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The Charterhouse of Roermond and its Urban Setting and Development

Introduction

The charterhouse of Roermond is the only remaining charterhouse within the borders of the current Netherlands. Of all nine Carthusian monasteries that were founded on Dutch territory, only the Roermond charterhouse survived the Reformation. The other charterhouses were suppressed and demolished during the sixteenth century. At that time the Roermond charterhouse belonged to the southern (catholic) part of Netherlands and it remained a charterhouse until 1783, when it was suppressed by the Austrian Emperor Joseph II. Afterwards, the monastery buildings have always been attached to a religious function: they were the second home of the Norbertine nuns of St. Gerlach, were in use as a priest seminary and lately have been office buildings of the diocese of Roermond.

Nowadays the charterhouse is situated in the historic city centre of Roermond. It is not well visible, because it is surrounded by more recent buildings. Still a lot of the former charterhouse buildings remain, like the church, chapter house, refectory, cloisters and former kitchen building.

Location of the charterhouse

The charterhouse of Roermond is situated in the north east of the historic centre of Roermond in a rather large building block between the Swalmerstraat, Bethlehemstraat, Voogdijstraat and Steegstraat. The oldest part of the historic centre is situated in the north east, close to the point where the Roer river joins the Meuse. After Roermond received city rights in the first half of the thirteenth century, the city expanded first in southern and then in eastern direction.¹

The northwest quarter of the historic centre is supposed to have been added to the city in the course of the first three quarters of the fourteenth century.² In 1370 a local gentleman called Werner van Swalmen had returned home from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In honour of his safe return, he founded a small chapel and a hospital. The chapel was situated at the corner of the Swalmerstraat and Bethlehemstraat, dedicated to the H. Virgin of Bethlehem. It had an odd, pentagonal ground plan. At one side was the entrance and at the other four sides were apses. In each apse an altar was placed, dedicated to various saints and the Holy Virgin. It is not clear where the hospital was positioned. A logical place would be along the Swalmerstraat, where

travellers could easily enter the building.

In the following years, Werner van Swalmen came into contact with the Carthusians of Cologne, who had plans to found a charterhouse in Roermond, at the time an important city in the duchy of Gelre. Van Swalmen donated the chapel, hospital and adjacent building plot to the Carthusians. In return they would maintain the chapel and take care of the services. The foundation letter of the monastery of 1376 mentions a house and a gate building, owned by Werner van Swalmen, that would be divided from the monastery grounds by a wall.

Recent archaeological research along the Bethlehemstraat and Voogdijstraat shows that at the time of the foundation of the charterhouse, the building block was already partially filled with houses.³ The Carthusians therefore had to adjust the ground plan of the monastery to the available building plot. To the west of the later cloister the foundations of an early fourteenth century structure of some significance were found. The outer wall of the monks' cells on that side is very close to this structure. The ground plan of the cloisters is not a straight square or rectangle, but is slightly bent towards the east, as if it is taking into account the already existing structure at the west side.

Ground plan of the charterhouse

Recent building historical and archaeological research⁴ gave more detailed information on the first ground plan of the Roermond charterhouse at the end of the fourteenth century. It appears that the ground plan hasn't drastically changed afterwards, only the appearance of the buildings was altered in later times and some additions have been made. In the current complex, though no longer complete, there still are fourteenth century cellars underneath the former kitchen building and refectory. Also the outer walls of the cloisters, refectory and chapterhouse are still partly dating from the fourteenth century.

A drawing of the ground plan of the complex, made after its dissolution in 1784, gives a good overview of the charterhouse in its 'final' form, that must have been quite similar to the original layout. It shows that the complex consisted of three zones. First there was the more public area, close to the Swalmerstraat. Here were the entrance buildings, lay brothers' quarters, guest quarters (possibly combined with the hospital),



Fig. 1 - The church and cloisters of the charterhouse of Roermond. B. Dukers.



Fig. 2 - The cloisters (renovated 1750). B. Dukers.



