

## Remarkable Women.

### Nuns' Networks in the Middle Ages

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## Prologue: The Voices from the Past

In the Middle Ages half of all those who entered monasteries were women. Why, then, do we hear so little about them? Only a few names are familiar: Hildegard of Bingen, of course. Perhaps also Roswitha of Gandersheim and Mechthild of Magdeburg. In recent years they have had books or exhibitions dedicated to them. However, the great group of learned, feisty, devout, and enterprising nuns from countless generations has faded into oblivion, their voices not heard. Nevertheless, women who lived in convents in the Middle Ages were by no means unremarkable or unremarked – quite the opposite. In the German version we played with the word “unerhört”, meaning both “unheard” in the sense of not noticed by research and “unheard of” in the sense of outspoken. Their communities were often powerful institutions and they saw themselves as being in a highly influential position, since through their way of life they were “brides of Christ”, in other words, the future spouses of the “King of Kings”, and hence had His ear in a way no one else did. That He heard them was a conviction which permeated medieval society and bestowed upon them a special status, one which manifested itself not just politically and economically, but also socially and culturally – and which allowed these women to become effective and influential in hitherto unprecedented ways.

To be unheard-of and unheard is a fate first suffered by these nuns in the modern era, so that every act of rendering them visible constitutes a minor revolution. In her habilitation Eva Schlotheuber edited and contextualized a small parchment manuscript which, through daily use, had grown greatly in girth: the convent diary of a nun from the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster (Convent St. Crucis) near Braunschweig – an eloquent and important “witness statement” in which, for over twenty years, a Cistercian nun described her convent life before the town gates of Braunschweig. For her part, Henrike Lähnemann brought together the devotional manuals of the \*Cistercian nuns from Kloster Medingen (Medingen Abbey) from libraries across the globe in order to open the doors into the nuns’ pictorial and devotional worlds. For background information we both drew on a unique source, yet another which has, up to now, only been available amongst the medieval manuscripts in the convent archive at Kloster Lüne (Lüne Abbey) but is not yet edited: the collection of letters belonging to the \*Benedictine nuns of Kloster Lüne. These letters – nearly 1,800 of them, written between 1460 and 1560 – are moving documents from the late Middle Ages and the Reformation era, when the nuns resolutely resisted the introduction of Lutheran practices into the convent. In their letters the women debate a broad spectrum of themes arising from their work days, high days and holidays – from lobbying to theological debates to letters dispensing consolation and advice. The wide range of topics offers profoundly fascinating material, invaluable for adding colour and life to the history of nuns at the transition from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period because here the nuns themselves make their voices heard.

In the course of the Reformation the Cistercian Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster just outside the gates of Braunschweig was initially dissolved, but it then emerged that there was no desire to live without it after all and a short while later it was re-founded, this time as a Protestant institution for ladies from high-ranking families. Dissolution during the Reformation was a fate it shared with most convents in the areas which converted to Protestantism – although not with Kloster Lüne, which to this day exists as a Protestant community in its original buildings. In 2022 Kloster Lüne celebrated 850 years of uninterrupted existence. A community of women under an \*abbess continues to live in these buildings, the erection of which is reported in the letters and whose archive preserves the medieval sources down to this day. The women of Kloster Lüne can be seen in the image on the front cover, a detail from a painting which captures the vision of a Lüne conventual in the sixteenth century. It still hangs in its old spot in the nuns’ choir in Kloster Lüne.

The Cistercian nun from Braunschweig does not mention her name in her diary. At no place in her entertaining record, which stretches over two decades, does she provide any clue to her identity. She lived as a nun in the Cistercian Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster towards the end of the fifteenth century and,

like two-thirds of the community, probably died of the plague in 1507. Her chronicle breaks off abruptly with the description of how the plague, which initially broke out in the town, slowly spread to the convent and claimed its first fatalities there. The handwritten diary, preserved in the format of a compact prayer book, is twice as thick as it is wide. In 1848 the book, from the estate of the independent scholar Carl Friedrich von Vechelde of Braunschweig, was sold to the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel and is preserved there under the shelfmark Cod. 1159 Novi. Since the von Vechelde family had several of its members in the convent, the diary notes of the anonymous Cistercian nun may have been handed down in the family throughout the centuries. Unfortunately, the beginning of the manuscript is lost, so that the possibility cannot be ruled out that the writer of the diary said something about herself at the start. Her journal record begins in 1484 and must have been very important to her. She procured her own material for writing on in the thriftiest, but most laborious way possible: she scraped off the text in an old parchment prayer book in order to be able to write on the parchment again and she cut further scraps of parchment to the right size or even sewed smaller pieces together in order to have sufficient materials for her writing. In some places she supplemented her stock of parchment or paper with the reverse side of old letters. Her position in the convent can, therefore, only be inferred in as far as she does not appear to have held any of the leading monastic offices and officiated neither as \*prioress nor as \*cellarer nor as \*teacher of the girls (*magistra puellarum*). This means that the writer of the diary is one of the rare voices which do more than merely report on life behind the convent walls from the internal perspective of the convent, but, rather, also uninhibitedly discuss matters which either appeared problematic to the nuns or simply went wrong. For her there is nothing which needs defending or glossing over; and her judgement on the various office-holders who steered the fortunes of the convent is shot through with quite startling criticism in places.

