

The Life of Nuns

Love, Politics, and Religion in
Medieval German Convents



Henrike Lähnemann
and Eva Schlotheuber



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Cover image: *Apparition of the crucified Christ from the vision of Dorothea von Meding in 1562*, painted in 1623, on the nuns' choir in Kloster Lüne. Photo by Sabine Wehking. ©Kloster Lüne

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VIII. Appendix

1. Convent Histories

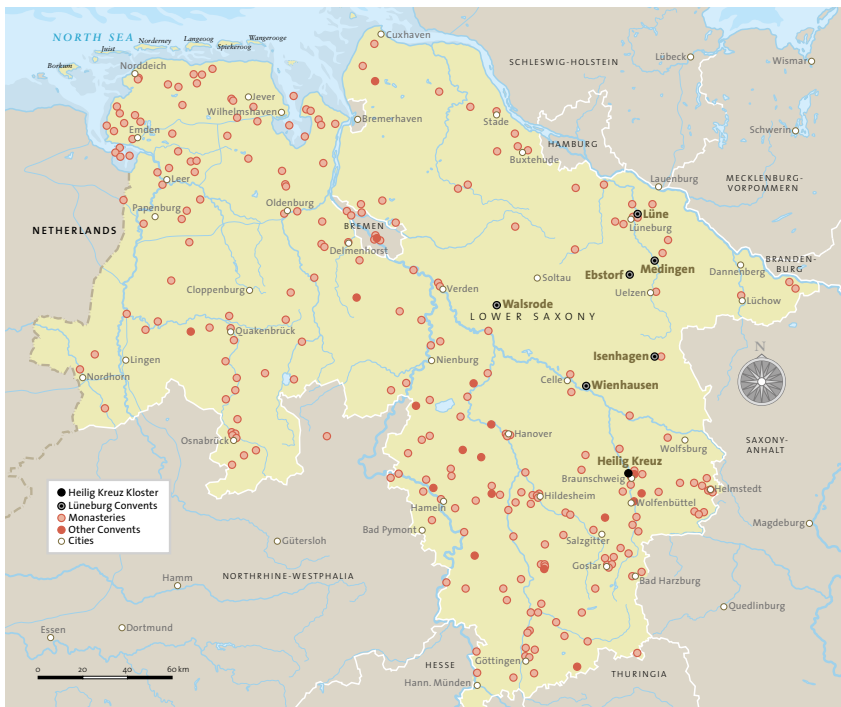


Fig. 38 Map of the Convents in Lower Saxony. ©Peter Palm.

1.1 Heilig Kreuz Kloster near Braunschweig

The Heilig Kreuz Kloster near Braunschweig is a Cistercian convent founded around 1230, presumably as an act of atonement after a feud between the Guelph nobility and the town of Braunschweig. It was

located outside the gates of the town on the Rennelberg, the nobility's former tournament ground. Until 1532 the convent existed as a Roman Catholic community which followed the rules of the Cistercian Order, but was not incorporated into the Order; then the first Lutheran abbess was appointed under pressure from Braunschweig Council. The nuns' main tasks were the care of the sick and the girls' school established in the convent. After 700 years the buildings of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster were completely destroyed during a heavy bombing raid on Braunschweig in 1944; only a small portion of the early modern convent cemetery was spared.

1.2 Lüneburg Convents

The six convents of Kloster Ebstorf, Kloster Isenhagen, Kloster Lüne, Kloster Medingen, Kloster Walsrode and Kloster Wienhausen are located in the territory of the former Principality of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. They share the same fate: they underwent monastic reform in the late fifteenth century; continued as women's religious communities after the Lutheran Reformation. Together with the former women's foundations and convents of the Duchy of Calenberg, but in contrast with them still as independent institutions under public law, they now belong to the administrative province of the Klosterkammer Hannover, the state institution responsible for looking after former monastic estates, buildings and communities.