Fig. 3 - Stone vault of the chapter house (1556). B. Dukers.

and functional buildings like stables, brewery, bakery and kitchen for the lay brothers. At the northwest corner was the Bethlehem chapel. These buildings surrounded an inner court, that had to be crossed to enter the semi-private area of the charterhouse. This area consisted of buildings that could only be entered by the monks and special guests. Here were the cells of the procurator and the prior, whom both could receive guests, and a group of other buildings that were used by the monastic community, like the kitchen, the refectory, chapterhouse, library and church. In Roermond they are aligned east to west, which is rather unique. This plan might be the result of the limited space within the building plot. Even when the church was enlarged around 1500, the linear alignment was maintained. The last zone of the complex is a private zone, only accessible by the monks. It includes the *galilea* (great cloister) and the monks' cells. All cells consist of a small house and a garden, surrounded by a garden wall. Archaeological research shows that in the course of the fifteenth century the original number of thirteen cells was enlarged by building new cells at the south west corner.

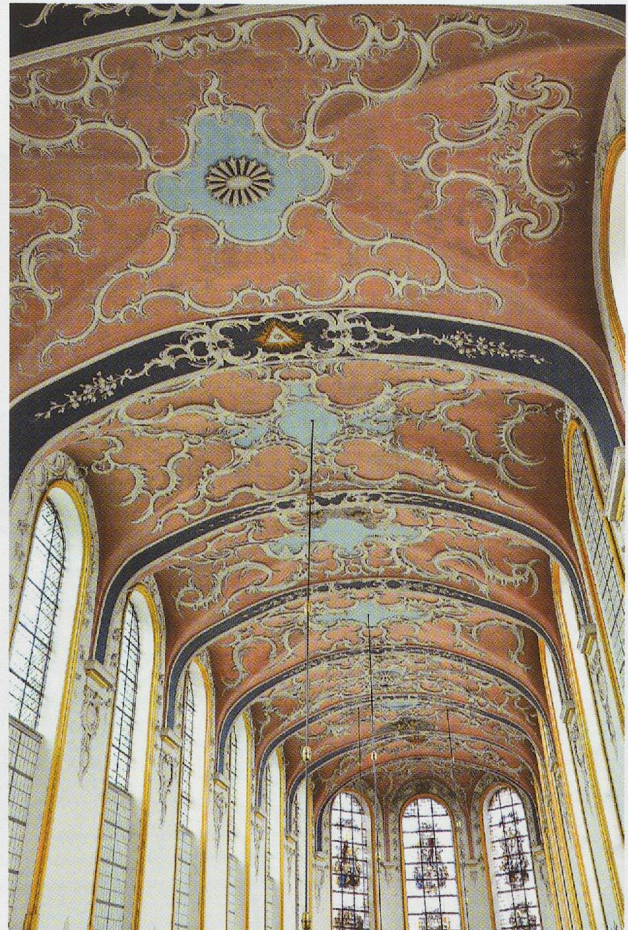


Fig. 4 - Stucco vaults of the church (ca.1750). B. Dukers.

The relationship between the charterhouse and its neighbours

Even though the Carthusian monk lives in solitude and silence, there is one moment a week when he is allowed to talk, namely during the *spatiamentum*. The monks take a walk of several hours to exchange ideas and also get the necessary exercise that they can't get within the limits of their cells. For this walk, a rather large natural area or garden is necessary. In 1411 the Carthusians of Roermond got permission to make a garden at the northeast side of their territory, close to the church and the (eastern) monks' cells.⁵ In a charter of 1474 the prior of the charterhouse asks permission to enter the 'new' garden, once the wall around it is finished.⁶ The document does not precise in what direction the old garden is enlarged.

The charterhouse was damaged by city fires in 1554 and 1665 (Fig. 5 and 6). Also some neighbouring houses at the Voogdijstraat are damaged or burned down. Archival documents show that in the course of time the Carthusians bought most plots along the Voogdijstraat, destroyed the buildings and added the plots their garden, so that by the end of the seventeenth century their cloister garden completely enclosed the *claustrum maior* and the monks' cells. The garden had a

