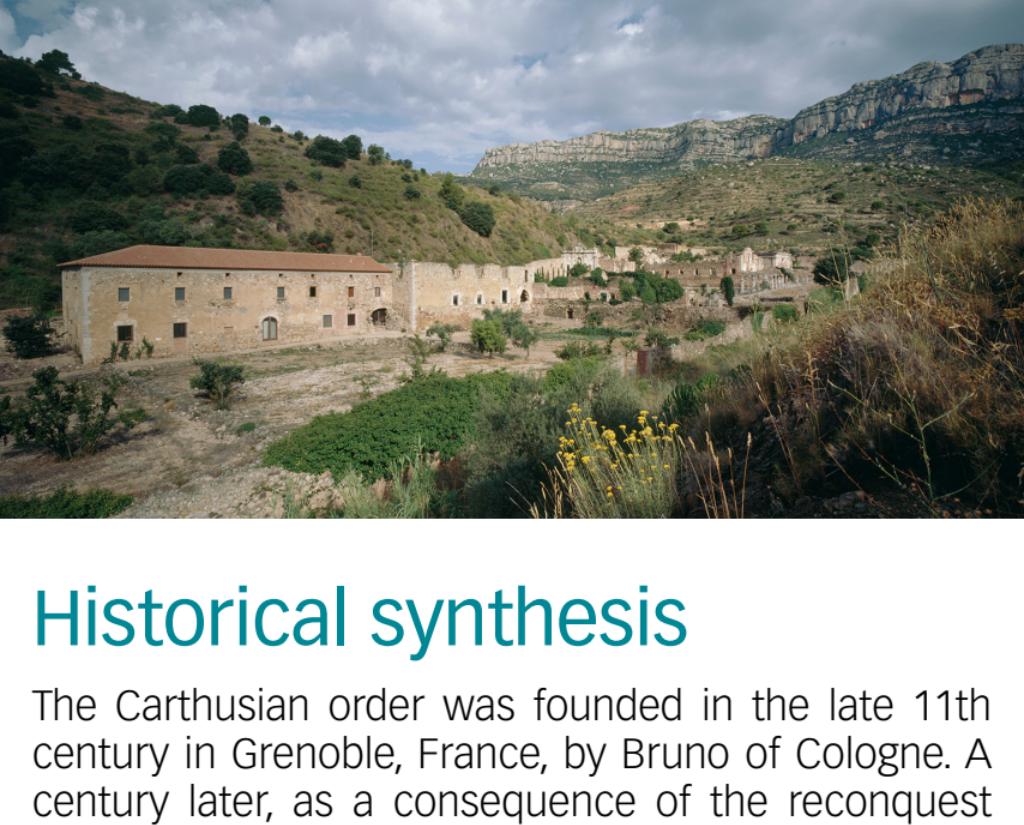


Carthusian Monastery of Santa Maria d'Escaladei

Visit





Historical synthesis

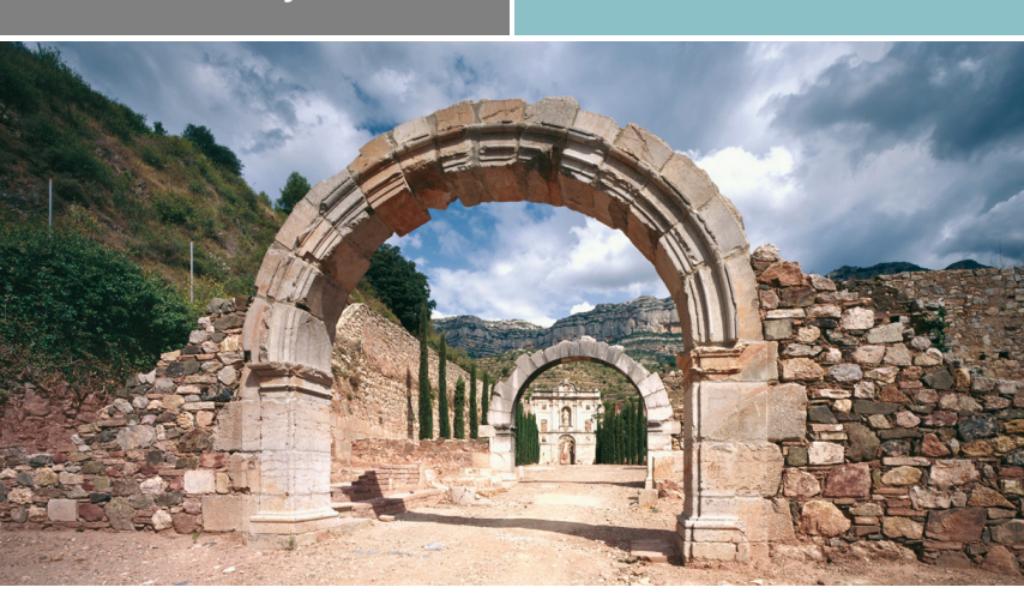
The Carthusian order was founded in the late 11th century in Grenoble, France, by Bruno of Cologne. A century later, as a consequence of the reconquest of New Catalonia from the Moors and the Catalan monarchs' need to repopulate the territory, the order came to the Iberian peninsula for the first time. In 1194, king Alfons I the Chaste founded the charterhouse of Escaladei, granting the monks a place where silence, solitude and nature combined to provide a setting that was ideal for the development of their charisma. The monastery's earliest buildings, dating from the period of transition between the Romanesque and Gothic styles, were the church of Santa Maria, finished in 1228; the first cloister, known as "Maius"; twelve cells around it; and the remaining basic monastery buildings such as the chapter house and refectory; the small cloister (known as Recordationis); some chapels; and outside the strictly claustral section, the service rooms.