Around the year 1500 the duties which fell to the author of the diary probably included participating in the organization and supervision of the celebratory dinners which took place in the convent in the company of the nuns' relatives whenever new members were admitted to the convent. In 1499 she describes just such a dinner, to which families from the minor aristocracy were invited, and concludes her description with the words: "I have written this down so that I conduct myself somewhat more cautiously should I be entrusted with the care for a similar dinner in the future". In other words, she notes down the events of her life in the convent not least for herself. Her probably rather lowly position in the convent leaves its mark on her narrative perspective: her comments have a certain unfiltered quality. She writes in Latin, perhaps also to practise the language, on whose orthography and syntax she did not always have the firmest of grasps. In some places she lapses suddenly into Low German: whenever the subject matter becomes emotional, whenever she wishes to reproduce the words of the relatives and lay people or whenever the appropriate Latin expression does not occur to her. And her narrative style is captivating: lively, refreshing and humorous.

While one function of the diary may have been the writer's need to reassure herself in difficult situations, she also envisages future generations of nuns in the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster as the intended readers of her writings. She wishes to pass on what the convent has done wrong, whether from lack of awareness or lack of thought, so that it might be avoided in the future: "I have written this so that those who come after me do not believe every word they hear" – thus her warning words to her readers when the provost and convent were forced into a shamefaced admission that they had been fooled by swindlers who had promised them a sizable endowment from nobles living a considerable distance away. However, in her view the individual nuns who, rashly running, violated their enclosure when fire broke out one night on the Rennelberg, the hilltop site of the convent, would have been better advised not to, for with a little more faith in God their abandoning of enclosure – especially in their night attire – could have been avoided.

Building on the tales told by the writer of the journal, we deal with larger, interlinked themes: the nature of life in the convent (Chapter I); what we know about education there (Chapter II); what the

nuns' relationship to their families was like and how the convent economy functioned (Chapter III); the role played by music and what it meant to be reformed (Chapter IV); how the women's communities coped with the upheavals of the Reformation (Chapter V); how illnesses were healed – and how death was dealt with in the convent (Chapter VI). The Appendix includes a glossary which systematically compiles and explains concepts marked by asterisks in the text, as well as overviews and suggestions for further reading.

A large number of the sources on which this book is based stem from the fifteenth century. These are fascinating decades in which written testimonies sharply increase in number. Just as the nun from the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster recycles a parchment prayer book for her notes in order to find some space to write, many other written documents from convents also bear witness to creativity when dealing with the precious writing material. At the end of the fourteenth century the first paper mill in Germany started operations in Nuremberg and the number of those able to read and write increased, above all in the cities and due to the efforts for reform in the monasteries, developments which led to a marked rise in text production. The traditional designation of "late mediaeval" is problematic if "late" represents a value judgement. The stories and records left by the nuns do not speak of decline and expiration, after which a new age dawns in the sixteenth century, whether with the Reformation or a rebirth ("Renaissance") of antiquity, one understood in secular terms. Rather, from the perspective of contemporaries the fifteenth century manifested itself as an age of radical departures and the discovery of new horizons. With our own eyes we always look back on the past, but we can expand our perspective through that of women from earlier generations if we allow their voices to be heard – whether we are dealing with Hildegard of Bingen and her community in the twelfth century or the anonymous Cistercian nun from the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster and her sister nuns in the fifteenth. They are the main protagonists in their own story. We would like to make as many as possible of the forgotten voices audible again. For that reason, we decided to start each chapter with an account from the convent diary of our Cistercian nun from Braunschweig – first-hand reports on lice, Lebkuchen and attestations of love for Christ.

The rich heritage of the convents also includes their musical and material culture, aspects we similarly wish to incorporate into this book – from their large tapestries to their sculptures to their medieval architecture, of which more has been preserved in Germany than in most other European countries. Hence every chapter is supplemented by medieval works of art from convents, illustrative examples which shed light on the theme from the perspective of the nuns.

