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CRITICAL REVIEW

**Henrike Lähnemann & Eva Schlotheuber, *The Life of Nuns. Love, Politics, and Religion in Medieval German Convents*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2024. Pp. 199. ISBN 978-1-80511-266-2.**

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Women made up half of the adult population in medieval society. But the personal accounts and the resulting insights of this half of society are vastly underrepresented in the investigation of the period. With *The Life of Nuns*, the historians Henrike Lähnemann (University of Oxford) and Eva Schlotheuber (Heinrich Heine Universität Düsseldorf) address this deficit by introducing their readers to the everyday realities and underlying concepts of German convents between the Late Middle Ages and Early Modernity. For that purpose, the authors draw on their own extensive research connected to a multitude of sources mainly from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in northern German territories, providing distinct female voices that add profoundly to the understanding of the time.

The publication's characteristic emphasis on first-person accounts is reflected in its overall structure. Each of the book's seven interlinked chapters follows a four-step structure, beginning with an introductory paragraph, illustrated by case studies, leading to a more general conceptual evaluation, and ending with the presentation of material objects related to the theme, such as tapestries, statues, and paintings. The *Appendix* stands out as an additional eighth chapter and provides short histories of the convents mentioned in the book, an *Overview of the Daily Routine in a Convent*, a glossary, and information on illustrations, sources, and secondary literature.

The inciting case study in each chapter draws on a late medieval diary that was kept diligently by an unnamed Cistercian nun for over twenty years. These exemplary excerpts span from the evacuation of the nun's convent — the Heilig Kreuz Kloster — outside Braunschweig and the subsequent exile in wartime (chapter I) through an educational cooperation with another convent (chapter II), episodes of familial ties and backgrounds

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(chapter III), a monk's friendly visit in a time of grief (chapter IV), the singing of sacred and secular songs (chapter V), the visit of the papal legate in Braunschweig (chapter VI) to experiences of illness, death, and the plague (chapter VII). The anonymous Cistercian nun's account is usually followed by further case studies, often based on correspondence by nuns from various other German convents. The focus on the inclusion of these very personal voices and narratives lends a distinct authenticity to the general arguments of the book and makes for engaging, immersive reading. Throughout *The Life of Nuns*, the authors hardly leave a global observation unsupported by primary sources.

Regarding each chapter and theme, the authors move effectively between the particular and the universal. This can be demonstrated through the first chapter. Titled *Enclosure*, the chapter is framed by two images, the floor plan of the Benedictine convent of Ebstorf at the beginning and the Ebstorf world map at the end, thereby illustrating the rigid structure of a nun's *Lebensraum* from the specific architectural setup of a convent to the world view that serves as the spiritual foundation of monastic life. The introduction to "the macro- and microcosm of the convent" (p. 31) also touches on temporal aspects like the daily and yearly routine, which — in my opinion — could have been examined further and expanded conceptually in an additional chapter focused on Time.

The second chapter, however, deals with *Education*, stressing how the quality of teaching could add to a convent's prestige and outlines the contents and formative steps from the state of a novice to that of a choir nun. School lessons were oriented towards liturgy and daily life. The mastery of Latin was central to the understanding and interpretation of the source texts. Familiarization with "the basic sciences" (p. 49) and economics helped with the completion of everyday tasks in the convent. Such opportunities for learning were mostly withheld from women and girls beyond the confined space of a convent. Therefore:

Religious life as an alternative to marriage was highly attractive to women and their families. [...] Admission to a convent gave the girls access to a learned education and a career in responsible leadership positions [...] (p. 44).

To demonstrate the importance of education, the authors close the second chapter with an examination of the monumental Heiningen Philosophy Tapestry by which the Augustinian nuns of the local convent visually conceptualized a knowledge universe and their own place in it.

The third chapter, titled *Nuns, Family, and Community*, presents the ways the connection to a nun's family was maintained despite the obligatory transfer of guardianship. Subsequently, it addresses the complex relations with society beyond a convent's walls. A medieval convent represented a hierarchy that extended beyond the body of choir nuns living in enclosure. Convents were also populated by lay sisters, convent members of lower



status who could take up tasks outside. There had to be a provost, who served as administrator of secular matters and often headed a pool of clergymen the nuns needed due to gender-based prohibitions, such as the one forbidding women to celebrate Mass. The complexity of the convent as a unique arrangement of working and living spaces was further increased by the presence of craftsmen, laymen, servants, and maids.