In 1218, with the community well established, and with donations from king Jaume I the Conqueror, the charterhouse gradually acquired dominion and jurisdiction over the villages of La Morera, Gratalllops, Torroja, Porrera, Poboleda and Vilella Alta, thus bringing the Priorat region into existence. The same year, archbishop Espàrrec de la Barca donated the tithes and first fruits of the Priorat to the monastery of Escaladei.

The charterhouse's great prestige and the fact that it enjoyed royal protection enabled it to grow quickly. In 1333, thanks to the aid of prince Joan of Aragon, son of Jaume II, the second cloister was built, in the Gothic style, with another twelve cells, thus enabling the community to double in size. And in 1403, with donations from Berenguer Gallart, lord of Puigverd, the group of buildings was completed with the construction of a third cloister, in Florid Gothic style, with the last six cells.

However, the fact of having undergone a series of enlargements and the variety of styles that could be distinguished in the monastery led the community to decide to rebuild the entire complex. This rebuilding programme began in the 16th century and continued throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, giving the charterhouse a Baroque, neo-Classical appearance. Throughout this period, the Carthusians were a focus of the first magnitude for culture and art, and the charterhouse of Escaladei was an important artistic centre, notable being the Escaladei school of painting, represented by the Juncosas, amongst others.

In 1835, with the seizure of church property under Mendizábal, the Carthusians' land was confiscated and they had to leave the monastery. The following day, the monastery was sacked and, a few days later, burnt down. In just two years, the conventional buildings were almost entirely destroyed. The charterhouse's assets that survived the sacking were sold at public auction in 1843 and acquired by a group of proprietors. In 1980, after a long administrative process and almost a century and a half of abandonment and desolation, the group of Carthusian ruins was declared an Asset of National Interest. After the transfer of responsibility from the State to the Generalitat de Catalunya, the latter began a programme of clearance and consolidation. Finally, in 1989, the former proprietors donated the complex to the culture ministry of the Catalan government, which took over management, opened it for visits by the public and began restoration work.



The charterhouse

Mediaeval Carthusian monasteries, such as Escaladei, contained two separate zones, each suited to the life of those who occupied them: firstly, there was the Domus Superior, the main complex, the place where the monks lived and spiritual life went on; secondly, some way off, there was the Domus Inferior, which in this case is now the village of Escaladei, which included the constructions necessary for tilling the land and the other tasks that made the charterhouse self-sufficient (cellars, stores, stables, etc.). The organisation of the charterhouse was complemented by scattered structures (barns, mills, bake-houses, bridges, etc.) that sustained the economic life of the monastery.

Furthermore, three differentiated areas could be distinguished within the Domus Superior: the eremitic area (cloisters and cells); the conventional area (church, refectory, chapter house, Recordationis cloister and the chapels); and the service area (kitchen, pantry, hostel, gatehouse, etc.).

Carthusian monks devote themselves to prayer in solitude and silence. By vocation, they are hermits, loners, who live as a community. Under the vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and silence, led by the Father Prior, the Carthusians, however, devote themselves to God's service in different ways according to whether they entered the order as fathers or lay brothers.

A father, or chorister monk, is a priest, and in the charterhouse he lives isolated in his cell, devoted to prayer, reading, meditation, contemplation and manual work. He gathers with the other monks three times a day in the church for the divine office. Only on Sundays and feast days do they eat together in the refectory.

