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The Carthusian Influence on Werner Rolewinck's Approach to History

Werner Rolewinck (Rolevinck), 1425-1502, was a Carthusian monk, historian, and prolific author. His writings, done exclusively in Latin, were primarily religious. Among his over fifty known works are sermons, theological writings, the examination of canon law, and most famously, works of history.¹ Rolewinck's writings include two medieval chronicles, one a history of Westphalia, and another, for which he is much more famous, the *Fasciculus temporum*, or *Little Bundles Of Time*.² The *Fasciculus temporum*, one of the bestselling books of the period, was more than simply a history for history's sake. Its writing was part of Rolewinck's spiritual labor, which he undertook as part of his involvement in the Carthusian Order, and served as a source of religious devotion for the author and as a means of spiritual contemplation and an illustration of God's plan for the reader.³

The Carthusian Order originated in the eleventh century as part of a renewed interest in monastic life, wherein the devotees elected to live withdrawn from the world and humbly in an attempt to imitate the life of Christ.⁴ Also called the Order of Saint Bruno after its founder Bruno of Cologne, the Carthusian Order was founded in 1084 when Bruno, four Benedictine monks,

¹Albrecht Classen, "Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum*," *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* 81, (2006): 255; Andrea Worm, "Rolevinck, Werner," in *Encyclopedia of the Medieval Chronicle*, ed. Graeme Dunphy and Cristian Bratu.

² Worm, "Rolevinck, Werner."

³ Classen, Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum*," 229; Gudrun Tscherpel, "World chronicles," in *Transforming the Medieval World: Uses of Pragmatic Literacy in the Middle Ages*, ed. Franz-Josef Arlinghaus, Marcus Ostermann, Oliver Plessow, and Gudrun Tscherpel (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006), 287.

⁴ Classen, Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum*," 226; John Wickstrom, "Carthusians," in *The Encyclopedia of Monasticism* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), 244.

and two lay brothers, seeking greater solitude, relocated to the French Alps and the hermitage of La Grande Chartreuse (The Grand Charterhouse), or *Cartusia* in Latin, from which the order takes its name.⁵ This “new monasticism” included various levels of austerity and solitude. Some houses lived communally and permitted speech between their members, while monks of other abbeys sought solitude even from other monks, and attempted to minimize speech, which was seen as detrimental to the monk’s life of spiritual contemplation. The Carthusian approach was for the brothers “to create a community of solitaries.”⁶

Carthusian communities were designed around this concept, and unlike other monasteries where the monks lived in dormitories, Carthusian monks lived in cells or individual rooms.⁷ Carthusian cells, while simple, were not limited to simply a bed and a spot to pray as one might expect. In later monasteries, cells were essentially private two-story apartments. Each cell contained a workroom, a small devotional area, a library, a bedroom, and a small private garden, allowing the monks to pursue their lives of contemplation and study in the solitude of their own space.⁸ Also living at the monastery were lay brothers, whose responsibility was to perform the work which enabled the monks to devote their lives to contemplation, including delivering humble meals to monks in their cells.⁹ Early communities were made up of thirteen monks, with one of them taking on the role of prior, and each of the later houses answered to the abbot of La Grande Chartreuse.¹⁰ Despite slow growth, possibly due to the expense of building cells, a desire to keep the communities smaller, or simply because the austerity of the Order made it harder to

⁵ Classen, “Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum*,” 226; Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

⁶ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

⁷ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

⁸ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

⁹ Classen, Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum*,” 226; Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 245.