Kloster Ebstorf is a former Benedictine convent near Uelzen. The Gothic complex, almost completely preserved with its cloister (Figure 1), stained-glass windows, keystones (Figures 21 and 25), the chests on display in the corridors there and the layout of the convent church, still conveys a good impression of medieval convent culture. The extensive library, which has been preserved, is an important source for the history of education (Figures 27 and 28; Chapter II.2), as is the Ebstorf World Map (Figures 8 and 9; Chapter I.3). Its works of art also include *horti conclusi* (Gardens of Paradise), which contain fragments of saints' relics and were made by the nuns, as well as a larger-than-life statue of St Maurice.

Kloster Lüne is a former Benedictine convent in Lüneburg, which celebrated its 850th anniversary in 2022. The three books of letters from

the convent (*see* Sources and Literature) provide information about the nuns' networks in the late Middle Ages, as does the depiction of the convent in the painting of Dorothea von Meding's vision (Figure 32). The late-medieval dormitory with the wing containing the nuns' cells has been impressively well preserved here. The convent is now also known for its tapestry museum, exhibiting examples of whitework embroidery and large-scale pieces from the reform period in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries (Figure 15). The museum also houses the textile restoration department of the Klosterkammer Hannover.

Kloster Medingen is a former Cistercian convent near Bad Bevensen dedicated to St Maurice (Panel 8). Information about the early history of Medingen is provided by the panels depicting its history in sixteen pictures, starting with its foundation and ending in the 1490s (Figures 3, 6, 8, 10). In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, numerous illuminated devotional books were produced in the convent, which also contain a rich body of songs (Panel 12 and Figure 12). The convent burnt down almost completely in 1781 and was rebuilt in the neo-classical style.

Kloster Wienhausen is a former Cistercian convent near Celle (Figure 37). The late-medieval complex has been preserved almost in its entirety, including the sculptures, tapestries and stained-glass windows. A particular treasure is the 'nuns' dust' found under the floorboards of the richly painted nuns' choir in the 1970s (Figures 5, 35, and 36; Chapter VII.3). It includes the oldest pairs of spectacles in the world, fragments of manuscripts, slips of paper and tools for writing and handicrafts.

2. Schematic Representations of Convent Life

2.1 Overview of the Daily Routine in a Convent

The times and sequence of the individual elements can vary in the different congregations and from convent to convent. In contrast to the custom described here, there are convents where the nuns' rest is interrupted at midnight to sing matins together with lauds in the convent church. Afterwards, the nuns return to their beds and get up again at 6:30 for prime (this 'division of the night' is the original Benedictine custom and reflects the standard way in which most people slept in the

premodern period). In some convents it is not customary to work before terce. The first meal of the day always comes after the conventual mass, in some convents before, in others after sext; in Lent possibly only in the afternoon, after none, or after vespers.

4:00	Matins and Lauds	Divine office in the convent church, with possible votive offices (Marian psalter)
6:30	Prime	Divine office in the convent church, followed by private masses of the priest-monks spread across the morning.
7:00	Chapter Office	In the chapter house, reading of a chapter from the rule of Benedict, martyrology, remembrance of the dead, blessing over the day's work (possible debates).
7:30	<i>Lectio divina</i>	If applicable in the cells, Bible reading and personal prayer.
8:00	Handwork/Study	In the areas of the convent set aside for these functions or in the cells.
10:00	Terce, followed by the conventual mass and sext	Divine office in the convent church.
12:00	Lunch	In the refectory.
12:30	<i>Recreatio</i>	Midday break, to sleep or go for a walk.
14:00	None	Divine office in the convent church
14:20	Handwork/Study	In the areas of the convent set aside for these functions or in the cells
16:00	Vespers	Divine office in the convent church, with possible votive offices (Marian psalter)
16:30	Amongst other things, reading/lecture, followed by dinner and free time	Dinner in the refectory (no dinner during Lent)
18:45	Compline	Divine office in the convent church
19:30	Night's rest	If applicable in the cells, otherwise in the dormitory

3. Glossary of Terms

A detailed German glossary of terms used in the monastic history of Lower Saxony, as well as the basis for the map above, can be found on the Göttingen Regional History website at <http://www.landesgeschichte.uni-goettingen.de/kloester>.