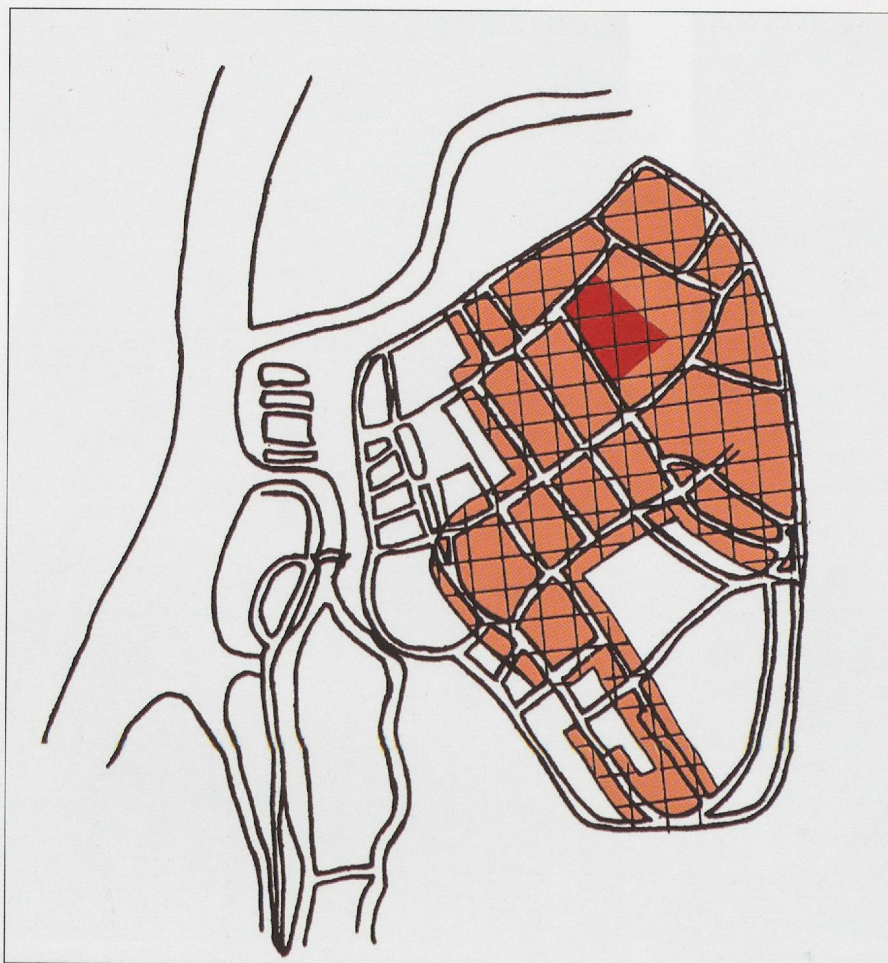


Fig. 5 - City plan of Roermond and extent of the city fire of 1554 (the charterhouse in red).

J.G.C. Venner/B.Dukers.

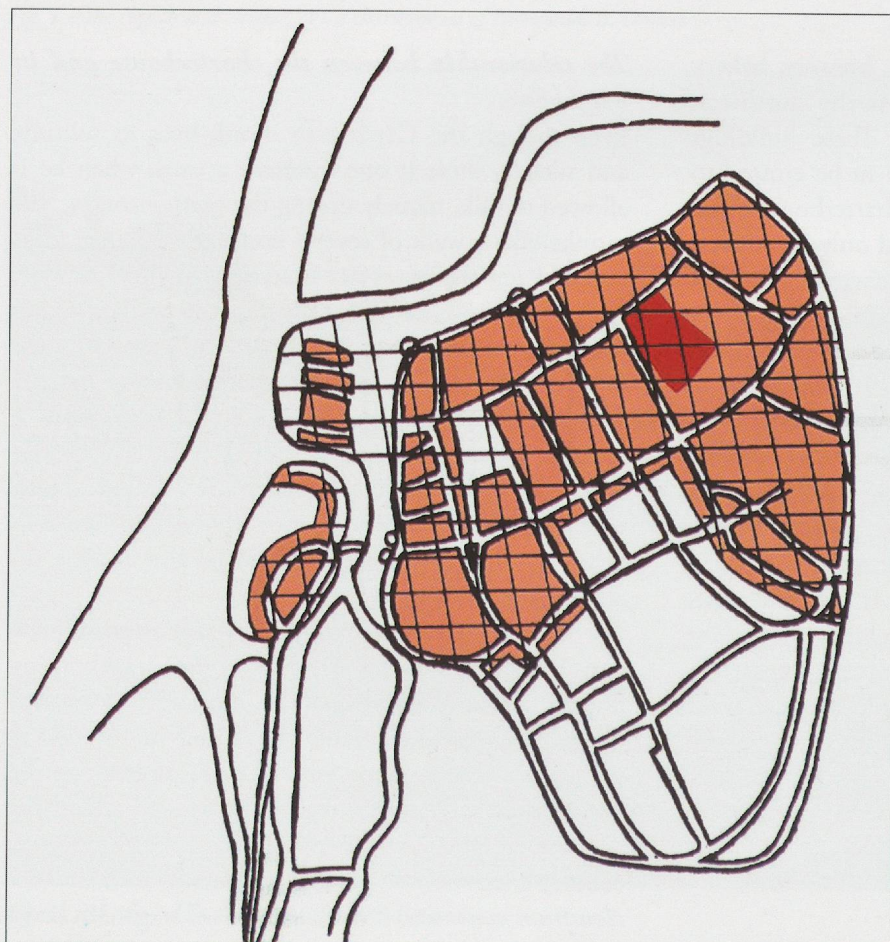


Fig. 6 - City plan of Roermond and extent of the city fire of 1665 (the charterhouse in red).