A lay brother, like the fathers, is a monk, but with different functions. He spends six hours a day on service tasks and manual work outside the cell. His job is the monastery's internal maintenance. Included within the lay brothers are the donati, who are Carthusians who have not taken vows. They are so called because they give themselves voluntarily to the charterhouse. They perform the same tasks as the other lay brothers, particularly those external to the monastery.

1



Entrance courtyard

16th–18th centuries

Large courtyard, possibly closed at one time by a defensive wall and by surrounding buildings devoted to services for the monastery and to providing attention for visitors and for those who had come seeking charity.

Plane

2



Services building

16th–18th centuries

This service building was a functional structure with a ground floor, first floor and attic. It was used as a store-house, stables and servants' quarters. The last door in the building connected the courtyard to the kitchen garden.

Plane

3



Chapel of Sant Bru

16th–18th centuries

A public chapel dedicated to Saint Bruno, the founder of the order. It accommodated all those who wished to hear mass. It was rebuilt and redecorated in 1721, and is not at present open for visits.

Plane

4



Hostel

16th–18th centuries

The hostel was a two-storey building. It provided shelter for anyone: shepherds, widows, travellers, members of the monks' families, etc. However, their stay could last only one day, since the next day someone else might need shelter. Only parts of its walls remain and it is not known how it was decorated, except that the floor was covered with tiles from Valencia.

Plane

5

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Gatehouse – Access to the enclosed area

17th century

This building was the reception point for visitors, and it controlled entry to the enclosed parts of the monastery. A large gateway of a simplified Tuscan order under a semi-circular arch led to a vestibule, on the left of which was the porter's lodge and the cell of the brother porter, in which the remains of a basin and a fireplace can still be seen; while on the right was access to the hostel.

The building had two floors and a ridged roof. Symbolically, it marked the entrance to the first enclosed area, the conventional section of the charterhouse. The only persons with access to this, apart from the monks themselves, were persons in the service of the charterhouse and those authorised by the Prior. Since Carthusians are a strictly enclosed order, women were not allowed to enter.

Plane



6



Ave Maria court

So called because, according to tradition, when the monks crossed it they said an Ave Maria in praise of Our Lady. It was closed on both sides by a high wall and it isolated the monks from the exterior, from everything alien to their strict observance.

[Plane](#)



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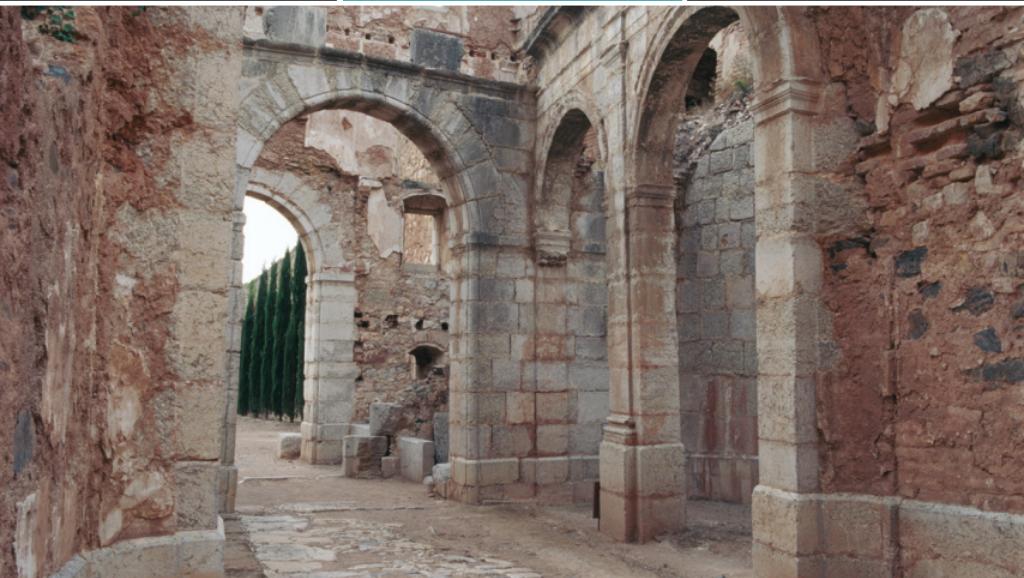


Santa María facade

17th century

This facade, as most of the architectural features have disappeared, is one of the charterhouse's most significant and characteristic features, lending it identity. Classical in style and with a symmetrical composition, it is defined by three axes framed by pilasters with Ionic capitals located on the first floor, which rest on the bare volume of the ground floor, which is the base of the composition. The central axis is marked by a large arched gateway, above which is a niche containing the figure of Our Lady of Escaladei, carved in alabaster by Antoni Náveros in 1599. A curvilinear pediment tops the facade, under which there is a shield with the Christogram JHS. That of Mary, crowned and borne up by angels, is over the access doorway.