- Abbeß** Head of a convent.
- Antependium** Curtain or attachment for an altar which could change in the course of the church year.
- Antiphon** Alternating chant or counter-chant in which several voices or instruments 'answer' one another, i.e. sing or play alternately.
- Augustinian canoneses** Religious women who lived on the basis of the Rule of St Augustine and pursued a free way of life.
- Benedictine nuns** Nuns who live according to the Rule of St Benedict of Nursia (died 547). The Cistercian nuns also followed the Benedictine Rule, but in the stricter interpretation of the Cistercian Order. To a certain extent, they were considered reformed Benedictine nuns.
- Bursfelde Reform Congregation** Association of West and Central German, but also Dutch, Belgian, Danish and Luxembourgian Benedictine convents and monasteries that interpreted the Benedictine Rule strictly.
- Canon** Priest who is part of a community of clerics, e.g., of a cathedral chapter; also canon of a chapter.
- Canonical hours** → Hours
- Cantrix** → *Precentrix*.
- Cellar mistress** Nun with responsibility for managing the convent stores and the provisioning of the community.
- Celleraria** → Cellar Mistress.

- Chapter (house)** A room distinguished by particularly ornate architecture and usually located in the east wing near the choir. It opened onto the cloister and was a central part of the → enclosure. A chapter of the Rule of Benedict was read out there every day; the business of the convent was discussed; and violations of the rules were punished in 'chapters of fault'.
- Cistercian nuns** Nuns who follow the Cistercian Rule, → Benedictine nuns. Only some of the Cistercian nuns were legally full members of the order (incorporation), i.e. the order had the duty of supervising their spiritual life (*cura animarum*) and their goods (*cura temporalium*). They were then exempt, i.e. freed from the bishop's duty to supervise them. The Cistercian nuns of the Heilig Kreuz Kloster near Braunschweig were not incorporated, i.e. they followed the Cistercian rule and also shared in the privileges of the order, but continued to be subject to the bishop and, with regard to the administration of their property, to a secular cleric, the provost.
- Cloister** In the narrow sense the roofed rectangular walkway enclosing the cloister courtyard and connecting the east, south and west wings of the convent buildings. The north wing is usually directly connected to the south wall of the convent church. In a wider sense, the enclosed area reserved for the nuns, comprising the nuns' choir, the cloister with dormitory, refectory, workrooms, garden and cemetery
- Compline** Last time for prayer before the night's rest.
- Convent** The entire community of nuns, novices and servants; more narrowly, the community of choir nuns.
- Corporal** Linen cloth on the altar as an underlay for the communion vessels.
- Confession of Augsburg** → Protestantism.
- Divine office** → Hours
- Domina** Designation for the abbess of a religious women's community.

- Dormitory** Common dormitory in the convent, which could consist of a single room with small partitions or of a cell wing.
- Enclosure** The concept of the separation of women from the world.
- Familia* The secular servants of a religious community.
- Flax-breaking** A stage in the process of extracting linen from flax.
- Four Humours** Classical medical doctrine (humoral pathology) of the four bodily fluids: yellow and black bile, blood and phlegm.
- Gradual** Book collecting all the musical items of the mass.
- Guild master** Head of a guild or fraternity.
- Habit** Clerical garments that differ in colour, fabric and cut depending on the monastic order and consist of a cowl and various outer garments such as the scapular; in addition, nuns wore veils and possibly a → nun's crown.
- Hours** The seven times of day at which a religious community sings prayers and psalms, structuring everyday life, also the divine office or horary prayer.
- Hymn** Form of Latin strophic congregational singing attributed to Ambrose of Milan (died 397). Certain hymns were sung during the → Hours, as well as on feast days.
- Interdict** A church punishment that applies to a geographical area, e.g., a city, whereby all sacraments and religious acts, i.e. also baptism and burial, are temporarily forbidden. By contrast, the ecclesiastical ban (excommunication) affects individuals, who, when excommunicated, are temporarily excluded from the Christian community.
- Lay brothers** → Lay sisters.
- Lay sisters** Women who were part of the community but had fewer obligations to prayer and did manual work for the nuns.