This book has grown out of many years of collaboration and was jointly conceived. Eva Schlotheuber contributed the initial stories and was responsible for the systematizing chapters, while Henrike Lähnemann took this aspect further and was responsible for elucidating the narratives in the images. Over and above this collaboration, the book arose out of conversations with travelling companions both scholarly and personal – Martina Backes from the German Department in Freiburg, Berndt Hamm for the theological aspects, Thomas Noll from History of Art at Göttingen, Friedel Helga Roofls for Middle Low German and Philipp Stenzig from Historical Studies at Düsseldorf. Sabine Wehking and Christine Wulf from the Inschriftenkommission der Niedersächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Commission for Inscriptions at the Academy of Sciences of Lower Saxony) in Göttingen supported the project, as did the large working group on Kloster Lüne, which, based in Oxford und Düsseldorf, is collaborating on an edition of the Lüne letters. Kristin Rotter of the Propyläen Verlag not only proposed the project, but accompanied it with enthusiasm and encouragement. In Heike Wolke the project found an outstanding editor. Particular thanks is owed to Wolfgang Brandis, archivist of the Lüneburg convents, who provided the majority of the illustrations and clarified image copyright with the individual convents, whose abbesses and convent communities heartened us from the very beginning with their interest in their own history.

## I. ENCLOSURE

The medieval convent is built around the concept of enclosure, the cloistered life away from the world. Characteristic features of the nuns' particular way of life become apparent at precisely the moment when this order is disturbed, when war breaks out and the nuns are forced to flee, just as the author of the diary from the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster reports for the year 1492.

### 1. The Nuns' Flight

#### *Suddenly in the Midst of War: The Great Braunschweig Civic Feud*

On 12 August 1492 the young Duke Henry the Younger sent written challenges into the town of Braunschweig. Braunschweig's town councillors had refused to pay homage to the new duke, who did not wish to confirm their ancient rights and freedoms.

The Cistercian Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster lay between the ducal residence in Wolfenbüttel and the town of Braunschweig, just outside the town walls. The nuns were in turmoil. What were they to do? Stay and hope that the Duke would spare them, or leave convent and enclosure and flee to Braunschweig? War loomed on the horizon and the town councillors urged the nuns to flee: *Leven kynder, wor wil gy bliven?* "Dear children, where do you intend to stay? The Duke is closer to us than you yourselves believe." "Run, run, dear children. He already stands [with his army] before the wood from the stunted trees." Time and again they came out to the convent and urged the women: "Dear children, are you still here? The Duke is already inside the lines of fortification and wanted to take the cows from the old town. Alas, alas! If we had you inside the town, we would know that you were kept safe, that you would not be robbed of the noble treasure of your virginity". The Council's messengers, but also townswomen came to the convent and painted a colourful picture of the Duke's atrocities, but the women hesitated – violating enclosure was a serious step.

The fear and uncertainty felt by the nuns speak to us vividly from the diary entries of our nun from the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster, who does not reveal her name to us but recounts many of the moving events. She knows that the nuns from the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster did not hesitate for no reason. They knew full well that the Braunschweig town councillors were parties in the dispute. In her diary the Cistercian nun shrewdly notes that it seems to her the nuns were more exercised by the horror of the reports than by the actual danger. And they also knew it was an easy matter to bombard the town from their well-fortified convent. For that reason the Council had a considerable interest in the nuns' moving into the city so that they could billet town soldiers in the convent before the Duke arrived and seized it. Suddenly the nuns from the Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster found themselves at the heart of the conflict. And they occupied the centre ground between the two parties not just spatially but also socially. Within the convent walls the daughters of the Braunschweig patriciate, that is, of the civic bourgeoisie, lived harmoniously side by side with the daughters of noble families from the surrounding area. That had not happened by chance. The Cistercian Heilig-Kreuz-Kloster had been founded as an act of atonement and owed its establishment to a feud which had broken out in 1227 between the traditional chivalric nobility and the up-and-coming town of Braunschweig. At that time the *ministeriales* had taken advantage of a tournament outside the town walls to launch a surprise attack on the town by armed knights. However, the citizens of Braunschweig had known how to hold their own against them and had subsequently forced the nobles to found a convent on their former jousting field, the Rennelberg, as atonement for their act of violence. The endowment of a convent just outside the gates of the town brought with it many advantages. It freed the citizens of Braunschweig from the presence of the knights and their tournaments directly before their gates, particularly since tournaments could always also be used as preparation for military campaigns. Instead an enclosed site was created on which the daughters of the citizens of Braunschweig and the surrounding

nobility could lead a spiritual life together and hence, in their way, serve to safeguard the peace between the rival social classes.

