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Migrating Nuns—Migrating Liturgy: The Context of Reform in Female Convents of the Late Middle Ages

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I. Text and Context

Issues surrounding reform in female convents of the late Middle Ages, particularly in convents in the German-speaking world, have been looked into by linguists, historians, and theologians for quite a number of years.¹ Yet in most cases the term “reform” has been used (and continues to be used) in a very narrow sense, both by the reformers of the late Middle Ages and also by modern-day scholars: reform is understood as the introduction or reintroduction of enclosure—when this is done, a convent is considered a reformed convent. Once walls have been erected and doors locked, reform is achieved.

Reform, however, meant considerably more than just subjecting the nuns to a renewed, strict form of enclosure. Changes affecting convents were not restricted to their relationship to the outside world; reform always implied changes in the liturgy, too. These changes, as well as the forms in which they were implemented, have rarely been studied by scholars. The implementation of an altered liturgy, and of the reform as a whole, usually occurred in a specific way: sisters left their original convents and migrated into the convents that were

1. The present essay on the influence of nuns and sisters on liturgical change is the beginning of a larger research project on liturgy in female convents in the late Middle Ages.

to be reformed, taking with them a plan for liturgical celebrations that were—or were supposed to be—truer to the monastic rules. In what follows, I will inquire into the conditions and forms of these migrations of liturgy and into their impact on the social and cultural identity of the convents to be reformed.

A. Female Convents in the Late Middle Ages

The following remarks concentrate primarily on monasteries in the German-speaking world. The general circumstances of late medieval female convents are broadly comparable, irrespective of the individual affiliation to a special order. By the twelfth century, a vast number of convents had been established, predominantly in towns and cities but also in rural areas. Whereas the communities founded in the early Middle Ages had chiefly been Benedictine—communities with restrictive admission rules—the advent of the Cistercians opened up enormous opportunities for women. By the late thirteenth century, more than 250 convents of Cistercian nuns had been established in the territory of the empire.² The period when the mendicant friars spread throughout Europe saw the establishment on a similar scale of female communities of Dominicans, Clarissans, Augustinians, and—not least—tertiaries of the Third Order of the Friars Minor. Initially, the male branches of the orders were troubled by concerns and discussions on how to provide, or ward off, pastoral care for these female communities,³ yet by the end of the fourteenth century the nunneries were consolidated and had gained acceptance. At the same time, an intense reform movement developed, especially within the Dominican Order, known as the Observance. In connection with this Observance—along with reformist ideas within the church as a whole, articulated, for instance, at

2. Franz J. Felten, “Zisterzienserinnen in Deutschland: Beobachtungen und Überlegungen zu Ausbreitung und Ordenszugehörigkeit,” in *Unanimité et diversité cisterciennes: Filiations, réseaux, relectures de XIIe au XVIIe siècles*, Actes du quatrième Colloque international du CERCOR, Dijon, 23–25 Septembre 1998, ed. Nicole Bouter (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Étienne, 2000), 345–400, here 348.

3. Brigitte Degler-Spengler, “‘Zahlreich wie die Sterne des Himmels’: Zisterzienser, Dominikaner und Franziskaner vor dem Problem der Inkorporation von Frauenklöstern,” *Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte* 4 (1985): 37–50; idem, “The Incorporation of Cistercian Nuns into the Order in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century,” in *Hidden Springs: Cistercian Monastic Women*, ed. John A. Nichols and Lillian Thomas Shank, *Medieval Religious Women*, vol. 3, bk. 1 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 85–134; Franz J. Felten, “Der Zisterzienserorden und die Frauen,” in *Weltverachtung und Heilsgewißheit*, ed. Harald Schwillus and Andreas Hölscher, *Studien zu Geschichte, Kunst und Kultur der Zisterzienser* 10 (Berlin: Lukas Verlag, 2000), 34–135.

the councils of Constance and Basle—similar reform activities occurred in Benedictine and Cistercian communities. The reform communities of Kastl, Melk, and particularly Bursfeld reached not only male convents but nunneries as well.⁴ In addition, this reform context includes Johannes Busch's reformist ideas for the Augustinians, as well as the birth of the *devotio moderna* in the Netherlands and in northern Germany, including the Windesheim Congregation.⁵ At any rate, reform was on the agenda of men's and women's convents alike, whereas differences between the sexes characterized the content and the practice of reform.