- Liturgy** Sequence and entirety of the religious ceremonies and rites of Jewish and Christian worship.
- Liturgy of the Hours** → Hours
- Lot** Unit of measurement roughly equivalent to a spoonful.
- Magistra** → Schoolmistress.
- Master salter** Overseer of the boiling pans for salt production, an office that was usually held by patricians and carried considerable political weight.
- Middle Low German** Medieval variety of German spoken in Northern Germany and used as business language in the Hanseatic League, forerunner to *Plattdeutsch*.
- Ministeriales** Lower nobility which from the 13th century formed the core of the German knightly class (*Ritterstand*).
- Nuns' choir** Area of the church reserved for the choir nuns, from the twelfth century onwards often a gallery at the west end of the convent church. Before that the nuns' choir was often located in the northern or southern part of the transept, as was still the case in many convents in the late Middle Ages.
- Nun's crown** Cloth crown given to nuns by a bishop as the sign of the church's official recognition of their status as virgins; it symbolized the nuns' future coronation by Christ following the model of the coronation of Mary.
- Oblation** Handing over of a child to the convent, during which ceremony the parents take the vows on behalf of their child.
- Old Believers** After the Reformation the term for those who remained Catholic.
- Pastries and biscuits** were Produced in special shapes, such as *Spekulatius* baked in moulds, decorated gingerbread or wreaths made out of bread, and were often sent as gifts by the convents at New Year or other feast days. They were known as *Gebildbrot*.
- Paten** Plate for the bread at the celebration of the Eucharist.
- Paternoster** The Latin title for the Lord's Prayer, composed of the first two Latin words 'Our Father'.

- Patriciate** Urban upper class.
- Prebend** Income for priests, also benefice: material foundation for a male or female religious which either belonged to the initial provision of a parish or was the result of a later endowment.
- Prebendary** Secular woman who, often in old age, is cared for in the convent.
- Precentrix or Cantrix** Nun who led the choral singing and often taught the girls = precentor in a men's community.
- Prioress** Highest office within a women's community after the abbess, who bore the responsibility for the community. If there was no abbess in a convent, the prioress was its head.
- Procuratrix** Convent office, bursar, representative of the convent to the external world.
- Profession** Legally valid act of entering holy orders at the age of majority.
- Procurator** Office held by a member of the patriciate, similar to a church warden.
- Provost** Cleric who supervises the affairs of a convent.
- Psalter, Psalteries** The biblical book in which the psalms of David are collected; also the compilation of the psalms and other prayer texts used by the nuns for the Liturgy of the Hours.
- Religious** Men and women who have committed themselves to a spiritual life.
- Responsory** Singing alternating between a precentor and the choir.
- Sacrista** Sexton, nun in charge of the service, church and sacristy.
- Scapular** Liturgical outer garment.
- Scholastica** → Schoolmistress.
- Schoolmistress** Nun responsible for the education of girls in a convent school destined for the religious life.
- Sequence** Latin chant in pairs of stanzas.

Subprioress Deputy for the → Prioress.

Succentrix Deputy for the → *Precentrix*. While the *precentrix* (*cantrix*) leads one choir in the alternate chant, the *succentrix* presides over the other choir.

Suffragan Bishop subordinate to an archbishop.

Under one kind / Form of distributing the Lord's Supper to the
under both kinds laity either only as the host (bread) or also with wine. The Lord's Supper under both kinds became the distinguishing feature of the acceptance of Protestantism, but also of the Utraquists, one of the first denominations to form in Bohemia; it goes back to Jan Hus (died 1415).

Vicarius Priest who is the deputy for the provost among the clergy of the convent.

