

# *h-france review*

Volume 8

2008

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (January 2008), No. 5

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. No republication or distribution will be permitted without permission.

ISSN 1553-9172

*H-France Review* Vol. 8 (January 2008), No. 5

**James Hogg, Ed.**, *Exposition de nos statuts: Commentaire de la Chartreuse de Villeneuve-lès Avignon, vers 1767: Archives de la Grande Chartreuse ms. 1 Com. 50*. *Analecta Cartusiana* 99:36. Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 2006. xxxviii + 416pp. Notes, facsimiles, and index. (pb). ISBN 3-900033-45-5.

Review by Adam J. Davis, Denison University.

---

In 1084, when St. Bruno of Cologne established the Chartreuse at a remote site, high in the Dauphiné Alps above Grenoble, he created a distinctive monastic foundation, one that combined elements of the eremitic (solitary) and cenobitic (communal) forms of monastic life. Unlike the purely cenobitic monastic orders of the time (such as the Cluniacs and Cistercians), which were far more popular, the Carthusians — a word that derives from the Old French *chartreuse* — lived ascetic lives largely in solitude and silence, with each monk sleeping, eating, working, and praying in his own cell. At certain times of the day and week, however, the monks joined together for prayer, a silent meal, and common recreation. The Carthusians tried to have as little contact with secular society as possible, and in the early decades of the order, most of the charterhouses were located in remote locations. A significant number of the charterhouses in the later Middle Ages, however, were founded by bishops, members of the nobility, and royalty, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, intellectuals and churchmen showed a keen interest in the Carthusians' writings, libraries, and printing presses. Despite its influence, the Carthusian Order was never large. At its peak, on the eve of the Reformation, the order had only about two hundred houses in all of Europe with about a dozen choir monks and roughly the same number of lay brothers in each house.

From the start, the Carthusians had no written rule, and were instead governed by legislation compiled during the annual chapters of the conventual priors, the prior of the Grande Chartreuse being the general of the order. The first set of written customs ("consuetudines") was drawn up c. 1127 by Guido, the fifth prior of the order, and approved by Pope Innocent II in 1133. Updated compilations of statutes were made in 1259 ("Statuta Antiqua"), 1368 ("Statuta Nova"), and 1509 ("Tertia Compilatio").[1]

The volume under review is an edition of a French commentary on the statutes made at the charterhouse of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon around 1767 (confusingly, in his introduction, the editor suggests that the commentary was written from 1768-72, thereby somewhat contradicting his own title) (p. xi). The commentary, found in a 565-page manuscript that has never before been published, was likely written by Xavier de Lane, who at the time was vicar of Villeneuve, in charge of novices and recently professed monks. It was to these novices that the commentary was addressed. Dealing with just about every aspect of monastic life, from liturgy and governance, to diet, dress, and travel, the commentary provides a potentially valuable window into Carthusian spirituality and lived experience on the eve of the

French Revolution, revealing how novices were trained, the kinds of questions they asked, and more generally, how Carthusians dealt with their own tradition.

Founded in the context of the eleventh-century movement for monastic reform, the Carthusians have always been proud of their motto, "never reformed because never deformed." The Carthusian historian, Innocent Le Masson, who in 1687 wrote the first real commentary on the statutes, claimed that any alleged "changes" made to the original twelfth-century statutes "have been like a change of clothing, which adds nothing and takes nothing from the substance of the body." [2] Even the 1908 entry for the Carthusians in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* suggested somewhat defensively that modern Carthusians had only become more (not less) strict in their liturgy and ascetic practices, and "the only mitigation of importance introduced since Guigo's day is the decrease of the fast on bread and water from thrice to once a weekly." [3] Yet if the order had truly remained unchanged since its eleventh-century founding, why was there a need for new compilations of Carthusian statutes and successive commentaries on these statutes? And what do these supplements, glosses, and modifications to the legislation (or to use Le Masson's metaphor, "new clothing") reflect about the way that the Carthusians, despite their best efforts, were shaped by the larger society in which they lived? How did the Carthusians reconcile their religious values and traditions with evolving social reality and practice?

