistercians, have no crypts or richly decorated tombs in their churches (Zadnikar, 1983: 77). The Carthusians also do not know monumental facades which do not correspond with the real plan of the church (Devaux, 1998: 24).

Another Cistercian infiltration is that of the bells of Carthusian churches. The Carthusian liturgy requires the frequent ringing of bells but most of the charterhouses have only wooden belfries to support their bells. In the southern provinces of France, the churches have stone belfries of a completely different type. They are small square towers built at first on the top of the borders of the sanctuary. One sees that at La Verne (Var), Bonpas (Vaucluse) and Rodez (Devaux, 1998: 68) where Nonenque is situated. Since the Carthusian churches were not accessible to the public, apart from the guests in the hostelry, and there was no service for the parish, independent towers with large bells were unnecessary (Zadnikar, 1983: 76).

Carthusian churches never had an organ, since the Carthusians used no instrumental accompaniment for their choir singing and remained faithful to the monophonic Gregorian chant as ordered by the General Chapter of 1326 (Zadnikar, 1983: 77).

In the middle of the lawn area one finds the convent cemetery with a wooden cross, so that the monks, when they leave their cells, could see their future place of rest. The single grave is indicated only by an anonymous wooden cross although occasionally there might be a stone cross for a remarkable prior (Zadnikar, 1983: 56; Devaux, 1998: 97).

In the "lower house" (see p.14) the lay brothers also have their own chambers, so that here also, there is no communal living or sleeping quarters. These cells are smaller than the cells of the monks, but like those they are arranged around a central courtyard and connected with each other by a covered passage. The "domus inferior" also includes an infirmary for seriously ill choir monks as well as a guesthouse for guests, who have no entry to the "upper convent" and who are

received by the father procurator. A number of domestic buildings are also to be found in the lower convent. The Carthusian “domus inferior” is like other characteristics already mentioned, a unique phenomenon in monastic architecture (Zadnikar, 1983: 56, 81).

Apart from prayer and meditation the copying of manuscripts was the main occupation of the medieval monks. Even where a charterhouse was poor, it possessed a rich library (Zadnikar, 1983: 78). Today, still, charterhouses have large libraries. Even a small charterhouse like Nonenque has a well-stocked library with a workroom for binding books.

The charterhouse was fenced in from the beginning to ensure solitude. In the early houses there was only a pole fence, later a high ring wall, which was at times fortified with defensive towers (Zadnikar, 1983: 79). After the provisional accommodation of the monks and a makeshift chapel, the surrounding wall was erected, to screen the Carthusians from the outside world; only then were the separate cells and the domestic buildings built and lastly the church of the monastery. That explains why often many decades pass from the establishment of a convent until the dedication of the church (Völckers, 1921: 314).

Carthusian art, in particular works of art at Nonenque.

The most important works of art at Nonenque are probably the choir stalls and chairs in the church made by Gabriel Cadalbenc.



Figure 9
The choirstalls by Cadalbenc at Nonenque. (Photo: La Carterie, Amélie les Bains)

On 14 April 1676 the abbess at the time of the Cistercian nunnery of Nonenque, Anne-Suzanne de Simiane de Gordes, called in Cadalbenc, a well-known master-woodcarver of the region and instructed him to make a choir for the church of the monastery, a chair for the abbess, three high chairs and nine low ones, and wooden panelling for the walls to match (Lançon, 1995: 719). Gabriel Cadalbenc qualified as a “sculptor of Vabres” in 1660. He was commissioned for various jobs during the following years, for example, in 1688 by the confraternity of the Guardian

Angel to elaborate the retable⁷ which decorated one of the chapels of the nave. The last mention of him in the archives was in 1724 in a list of polltax: “Cadalbenc, sculptor, died miserably in hospital” (Lançon, 1995: 719).



Figure 10
The Virgin on the Rock. See Figure 1 for the position of the statue. (Photo: La Carterie, Amélie les Bains)

The choir comprised forty-four stalls, not including the chair of the abbess. The parties agreed on the sum of 1,350 livres. The artist had to furnish the material, oak and walnut, and was allowed two years for the work (Lançon, 1995: 719). Cadalbenc’s work can still be seen in the church of Nonenque. (Figure 9)

Next in importance, and most conspicuous, is the “Virgin on the Rock”. (Figure 10) This was sculptured and installed on the rock in the 20th century. The name of the sculptor is not known, but according to Dom Bernard, the vicar of Nonenque, he was a Carthusian (Gaillard, 2005). (Carthusian artists and writers generally choose to remain anonymous and to be known only as “a Carthusian”.)

The large crucifixion sculpture above the altar in the church showing the Virgin Mary and St John gazing up at Christ on the Cross, is also anonymous, but might have originated under

Cistercian rule. The stained glass in the three lancet⁸ windows behind this sculpture are obviously Carthusian. It has a simple heraldic design with fleur-de-lys and the Carthusian symbol “orbs et crux” on the top.

Only two charterhouses played a large part in the history of art: Champmol near Dijon because of the tomb of Claus Sluter, Pavia because of the entire facade of its church (Devaux, 1998: 336).

Conclusion

It is therefore clear that we can correctly speak of a unique architecture of the Carthusians. The charterhouses kept their unchanging characteristics in all the countries of Europe, which consisted of the strict functionality of their buildings and the expression of the way of life of the order.

Nonenque remained a Cistercian building with only slight adaptations to have it conform to the Carthusian way of life. This was possible because the Cistercians influenced the Carthusian architecture in several ways, and there are similarities between the Cistercian rule and that of the Carthusians, particularly in their predilection for simplicity. Adapting to a Cistercian abbey was also less difficult for Carthusian nuns than it would have been for monks.

Notes

- 1 Quoted by Ginette Bourgeois, 1997:5. Ginette Bourgeois, a native of the southern Aveyron, has published widely about the region and did most of her research locally. She cites as a source Abbé A. de Grimaldi, *Les Bénéfices du Diocèse de Rodez avant la Révolution de 1789*, but gives no publication date or place.
- 2 In this article the word “cloister” will be used for “a covered arcade” while the word “convent” will be used for a monastery or a nunnery.
- 3 Plans are derived from Bourgeois, 1997: 19-21.
- 4 This number and following numbers refer to figure 4.
- 5 A religious community distinct from anchorites or hermits.
- 6 The word “choir” here indicates the part of the church separated from the nave.
- 7 A shelf behind the altar for the display of lights, vases of flowers etc.
- 8 The Cistercian order was particularly fond of lancet windows. It is therefore possible that only the glass was changed.

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