To delve deeper into matters of personal exchange, the fourth chapter examines the topics of *Love and Friendship*. Their marriage to Christ created a bond between the nuns and a common understanding of their status as intermediaries between humankind and God. A resulting sense of agency manifested itself in communication with the outer world “through letters, gifts, intercession, advice and mutual aid” (p. 81). Naturally, the facets of love and friendship in a late medieval nun’s life were not limited to their fundamental spiritual union. It is within in a more profane context, in the realm of the “Nuremberg convent of the Poor Clares” (p. 84), that I personally locate my most memorable case study of the entire book. The German correspondence between nun Klara and her brother Willibald Pirckheimer, and the Latin correspondence between their sister abbess Caritas and their friend Conrad Celtis, are highly entertaining and revelatory, showing the nuns’ wit, eloquence, empathy, humor, and — maybe above all — their learned persuasiveness. That their conversation partners are now considered two of the most influential humanists of their time, further adds to the significance of their exchange. And it implies that because of their status as women and nuns, remarkable figures like Klara and Caritas have mostly been ignored and undervalued by historical sciences which were — and often still are — over-occupied with the accentuation of “great and influential men”. Following the case study, the chapter traces the medieval concept of friendship back to the Old Testament and Antiquity and exemplifies skillful establishment, cultivation, and preservation of friendly relationships inside and outside the convents. True to their method of closing with material objects the authors present manifestations of the ideas of love and friendship in the form of sculptures and depictions of Christ that play with vicinity and arrangement towards the messianic protagonist.

In chapter five the topic of monastic reform is approached through its manifestation in music. Music was a central aspect of life in the convent mainly but not only in the liturgical context. The cross-fertilization of the spiritual and the secular is documented in song lyrics of the time. To reform life in the convent — to “bring its way of life closer to the original ideals of Christianity” (p. 103) — often meant a shedding of long-established local routines in favor of stricter religious discipline. How this could affect convent life on every level — from liturgical rigidity to the equal provision of food — is shown by an example from the Cistercian Kloster Medingen. The thematic combination of *Music and Reform* in this chapter is interesting and original yet it must be remarked that the topics cannot always be merged without difficulty and are for the most part presented separately.



The following sixth chapter deals with the overall challenge the Reformation brought to monastic life by questioning its entire theological foundation.

The central point of Lutheran theology was that no man could earn grace for himself, not even through a pious life and good works, a path which monastic life represented *par excellence* (p. 140).

Perhaps counterintuitively, in the years leading up to the Reformation the level of church-bound religiosity in the general population remained extremely high, as is shown by the report on the papal legate's visit to Braunschweig and the extensive measures taken to welcome the cardinal and receive indulgences. Accordingly, many convents strongly resisted the introduction of teachings aligned with the Reformation, as illustrated by an incident from Kloster Medingen, where the abbess burned a German Luther Bible that had been presented to the convent by Duke Ernst.

As a logical final step in a book titled *The Life of Nuns*, chapter seven focuses on *Illness and Dying*, examining the nuns' role as carers for the poor and the sick, as well as their experience in the treatment of illnesses, terminal care, and the commemoration of the dead. Death is treated openly and communally in the Middle Ages. Preserved paintings of the choir in Kloster Wienhausen illustrate, among other things, the orientation of the enclosed convent space towards the heavenly beyond, as well as the practice of bloodletting as a regular task in the secular context.

In the spiritual understanding, knowledge of the connection between life and death opened up deeper aspects of what it is to be human, which [...] were experienced as very comforting, with the result that many lay people sought proximity to the nuns and their community. In this respect, the nuns constituted an entirely independent force and strong voice within medieval society (p. 175).

Thus, the nuns' role as terminal carers and commemorators of the deceased alone suffices to demonstrate the importance and high standing of medieval nuns. Accordingly, the final focus on death effectively consolidates the central message of a book devoted to the lives of a remarkable group of women.

The German original publication of the book has been very well received by both the public and academia. German scholar Wolfgang Brückner, for example, recommends the book as obligatory reading in introductory medieval history courses at universities (see *Bayerisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde*, 2024, pp. 262-64). This English translation seeks to expose a broader readership to medieval Germany, with its unparalleled wealth of preserved documents, particularly because, in medieval England, for example, "the dissolution of the



monasteries eradicated the greater part of the material heritage of the convents” (p. 5). Authors and translator are philologically transparent about the publication’s relationship to the German original by including helpful commentary on translation choices and terminology.

In either language, Henrike Lähnemann and Eva Schlottheuber succeed in lending a voice to an often-neglected segment of medieval society. It becomes undeniable that, despite their frequent subordination in historical narratives, nuns constituted an integral part of medieval society, exercising influence, education, and agency. The book’s portrayal of “the great group of learned, feisty, devout, capable, and enterprising nuns” (p. 1) is as revelatory as it is compelling, as the authors strike a careful balance between scholarly transparency and popular accessibility. In conclusion, *The Life of Nuns* can be equally recommended to the scholar of medieval history and to the curious but unacquainted reader seeking female voices from the past that have long been drowned out by the other half of society.