J.G.C. Venner/B.Dukers.

high garden wall, to provide privacy to the community. Two seventeenth century charters show that the monks were not afraid to defend their seclusion. In 1618 there is a dispute with the nunnery of Godswaerd, that was situated close to the charterhouse. Some of the buildings of the nunnery had roof windows, that gave a view on the *claustrum maior* and monks' cells of the charterhouse. The monks protested and the nuns had to close the windows, but were financially compensated.⁷ However, in 1698 there was another dispute between

both neighbouring monasteries. This time the garden wall between the nunnery and the charterhouse was not high enough and the nuns were summoned to heighten their part of the wall, so there was no view into the charterhouse grounds.⁸

After the dissolution

The charterhouse of Roermond was dissolved in 1783 by the Austrian emperor Joseph II. An inventory made by the *Caisse de la Religion* gives a detailed overview

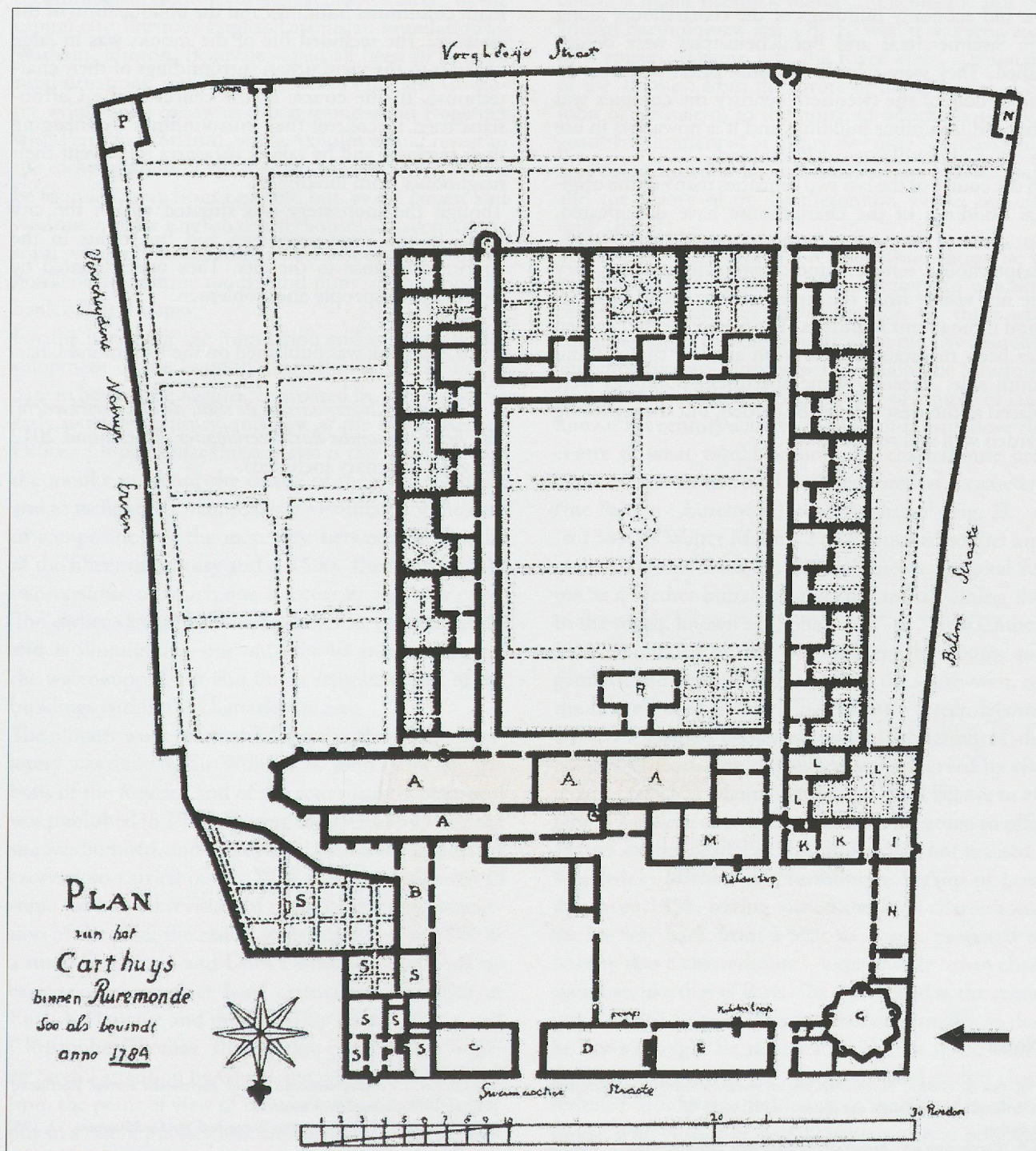


Fig. 7 - Copy of a groundplan of the charterhouse, made after the suppression in 1784. The letters refer to the following buildings: A church, chapterhouse and refectory - B coach house - C stables - D brewery and kitchen - E guesthouse - F sacristy - G Bethlehem chapel - H lay brothers' quarters - I parlour - K cell of the procurator - L cell of the prior - M monks' kitchen - N orangerie - P barn Gemeentearchief Roermond.

of the buildings, their ground plan, inhabitants and furniture. The ground plan (Fig. 7) shows that the territory of the charterhouse had been enlarged as to two third of the building block. Soon after the dissolution all the monks' cells and the Bethlehem chapel were demolished. In 1786 the Norbertine nuns of St. Gerlach moved into the remaining buildings. When the French arrived in Roermond in 1798, they were forced to leave the monastery, but the nuns bought their property back and remained until 1841. The complex was then transformed into a priest seminary. In 1923 many of the old economy buildings of the charterhouse along the Swalmerstraat and Bethlehemstraat were demolished. They were rebuild to house priest students. In the middle of the twentieth century the complex was changed into office buildings and it is nowadays in use as office of the diocese of Roermond.