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5. Sources and Secondary Literature

The titles of the secondary literature provide chapter-by-chapter references to the sources and research results used for and cited in this volume. They are also intended as recommended reading for greater in-depth study.

The introductory stories are taken from Eva Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung. Die Lebenswelt der Nonnen im späten Mittelalter. Mit einer Edition des "Konventstagebuchs" einer Zisterzienserin von Heilig Kreuz bei Braunschweig (1484–1507)* (= Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation 24), Tübingen 2004.

The letters of the Lüne nuns can be viewed online, including short English summaries of each letter, a detailed introduction on the historical background to their creation in German and English and a bibliography, at: <http://diglib.hab.de/edoc/ed000248/start.htm>. Book: *Networks of the Nuns. Edition und Erschließung der Briefsammlung aus Kloster Lüne (ca. 1460–1555)*, ed. by Eva Schlotheuber, Henrike Lähnemann et al. (= Late Middle Ages, Humanism, Reformation 24), Tübingen 2024.

Brief descriptions of all medieval women's monasteries in the region of present-day Lower Saxony, with lists of all office-holders and historical treasures, architectural descriptions and a bibliography can be found in the four-volume reference work *Niedersächsisches Klosterbuch. Verzeichnis der Klöster, Stifte, Kommenden und Beginenhäuser in Niedersachsen und Bremen von den Anfängen bis 1810*, ed. by Josef Dolle, Bielefeld 2012, 2nd edition 2022. Abstracts of the articles exist on the website of Landesgeschichte Göttingen: <http://www.landesgeschichte.uni-goettingen.de/kloester/>.

Many of the pictorial documents can be found in the exhibition catalogue *Schatzhüterin. 200 Jahre Klosterkammer Hannover*, ed. by Katja Lembke and Jens Reiche, Dresden 2018. The Medingen panel paintings and the reform movement in the convents are discussed in Ulrike Hascher-Burger and Henrike Lähnemann, *Liturgie und Reform im Kloster Medingen. Edition und Untersuchung des Propst-Handbuchs*, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Lat. liturg. e. 18 (= Spätmittelalter, Humanismus, Reformation 76), Tübingen 2013. Much of the material can be accessed (largely in English) on the Medingen Manuscripts blog: medingen.seh.ox.ac.uk. Medieval visual evidence with inscriptions, such as the

tapestries, can also be viewed online on the website of the Inscriptions Commission: inschriften.net. The volumes on the Lüneburg Convents, from which much of the visual material is taken, are Volume 24 (1984, Kloster Lüne) and Volume 76 (2009, including Kloster Ebstorf, Kloster Medingen and Kloster Wienhausen). For manuscripts, the web portal handschriftenportal.de provides up-to-date coverage, even more detailed for German manuscripts in <https://www.handschriftencensus.de/>.

Special literature on individual chapters (many of the publications by Henrike Lähnemann and Eva Schlotheuber mentioned are freely accessible via their publication directories on their university homepages in Oxford and Düsseldorf).

Chapter I: *Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte. Kommentierte Neuauflage in zwei Bänden*. Annotated edition of the Ebstorf World Map in two volumes, ed. by Hartmut Kugler, Berlin 2007; Henrike Lähnemann, *Eine imaginäre Reise nach Jerusalem. Der Geographische Traktat des Erhart Groß*, in: *Sehen und Sichtbarkeit in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*, ed. by Ricarda Bauschke, Sebastian Coxon and Martin Jones, Berlin 2011, pp. 408–424.