B. The Context of Reform and Observance

The reformers aimed at "observance," understood as strict adherence to the monastic rules. Their activities centered on the notion of a return to the origins of monastic rules. This meant first and foremost adherence to the original rule in question, and furthermore a markedly stricter way of life in accordance with the threefold vows. At the same time, however, the motif of "return to the origin of the rule" often became a topos in and of itself. In the name of "the origin," individual reformers enforced what they themselves deemed appropriate and original.⁶ Especially with respect to women's convents, return to the origin meant, above all, enclosure—regardless of whether or not this had been part

4. Johannes Linneborn, "Die Reformation der Benediktinerklöster im 15. Jahrhundert durch die Bursfelder Kongregation: Die Reformation der Frauenklöster," *Studien- und Mitteilungen aus dem Benediktiner- und Zisterzienserorden* 22 (1901): 48–71, 396–418; Inge Mager, "Bemühungen um die Reform der Klosterkonvente im 15. Jahrhundert: Grundzüge der Windesheimer und Bursfelder Reform," in *Trinitäts- und Christudogma: Ihre Bedeutung für Beten und Handeln der Kirche*, FS Jouko Martikainen, ed. Jobst Reller (Münster: LIT, 2001), 223–43; Elke-Ursel Hammer, "Substrukturen, Zentren und Regionen in der Bursfelder Benediktinerkongregation," in *Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, FS Matthias Werner, ed. Enno Bünz et al. (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007), 397–426; Anja Freckmann, *Die Bibliothek des Klosters Bursfelde im Spätmittelalter* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2006).

5. Bertram Lesser, "Zwischen Windesheim und Bursfelde: Klosterreformen in Hildesheim im 15. Jahrhundert," in *Schätze im Himmel, Bücher auf Erden. Mittelalterliche Handschriften aus Hildesheim*, ed. Monika Müller, Ausstellung der Herzog-August-Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel (Wolfenbüttel: Herzog-August-Bibliothek, 2010), 31–40; Wybren Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The "Modern Devotion," the Canonesses of Windesheim and Their Writings* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2004); Mathilde van Dijk, "Disciples of the Deep Desert: Windesheim Biographers and the Imitation of the Desert Fathers," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 86 (2006): 257–90.

6. Gert Melville, "Aspekte zum Vergleich von Krisen und Reformen in mittelalterlichen Klöstern und Orden," in *Mittelalterliche Orden und Klöster im Vergleich: Methodische Ansätze*

of the original rule. Enclosure became the crucial hallmark and the essential ingredient of what constituted reform.⁷

In order to enforce their reformist ideas, the reformers—male in most cases—took a raft of measures. Ensuring enclosure by means of walls, gates, and grills constituted a principal measure. These changes to the monastic buildings were propped up by educational measures. Frequently, the introduction or reinforcement of enclosure carried with it instruction in reading, writing, and, above all, Latin, all deliberately introduced with regard to changes in the liturgy.⁸ Simultaneously, women's convents rediscovered for themselves the value of the written word, with the number of chronicles and other texts written in convents rising significantly.⁹ A quite common move—the consequences of which have yet to be explored—was the transfer of nuns from a reformed convent to a convent facing reform. This phenomenon will be dealt with in more detail below. Other reform measures included a reorganization of male supervision, conducted by secular or monastic clergy or, in economic matters, by male lay bailiffs.

C. The Written Evidence for Reform

Convent reforms of the late Middle Ages are exceptionally well documented. It is almost exclusively the reformers or the reformed convents who

und Perspektiven, ed. Gert Melville and Anne Müller, *Vita Regularis* 34 (Berlin: LIT, 2007), 139–60.

7. Sigrid Schmitt, “‘Wilde, unzucht- und ungaistlich swestern’: Straßburger Frauenkonvente im Spätmittelalter,” in *Frauen und Kirche*, ed. Sigrid Schmitt (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2002), 71–94; Heike Uffmann, “Inside and Outside the Convent Walls: The Norm and Practice of Enclosure in the Reformed Nunneries of Late Medieval Germany,” *The Medieval History Journal* 4 (2001): 83–108; Gisela Muschiol, “Versorgung, Unterdrückung, Selbstbestimmung? Religiöse Frauengemeinschaften als Forschungsfeld,” *Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte* 27 (2008): 13–26, esp. 17.

8. Heike Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten: Monastische Reformen des späten Mittelalters in den Vorstellungen von Klosterfrauen* (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2008), 80–97; Marie-Luise Ehrenschtndtner, *Die Bildung der Dominikanerinnen in Süddeutschland vom 13. bis 15. Jahrhundert*, *Contubernium Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte* 60 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2004), 119–48; idem, “Puellae litteratae: The Use of the Vernacular in the Dominican Convents of Southern Germany,” in *Medieval Women in Their Communities*, ed. Diane Watt (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1997), 49–71; Henrike Lähnemann, “Der Auferstandene im Dialog mit den Frauen: Die Erscheinungen Christi in den Andachtsbüchern des Klosters Medingen,” in *Passion und Ostern in den Lüneburger Klöstern*, ed. Linda Maria Koldau (Ebendorf: Kloster Ebendorf, 2010), 105–34.

9. Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten*, 107–22; Ehrenschtndtner, *Die Bildung*, 277–86.

left records of the reform. Those convents that successfully resisted reform, and those individual monks and nuns opposed to reform who avoided it by leaving or changing their community, documented their unwillingness much less frequently. Reforms are recorded in various types of sources, prominent among them the historiographic texts written in the convents. Chronicles, displaying a visible interest in their subject matter, give a well-aimed account of the beginnings of the reform, of its progress, of its successes in all areas of monastic life, of its impact, and of its exemplariness.¹⁰ A similar genre are the *Schwesternbücher*, “sister books,” collections of short biographies of deceased sisters of a convent aiming to present role models for the living. Though most known sister books date back to the fourteenth century, that is, the period preceding the reform, a number of such books from the late fifteenth century, containing descriptions of sisterly lives led in an exemplary reformed fashion, have survived.¹¹

A mostly personal view emerges from the few extant letters and collections of letters. When Katharina of Mühlheim, a nun from Schönensteinbach Abbey (where the Dominican Observance originated), wrote to her former prioress, she reported that, in seeking reform, she had to set off three times for new convents, thus revealing some of the troubles of the reform: “I would never have thought that I would have to spend my life alone with only one sister from Schönensteinbach. Know that it makes me very sad that I must live so far from Schönensteinbach, and also so far from all those sisters.”¹²

Texts such as these provide information on everyday life and holidays, on the economy and the use of power, and also on the practice of the liturgy. Moreover, women’s convents have also left a legacy of books explicitly intended for liturgical and paraliturgical use: antiphonals, breviaries, hymn books, psalteries, sequentiaries, and prayer books.¹³ The Dominican women’s convent

10. Anne Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles: Women Writing about Women and Reform in the Late Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004); Antje Willing, *Literatur und Ordensreform im 15. Jahrhundert: Deutsche Abendmahlsschriften im Nürnberger Katharinenkloster* (Münster: Waxmann, 2004).

11. Anne Bollmann, “Frauenleben und Frauenliteratur in der Devotio moderna. Volkssprachliche Schwesternbücher in literarhistorischer Perspektive” (PhD diss., University of Groningen, 2004); Anne Bollmann and Nikolaus Staubach, eds., *Schwesternbuch und Statuten des St. Agnes-Konvents in Emmerich* (Emmerich: Emmericher Geschichtsverein, 1998).

12. *Seraphin Dietlers Chronik des Klosters Schönensteinbach*, ed. Johann von Schlumberger (Gebweiler: J. Boltz, 1897), 406; and Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles*, 105.

13. See the manuscripts and editions listed by Winston-Allen, *Convent Chronicles*, 293–301; Renate Giermann and Helmut Härtel, eds., *Handschriften des Klosters Ebstorf, Mittelalterliche*

in Nuremberg, for example, is the original home of a handbook for the nun sacristan, composed by the Katharina of Mühlheim, whose letter is quoted above.¹⁴ The Benedictine nunnery of Preetz in Schleswig-Holstein preserves a so-called *Buch im Chore* (book in the choir) in which the prioress describes the proceedings of a late fifteenth-century church service—the realities as well as the ideals—where she renders visible the objectives of reform within a single convent.¹⁵ Furthermore, various ceremonial books and *libri ordinarii* of the reform communities can be drawn upon in the quest for the migrations of the liturgy carried into the convents by migrating nuns and monks.¹⁶

II. Reform in Practice: The Migrating Nuns

Given the profusion of records just described, we have to confine ourselves to a selection here. The focus of the following remarks will be on two groups of female reformers: migrating nuns within the Dominican Observance and migrating nuns within the Bursfeld and Windesheim reform. With regard to the Dominican Observance, we will investigate the networks of nunneries in

Handschriften in Niedersachsen 10 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994); Karin Schneider, ed., *Die Handschriften der Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg*, vol. 1: *Die deutschen mittelalterlichen Handschriften* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1965), xi–xxxvi; see <http://www.manuscripta-mediaevalia.de> for the manuscripts of the convent of St. Catherine in Nuremberg now housed in the Germanische Nationalmuseum and in the library of the city of Nuremberg; Christine Sauer, “Zwischen Kloster und Welt: Illuminierter Handschriften aus dem Dominikanerinnenkonvent St. Katharina in Nürnberg,” in *Frauen—Kloster—Kunst: Neue Forschungen zur Kulturgeschichte des Mittelalters*, Beiträge zum Internationalen Kolloquium vom 13.–16. Mai 2005 anlässlich der Ausstellung “Krone und Schleier,” ed. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Carola Jäggi (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 113–30.