Plane



8



Courtyard

16th century

Built in the closing years of the Renaissance. Around it were rooms used as offices. On the right are the remains of a staircase leading to the upper floor. On the left, on the ground floor, was the pharmacy, for which the monastery was particularly notable. Beyond the courtyard on the right was the lay brothers' building, of which a wall with windows and a Gothic arcade has survived.

[Plane](#)

9



Church square

16th–18th centuries

The nerve centre of the monastery, characterised by its ordered space.

On the left is a fountain, the cell of the Procurator (who helped the prior with administrative duties) and the prior's cell, which contained, in addition to the rooms usually found in the cells, a chapel, a room to receive visitors, access to the library and a corridor leading to the church.

On the right, a passage led to the "Minor" or Recordationis cloister, so called because the monks gathered here to remember the dead before burial. It was the core of the conventional section of the charterhouse and gave access to the church, the chapter house, the refectory, and some of the chapels, etc., currently closed to visitors pending restoration.

It was a small cloister, with a central fountain decorated with frescos showing scenes from Carthusian life.

Opposite the entrance to the square is the way into the second cloister: the eremitical area.

Plane

10



Church of Santa María

13th century

Started in 1203-1204 and finished in 1228, it is the only element of the original charterhouse whose structure has been preserved. Its single aisle is oriented east-west and is covered by a pointed barrel vault. There are remains of Gothic vault. There are remains of Gothic decoration, completely disfigured by that of the 17th century. The west end of the church, originally Romanesque, the voussoirs of the doorway and the mediaeval masonry were of reddish stone. In the 17th-century refurbishment, the doorway was reconstructed in marble in the Classical style, the facade of the west end was raised with a parapet and a large oval rose window was inserted. There were two sacristies. Like all Carthusian churches it had two choirs, one for the fathers and another for the lay brothers. Every day a monk would go to the church to pray in the morning, at conventional mass; in the afternoon, at vespers; and at night, from twelve o'clock to half-past one or three, to matins and lauds.

[Plane](#)

11



Large or “Maius” cloister

17th century

Originally built in the 13th century, it was surrounded by the first twelve cells. At that time it was smaller, but during the 17th-century rebuilding it was enlarged and decorated in the Classical style. As required by Saint Bruno's rule, the garth of the cloister contained a cemetery. A modern iron cross bears witness to this. The remains of the walls suggest the doorways of the cells. On the other side of the cloister, archaeological excavations have revealed what may be the remains of the original cells.

[Plane](#)

12 a

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Cloister

The cloister was the space around which the monks lived their eremitical lives. The galleries of this cloister (the cloister Maior) gave access to the twelve monks' cells. In style, the galleries were in the Tuscan order with arches supported by small pilasters or square columns which are inserted into an order of larger pilasters with entablature; they were closed by brickwork walls, with windows, and probably with an oculus above them. The gallery was covered with groin vaults separated from one another by arches springing from brackets.

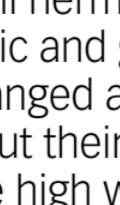
What you can now see is a faithful reconstruction, on the basis of the surviving remains, of one end of a gallery. The very austere decoration of this segment consists of the outlining of the edges with a black band.

Close to the doorway to the cell, to the right of it, there was a small opening in which the lay brothers would leave food and drink for the fathers. Its slanted shape avoided contact between the inside and the outside of the cell, thus ensuring complete solitude and silence for the monk.

[Plane](#)



12 b



Cell

The cells were the most fundamental and essential part of the charterhouse. Here the monks lived as hermits. The cells are in fact small hermitages, consisting of a ground floor with attic and giving onto a small garden. They were arranged around the cloister, one next to the other, but their intimacy and privacy were maintained by the high walls that separated them. They are rationally distributed in accordance with the use of each room. The cells at Escaladei consist of:

12.b.1 Entrance hallway

A small vestibule that separates the cell from the cloister, and which contains a small shelf where the father would leave notes if he needed anything.