¹⁰ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244, 246.

recruit, at its height in 1514 the Carthusian order had 196 houses, 12 of which were set aside for women.¹¹

While the monks spent a great deal of their time within their cells, they did not isolate themselves entirely from the world. The monks had contact with the lay brothers, who in turn had contact with the outside world and would see to the outside needs of the monastery.¹² In addition to the contact with lay brothers, the monks left their cells for a few hours each day to interact with each other as a community.¹³ Each day “the monks emerged at midnight to participate in the liturgical offices of matins; they attended a community mass in the morning (a later addition) and chanted vespers late in the afternoon.”¹⁴ The monks interacted with each other on Sundays and on major feast days, eating together, celebrating the entire office, and spending an hour walking where it was permitted to converse about “useful matters.”¹⁵ Once a week the monks also participated in a *spatiamentum*, in which they would walk for around three hours and in which conversation was also permitted.¹⁶ Finally, once a year the monks would take an extended walk, where an entire day would be spent walking throughout the monastery grounds.¹⁷ The monks clearly valued their solitude but were also aware of the need to take a step back from their studies periodically and both get physical exercise and establish connections between one another in addition to their shared devotion.¹⁸

¹¹ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244-246.

¹² Classen, “Werner Rolevinck’s *Fasciculus temporum*,” 226; Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 245.

¹³ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

¹⁴ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

¹⁵ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

¹⁶ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

¹⁷ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 244.

¹⁸ This tradition is maintained in Carthusian communities to this day, and remains a vital aspect of the order as “through these walks, souls are knitted together, the interior life flourishes, mutual affection is bolstered, and life in solitude is fortified.” See: <http://www.chartreux.org/en/nuns/day-feasts-spatiamentum.php>.

Within their cells the monks traditionally had a single simple meal per day, with no meat, and limited their diets to only bread and water on fast days. They split their time between prayer, spiritual reading, and labor.¹⁹ Intellectual purists were heavily encouraged, and the Carthusian houses were famous for their library collections and their book production, and much of the labor portion of their monastic life was dedicated to this pursuit.²⁰ Production included not only the copying of existing manuscripts but also the writing of new books, and later this focus progressed toward involvement in the printing of books.²¹ Carthusian works tended to focus on two areas of spirituality, the “affective way” which connected God and humanity through the humanity of Christ, and the “negative way” which emphasized the divinity and “otherness of God.”²² The importance of books to the Carthusians cannot be understated: the order held a firm belief in the value of books and their production served as a means with which to save the soul.²³ “Books and reading” in the eyes of the Carthusians “[gave] the pious a vehicle for contemplation and study.” This importance is underlined in the majority of images of Saint Bruno, a former schoolmaster who valued books and education highly, which depict him with a book either in his hand or in close proximity to him.²⁴ The tradition produced several writers, including at least two chroniclers: Rolewinck and the unknown author of the English chronicle *e Museo 160*, who credited Rolewinck as an inspiration.²⁵

¹⁹ Wickstrom. “Carthusians,” 244.

²⁰ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 245.

²¹ Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 246.

²² Wickstrom, “Carthusians,” 246.

²³ Laviece Ward, “Werner Rolewinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*: Carthusian Historiography in the Late Middle Ages,” in *Normative Zentrierung: Normative Centering* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), 214.

²⁴ Ward, “Werner Rolewinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*,” 214.

²⁵ Ward, “Two Carthusian Histories, Their Authors and Audiences,” 132-133; Ward, “Historiography in an early sixteenth-century English manuscript, *e Museo 160*,” *Medieval Perspectives* 3, no. 1 (1990), 287-288. The author of *e Museo 160* was an unknown Carthusian monk in Northern England. The only known copy is in the Bodleian Library.

It is within this context, as a Carthusian monk for the majority of his life, that Rolewinck and his *Fasciculus temporum* need to be considered. Rolewinck was born in 1425 in the town of Laer bei Horstmar in Westphalia, and in 1443/1444 moved to the city of Cologne, where he studied law at the university.²⁶ It was in 1447, at the age of twenty-two, that Rolewinck made the decision to join the Carthusian order, becoming a brother at the monastery of Saint Barbara in Cologne.²⁷ Rolewinck would stay there for the remainder of his life, and it is here where he did all his writing, including the writing of the *Fasciculus temporum*, until dying of plague there, at the age of seventy-seven, in 1502.²⁸ Much of Rolewinck's time was spent in relative solitude as he pored over his collection of books and wrote both religious texts and updates to his histories.²⁹ He was keenly aware of the opportunity for spiritual outreach that his work provided, and sought to enlighten his readers through his histories, allowing them to "raise up their eyes to the histories of things done ... that they may learn while enjoying good fortune, from good examples of worthy men, to pursue worthy works and in bad fortune to avoid the rocks of perdition."³⁰ Laviece Ward gives Rolewinck credit as a "sophisticated historian" who was "aware of the subtleties of historiography," but one who was also careful in his approach to history, presenting it in an appropriately conservative way for a Carthusian whose ultimate goal was to forge a connection between history, humanity, and the divine.³¹