In the course of the last two centuries many of the original buildings of the charterhouse have disappeared, but some of the most important ones like the church, chapterhouse, refectory and cloisters still remain. They are not visible from the street, as they are hidden behind more recent buildings. The former cloister garden has been maintained as a green area on the east and south side. Recently some apartment buildings were placed at the west side of the garden, but the enclosing garden wall still remains.

Conclusion

The charterhouse of Roermond has been a part of the urban tissue of the city since the late fourteenth century. It was built within the city walls, like its mother convent of Cologne.

This location was determined by the building plot that Werner van Swalmen donated, but no doubt also the security of the city walls played a part in it. Built on a limited plot along the Swalmerstraat, the ground plan and organisation of the complex had to be adjusted to the situation, hence the linear composition of the main communal buildings and the oblique form of the cloisters. The secluded life of the monks was in large contrast to the vivid urban surroundings of their charterhouse. In the course of the centuries the Carthusians tried to control their surroundings by enlarging their territory and by taking measures to prevent their neighbours from looking in.

Though the monastery was situated within the city walls, it had large properties and fish rights in the countryside close to the city. They were donated by wealthy townspeople and noblemen.

In 2012 a book was published on the Ruremond Charterhouse:

B. DUKERS, *Kluizenaars in de stad; de bouwgeschiedenis van het Roermondse kartuizerklooster*, Roermond 2012 (English summary included).

Notes

1 G. VAN DE GARDE, 'Stadsuitbreiding en stadsommuring in middeleeuws Roermond', in: *De Spiegel van Roermond* (02) p. 51-87

2 *Ibidem*.

3 J. WATTENBERGHE, *Archeologische opgraving Bethlehemstraat – Voogdijstraat Roermond*, SOB Research Heinenoord, 2009

4 J. WATTENBERGHE 2009 and B. DUKERS, *Bouwhistorisch onderzoek Kartuizerklooster Roermond*, Buro4 oktober 2009.

5 J. GIJZEN, *De bouwgeschiedenis van de Roermondse kartuis*, Roermond, 1957 en 1968 (unpublished research).

6 H. MOSMANS, 'De Kartuijers in Roermond' in: *De Maasgouw*, 52, 1932 p. 61-63.

7 RHCL Maastricht, 14.D049, 'klooster kartuizers Roermond', nr. 230, charter of 16 July 1618.

8 Idem, charter of 27 June 1698.