12.b.2 The Ave Maria room

A large room, with a prie-dieu and an image of Our Lady. Its name refers to the Ave Maria the monk would pray each time he entered the cell or left it. The other rooms are arranged round it.

12.b.3 "Cubiculum"

With its fireplace, it is where the monk would sleep and eat. It contained a bed with wooden planks and posts and a straw mattress, and a cupboard in the wall whose door would fold down to serve as a table for eating. The hourglass and the skull symbolise human insignificance and the shortness of life.

12.b.4 Oratory-study

The monk would spend almost his whole day in this room, devoted to contemplative prayer and study. There is a writing-table, an armchair and an oratory consisting of a choir chair, a prie-dieu and a figure of Christ. The furnishing is completed by a small shelf for the two books which, according to the Carthusian rule, each monk was allowed to have in his cell.

12.b.5 Washing-place

An area equipped with a hand basin.

12.b.6 Porch

Small arcaded gallery, in a simplified Tuscan order. Under the vault there is a small cistern to supply the cell with the water needed to irrigate the garden and for the monk's needs, and at one side the stairs leading to the kitchen garden and the attic.

12.b.7 Garden

The garden has been restored with the arrangement and vegetation that would have been found in the charterhouse at the end of the 17th century: roses, irises, lilies, etc. From the garden, you can see the windows of the upper-floor, where there is an attic used as storage, to hang out clothing, as a lumber-room, and sometimes, as a place from which to look out.

12.b.8 Wood-store

A room for the storage of firewood.

12.b.9 Workshop

Area for manual work. In this case, the monk carved wood, but each monk might be devoted to something different: apothecary, dyer, potter, painter, etc.

Plane



The diagram shows a detailed floor plan of a monk's cell. The plan includes a central cloistered courtyard (b1) with an arched portico. To the left is a small entrance hallway (b2) leading to a larger room (b3). Further along the left side is a washroom (b4) and a cubiculum (b5). On the right side, there is a study or oratory (b6), a garden (b7), a workshop (b8), and a storage area (b9). The plan also shows the layout of the upper floor, including an attic used for storage and hanging laundry.

13



Chapels

13th century

A block containing several chapels, where the fathers would say mass every day. They were all refurbished in the 17th to 18th centuries, and remains of the decoration from this period can still be seen, in strong, contrasting colours.

Plane

History

Guide

Plane

14

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Plane



15



Shrine chapel

17th century

The shrine chapel was built behind the high altar, and the apse of the church was dismantled in order to connect with it. Tradition has it that the altar of the church stands over the site of the pine-tree which, according to the legend, divided the staircase by which the monks went up and down from heaven and which gave the monastery its name: Escaladei, the stairway of God.

Plane

16



Third cloister or Dolors courtyard

15th century

Built by Berenguer Gallart in 1403 in Florid Gothic style. Of modest dimensions, it occupied the space behind the church. Its construction meant there was an arcaded connection between the two large exterior cloisters: the Maior cloister and the Patriarch's cloister. It added six cells to the twenty-four then existing. This cloister, known as the Dolors courtyard, was bounded by a porch leading into the Recordationis cloister and by the walls of the little chapels. Two hundred years after it was built it was almost completely reconstructed to make space for the Shrine chapel.

Plane

17



Refectory

13th century

Large, 13-century rectangular structure refurbished in the 15th to 16th centuries. In the 17th century an upper floor was added. From the surviving remains it can be seen that it was covered by a flattened barrel vault with diaphragm arches and lunettes. Five large south-facing windows with round arches lit the room. From a pulpit reached by steps set into the wall, a monk would sing the liturgy, to which the monks, who gathered here to dine together only on Sundays and feast days, listened in silence as they ate.

Fathers and lay brothers sat in separate areas reached by different doors.

[Plane](#)



18

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Second, or “Patriarch’s”, cloister

14th century

The “Patriarch’s” cloister was built thanks to the legacy made in 1333 by prince Joan d’Aragó, patriarch of Alexandria and archbishop of Toledo and Tarragona. It consisted of twelve cells. As first built it was Gothic in style, albeit, in keeping with the Carthusian character, a very austere Gothic. It was built in the south-east side of the monastery since this was the only site, such is the shape of the terrain, where growth was possible. It was refurbished in the 16th to 17th centuries in neo-Classical style.

[Plane](#)

19



Kitchen garden

Located behind the services building, the kitchen garden was an essential part of a Carthusian monastery. Carthusian monks eat little fish and no meat. Greens, fruit, nuts, root vegetables, etc. are fundamental to their diet.

[Plane](#)