Some of the raw material for answering these questions can be found in the Villeneuve commentary and in the large number of other Carthusian texts published in the *Analecta Cartusiana*. During the last forty years, no one has done more to promote the study of Carthusian history and spirituality than James Hogg, the editor of this volume and, until his retirement, a professor at the University of Salzburg. In 1970, Hogg founded the *Analecta Cartusiana*, a series on Carthusian studies that has included proceedings of international conferences, monographs and essay collections, and edited texts. Under Hogg's direction, the *Analecta Cartusiana* has appeared in over three hundred volumes, with many volumes containing dozens of separately bound parts. An astonishing number of these volumes, including the one under review (99:36), have been edited by Hogg himself (in the case of this volume, edited with the help of Alain Girard).

Although the Villeneuve commentary's organization corresponds to the statutes, its discursive nature contrasts with the brevity and simplicity of Guigo's *Consuetudines*, written some 650 years earlier. With its frequent references to people and events particular to the Villeneuve charterhouse, it is difficult to imagine that the commentary was meant to be used outside this one charterhouse. In the chapter on how to chant and psalm, the commentary lists Latin (and Hebrew) words that are "difficult to know," and for each word, indicates which syllable(s) should be stressed. The commentary instructs novices to pronounce words like "deservio" with a soft "s," whereas words like "designo" with a hard "s" (pp. 42-48). Many of the issues addressed by the commentary seem to anticipate (or possibly repeat) everyday questions that novices posed. Framed around a series of questions, the commentary almost resembles the "four questions" of a Passover *haggadah*, asking: "Why do we do this?" "What does that symbolize?" "Is it preferable that we do this or do that?" Commenting on the Latin phrase, "corporalis exercitatio," the commentator suggests that nothing contributes more to the monks' health than exercise and manual labor, and he later adds that their current superior regarded exercise as so important that he did not think it should be interrupted even if one of the monks was dying. The commentary also explains the kinds of illness that excused the sick monk from divine offices.

Historians who use legal sources often confront the problem of determining whether laws can be assumed to reflect lived experience. At the very least, however, a commentary on earlier statutes, such as the Villeneuve text, makes it possible to compare commentaries and statutes from different periods, and thus assess changing ideals and expectations about Carthusian life. It is worth noting, for example, that whereas the commentary devotes a great deal of attention to the subjects of confession, communion, and property, it says remarkably little about solitude and silence, despite calling silence "notre devoir principal" (p. 288). The Villeneuve commentary can be combed for clues about the extent to which there was uniformity (or variation) among different charterhouses in the mid-eighteenth century. How did the commentary position itself in relation to earlier statutes and commentaries, particularly given the author's claim that the statutes came from God, the supreme legislator? In what ways did the commentary function as a kind of history of the Carthusian Order, as Innocent Le Masson's earlier commentary did? In what ways did the Villeneuve commentary reflect an attempt to liberalize, adapt, or harden monastic practices?

Disappointingly, none of these questions is addressed in the introduction to this edition. In his introduction, Hogg acknowledges that the Villeneuve commentary exerted little, if any, real influence outside this particular charterhouse. Yet Hogg then makes no attempt to justify publishing this dense and technical text, perhaps assuming that it will only be read by the tiniest circle of Carthusian savants. If, however, Hogg had provided some context, analysis, and discussion of critical questions surrounding the commentary in his introduction (all of which Hogg is well equipped to do), it would have made this material far more accessible for those interested in the history of monasticism and provided a valuable framework for future studies of the Villeneuve charterhouse and the evolution of Carthusian observance more generally. Given that there is no recent general history of the Carthusian Order, there is a particular need to contextualize and frame Carthusian texts such as this one. The edition appears to have been put together with care, and includes several indices, facsimiles of manuscript pages, and footnotes with descriptions of marginal notes and corrections in the manuscript. This edition will primarily appeal to specialists in the history of the Carthusian Order.

---

## NOTES

[1] A facsimile of a Basel manuscript from 1510 containing the "Consuetudines Guigonis," the "Statuta Antiqua," and the "Statuta Nova" was published in 1989 by James Hogg in *Analecta Cartusiana* 99: 1-2. For Guigo's *Consuetudines*, see also *Coutumes de Chartreuse*, Sources Chrétiennes 313 (Paris: Cerf, 1984).

[2] *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed., s.v. "Carthusian."

[3] *Ibid.*

Adam J. Davis  
Denison University  
[davisaj@denison.edu](mailto:davisaj@denison.edu)