Indeed, this solution was probably successful for a long time, but the old antagonisms came to the fore again at the latest with the start of the Great Braunschweig Civic Feud in August 1492. In this tricky situation the nuns were at a loss, but as the conflict came to a head they packed up all their worldly goods, their bedding, their good cloaks and veils and sent everything off with messengers to where it was out of harm's way with their relatives. Town mercenaries were already loitering round the convent day and night, but – as the author of the diary bitterly remarks – less for their protection than to hold the spot for the town. While they were, admittedly, not permitted to enter the enclosure, i.e., the women's inner domain, they ran amok in the courtyard, the kitchens and the store-rooms. In the process they gave the nuns' provost such a fright that he told the women he intended to leave the convent and seek safety in the town. If they wished to remain, that was their responsibility. This did not improve the situation.

Some nuns recommended sending letters to the noble families connected to the convent who exercised influence in the ducal council in order to ask them to spare the nuns and the convent. This discreet diplomacy bore fruit in as much as those to whom letters were addressed promised to intervene to the best of their ability with the Duke on the nuns' behalf, but they warned that due to the readiness on the part of the various armies to use violence it would not be possible to guarantee their protection. They were in a real dilemma, since no certainty could be achieved in this way either. Hence the Cistercian nun adds to her diary notes something we rarely hear: unvarnished criticism of the way the Mother Superior, the only recently elected Abbess Mechthild von Vechelde, exercised her office. The author of the diary writes that in those fearful days they had been like lost sheep – and for the very reason that their shepherdess, the Abbess, had been as if paralysed by fear and panic and was completely at a loss as to what to do. For that reason she had promised things which subsequently had to be rectified amidst expressions of remorse.

It was no longer possible to think of an orderly daily routine. On the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin, 15 August, they once more undertook a communal procession through the convent, cloisters and cemetery. However, in the morning, when they looked through the bars on their windows, they saw terrifyingly armed knights, they heard shots and the bells were pealing. Then during the night messengers came from the Council who more or less ordered them to leave the convent. Their departure had been decided. In the morning the nuns gathered punctually in the church on the chiming of the bell in order to place themselves and the convent into God's hands. Our Cistercian nun relates that they wept and wailed so much that they were hardly able to sing. Together they intoned the antiphon *O crux splendidior* [*O Cross, more splendid than all the stars*], the liturgical antiphony they knew so well. This was followed by five recitations of the \*Paternoster before they entrusted themselves to God, their patron the Holy Cross and, amidst a veil of tears, left the choir.

For their departure they lined up in the normal processional order: at the head the provost and his clerics; followed by Abbess Mechthild von Vechelde, at whose side a townswoman from Braunschweig was placed to escort her; then Prioress Remborg Kalm and the oldest nuns, the *seniores*; then the \*subprioress and, finally, all the nuns who had already been fully consecrated as well as the novices, the girls with their *magistra*. They were followed by the \*lay sisters and the conclusion to the procession was formed by two or three men and the remaining women. They all walked together solemnly to the Grauer Hof (the Grey Yard), the farmyard and economic centre of the Cistercian monks in Braunschweig.

## Exile

The Grauer Hof in Braunschweig belonged to the Cistercians in Riddagshausen, who stored and sold the grain produced by their farms there. A monk from Riddagshausen received the group and led them in. However, initially he showed them only a single room. It rapidly became clear to the provost and his clerics that they could not remain there with the women since conditions were too cramped. Hence, in tears, these bade him goodbye for this first night. Together the nuns recited \*Compline in the room into which they had been led by the monk and, exhausted, fell asleep perched in the window niches or with their heads leant against the walls. The next morning things took on a very different complexion. The monk returned and showed them a chapel in which they could celebrate divine office; two rooms which were suitable for a \*dormitorium, i.e., a communal dormitory; and a room of her own for the abbess. The room in which they had passed the first night was transformed into a \*refectory (dining room) and there was even a heated chamber with stone-oven hot-air heating, so-called hypocaust heating, with eleven seats which could be warmed by hot air. Now, in the light of day, they discovered in the middle of the complex that made up the Grauer Hof a large courtyard with trees and a small pond for which the provost procured them some fish. Ultimately a solution was also found for all other duties which made up their daily religious routine: the nuns took communion in a room by the entrance to the chapel, but always with the doors closed. They equipped a small chamber above the chapel, the *priche* [gallery], as their space for confession. Of course, it was so cramped in there that they were obliged to kneel in front of their father confessor. The room in front of the chapel was also used by them as a place for the sermons normally preached to them by the father confessor, the provost or sometimes even by a cleric invited from outside the convent. The daily reading (*collatio*) after \*Vespers took place there as well and on Thursdays the washing of feet. In the chapel itself they sang the Seven \*Hours together every day, the \*horary prayers, and celebrated divine office just as they had been used to doing.