Chapter II: Eva Schlotheuber, *Ebstorf und seine Schülerinnen in der zweiten Hälfte des 15. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Studien und Texte zur literarischen und materiellen Kultur der Frauenklöster im späten Mittelalter* (= *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought* 99), ed. by Falk Eisermann et al., Leiden/Boston 2004, pp. 169–221. The primary texts are edited by Conrad Borchling, 'Litterarisches und geistiges Leben im Kloster Ebstorf am Ausgang des Mittelalters', *Zeitschrift des Historischen Vereins für Niedersachsens* 4 (1905), pp. 361–407. Philipp Stenzig, *Die Chronik des Klosters Lüne über die Jahre 1481–1530: Hs. Lüne 13*, Tübingen 2019. Falk Eisermann, 'Die Inschriften auf den Textilien des Augustiner-Chorfrauenstifts Heiningen', in: *Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, phil.-hist. Klasse*, 6 (1996) pp. 227–285.

Chapter IV: Eva Schlotheuber, *Willibald und die Klosterfrauen von Sankt Klara – eine wechselhafte Beziehung*, in: *Pirckheimer Jahrbuch für Renaissance- und Humanismusforschung* 28/2014, pp. 57–75; *Willibald Pirckheimers Briefwechsel*, vol. 5, ed. by Helga Scheible, Munich 2001. Wilhelm Nyssen (ed.), *Aelred von Rieval, Über die geistliche Freundschaft. Lateinisch-deutsch*, Trier 1978. *Amicitia: Friendship in Medieval Culture*, Essays in Honour

of Nigel Palmer ed. by Almut Suerbaum and Annette Volfing, Oxford German Studies 36/2 (2007). *Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. by Elizabeth Andersen et al. (Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 44), Leiden 2013.

Chapter V: Henrike Lähnemann, 'Per organa. Musikalische Unterweisung in Handschriften der Lüneburger Klöster', in: *Dichtung und Didaxe. Lehrhaftes Sprechen in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*, ed. by Henrike Lähnemann and Sandra Linden, Berlin/New York 2009, pp. 397–412; Eva Schlotheuber, 'Wir, die wir von Kindheit an wie in einem Rosengarten erzogen worden sind ... Klostereintritt und Ausbildung in den spätmittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern', in: *Damals* 7/2003, pp. 30–36; Henrike Lähnemann, 'Armbrust und Apfelbaum. Eine lateinisch-niederdeutsche Hoheliedauslegung' (Mscr.Dresd.A.323), in: *Auf den Schwingen des Pelikans*, ed. by Ralf Plate et al. (= ZfdA-Beiheft 40/2022), pp. 403–429. Conrad Borchling, 'Litterarisches Leben in Kloster Ebstorf'.

Chapter VI: Henrike Lähnemann, 'Der Medinger "Nonnenkrieg" aus der Perspektive der Klosterreform. Geistliche Selbstbehauptung 1479–1554', in: *1517–1545: The Northern Experience. Mysticism, Art and Devotion between Late Medieval and Early Modern* (Ons Geestelijk Erf 87/2016), ed. by Kees Scheepers et al, pp. 91–116; Martin Luther, *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen und Fürbitte der Heiligen*, ed. by Howard Jones and Henrike Lähnemann, Oxford 2022 (online at editions.mml.ox.ac.uk). Beth Plummer, *Stripping the Veil*, Oxford 2022.

Chapter VII: Generally on the significance of food and dietetics in convents see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (1988). The recipes from Kloster Wienhausen in Chapter VII.2 are taken from an essay by Timo Bülters which appeared in 2017 and can be viewed online: <https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00005030>. The library catalogue of the Dominican convent in Lemgo and a description of the medical manuscripts can be found in Jeffrey Hamburger, Eva Schlotheuber, Margot Fassler, Susan Marti, *Liturgical Life and Latin Learning at Paradies bei Soest, 1300–1425: Inscription and Illumination in the Choir Books of a North German Dominican Convent*, Münster 2017, 2 vols. The magazines *Das Feuer hüten* (first volume translated by Anne Simon as *Tending the Hearth*) published by the General Convention of Abbesses of Protestant Convents in Northern Germany <http://generalkonvent.de/>), provide a vivid and tasty

introduction to the North German monastic landscape. The magazines present the convents in the area of the Klosterkammer Hannover by means of photos and recipes from the regional cuisine selected by the women who currently live there. The magazines are available in the convents.