²⁶ Classen, "Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum*," 226; Ward, "Werner Rolevinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*," 211, 214; Worm, "Rolevinck, Werner."

²⁷ Classen, "Werner Rolevinck's *Fasciculus temporum*," 226; Ward, "Werner Rolevinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*," 211; Worm, "Rolevinck, Werner."

²⁸ Ward, "Werner Rolevinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*," 209, 211-212; Worm, "Rolevinck, Werner."

²⁹ Ward, "Werner Rolevinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*," 212-213.

³⁰ Ward, "Werner Rolevinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*," 215; Ward, "Two Carthusian Histories, Their Authors and Audiences," 133.

³¹ Ward, "Werner Rolevinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*," 226.

Rolewinck was quite deliberate in the layout of the *Fasciculus temporum*, consciously organizing the writing and the graphics of the book to make his “brief history of the world” as accessible as possible.³² Rolewinck’s unique design aspects appear to be drawn from a few other sources: Peter of Poitiers’ *Genealogia*, manuscript editions of the Bible, and manuscript roll chronicles.³³ While aspects of his presentation were not unique, Ward credits Rolewinck with being “the first to combine the idea of a vertical time line from the roll chronicle, Biblical genealogy and Biblical illustrations,” and attributed his inspiration from different formats “including the popular medieval teaching tools, diagrams, rolls and illustrations” to create a unique image of the history of the world which was highly structured, understandable, and easily navigable.³⁴ He also made an effort to avoid making his history too dense, stating that “we [should] study briefly, and avoid extended study,” and attempting to let the timeline serve as part of God’s unified narrative rather than having the focus be on detailed descriptions of events themselves.³⁵ Beyond the spiritual goals of the book, Albrecht Classen attributes a sense of business acumen to Rolewinck’s work, suggesting that despite the insular nature of the Carthusian order, Rolewinck was very up to date on how to write books for popular consumption.³⁶ Classen calls Rolewinck “a master of the modern book design” who, despite being somewhat cut-off by monastic life, was keenly aware of how to combine the text of the book with illustrations and graphic design, attributing a great deal of the success of the

³² Classen, “Werner Rolewinck’s *Fasciculus temporum*,” 230; Ward, “Werner Rolewinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*,” 209.

³³ Ward, “Werner Rolewinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*,” 219-222.

³⁴ Classen, “Werner Rolewinck’s *Fasciculus temporum*,” 229; Ward, “Werner Rolewinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*,” 222.

³⁵ Ward, “Werner Rolewinck and the *Fasciculus temporum*,” 225.

³⁶ Classen, “Werner Rolewinck’s *Fasciculus temporum*,” 229-230.

Fasciculus temporum to clever design work which made the text easier to follow than other medieval chronicles.³⁷

Rolewinck was an accomplished historian with an awareness of historiography and his *Fasciculus temporum* remains a historically significant work, both successful in its time and as current means to examine the medieval approach to history. However, the spiritual motivations behind the work cannot be forgotten. Rolewinck wrote not to correct a historical narrative nor as part of the search for knowledge for the sake of knowledge. Rather, Rolewinck was a highly devoted and contemplative Carthusian monk who was attempting to use history to connect humanity to the divinity of God, and every part of the *Fasciculus temporum* is carefully formulated to share this message with his readers.

³⁷ Classen, "Werner Rolewinck's *Fasciculus temporum*," 230.

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