14. Gerhard Weilandt, “Alltag einer Küsterin: Die Ausstattung und liturgische Nutzung von Chor und Nonnenempore der Nürnberger Dominikanerinnenkirche nach dem unbekanntem ‘Notel der Küsterin’ (1436),” in *Kunst und Liturgie: Choranlagen des Spätmittelalters: Ihre Architektur, Ausstattung und Nutzung*, ed. Anna Moraht-Fromm (Ostfildern: J. Thorbecke, 2003), 159–87.

15. Elfriede Kelm, “Das ‘Buch im Chore’ der Priörin Anna von Buchwald im Klosterarchiv zu Preetz,” *Jahrbuch Plön* 4 (1974): 68–83; Johannes Rosenplänter, *Kloster Preetz und seine Grundherrschaft: Sozialgefüge, Wirtschaftsbeziehungen und religiöser Alltag eines holsteinischen Frauenklosters um 1210–1550*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Schleswig-Holsteins 114 (Neumünster: Wachholtz, 2009).

16. Marcellus Albert, ed., *Caeremoniale Bursfeldenses*, *Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum* 13 (Siegburg: F. Schmitt, 2002); Albert Schmidt, *Zusätze als Problem des monastischen Stundengebets im Mittelalter* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1986).

southern and upper Germany.¹⁷ As to the Bursfeld and Windesheim reform, the so-called Heideklöster (heath cloisters) deserve special attention; they were a group of nunneries of Benedictine or Cistercian character situated in the heathland around Lüneburg, to the south of Hamburg. For a variety of reasons, the written records from these religious houses have been preserved much more fully than in other regions. The convents in question are Ebstorf (OSB), Isenhagen (OCist), Lüne (OSB), Medingen (OCist), Walsrode (OSB), and Wienhausen (OCist).¹⁸

A. Dominican Nuns on the Move

In his fifth *Buch der Reformacio Predigerordens* (book of the reform of the Dominican Order), Johannes Meyer, an observant Dominican living in the fifteenth century, describes in detail the events surrounding the reforms of the individual women's convents.¹⁹ Introduction of the Observance in different women's convents shared one striking feature: reform was implemented not by handing over texts or books but by introducing a group of sisters from convents that had already been reformed. This phenomenon crisscrossed the southern parts of the empire: sisters from Colmar transferred to Basle, to Strasbourg, to Speyer, to Freiburg;²⁰ sisters from Schönensteinbach in Alsace transferred to Nuremberg, to Pforzheim, to Freiburg, to Medlingen near Augsburg;²¹ sisters

17. Eva Schlotheuber, "Bücher und Bildung in den Frauengemeinschaften der Bettelorden," in *Nonnen, Kanonissen und Mystikerinnen: Religiöse Frauengemeinschaften in Süddeutschland*, ed. Eva Schlotheuber, Helmut Flachenecker, and Ingrid Gardill (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 241–62; Hieronymus Wilms, *Das älteste Verzeichnis der deutschen Dominikanerinnenklöster*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens in Deutschland 24 (Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1928).

18. Ida-Christine Riggert, *Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster* (Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1996); Wolfgang Brandis, "Die Archive der Lüneburger Klöster," in *"In Treue und Hingabe": 800 Jahre Kloster Ebstorf*, ed. Marianne Elster and Horst Hoffmann (Ebstorf: Kloster Ebstorf, 1997), 275–82.

19. Johannes Meyer, *Buch der Reformacio Predigerordens*, ed. Benedictus Maria Reichert, Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte des Dominikanerordens in Deutschland 2/3 (Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1908–9). The *Buch der Reformacio* is divided into five parts, called *Buch I* to *Buch V*. I quote from the edition of Reichert, naming the part of the *Buch* and the page of the detailed report of the migrations. The references that follow give the page numbers in *Buch V*.

20. Meyer, *Buch V*, from Colmar-Unterlinden to Basle, 52ff.; to Strasbourg-Nikolaus in undis, 80; to Strasbourg-St Agnes, 123; to Speyer, 198; to Freiburg-Adelhausen, 114f.

21. *Ibid.*, from Schönensteinbach to Nuremberg, 64–66; to Pforzheim, 102f.; to Freiburg-Magdalen, 120; to Medlingen, 147f.

from Basle, for their part, transferred to Worms, to Strasbourg, to Bern;²² and eventually those from Nuremberg, freshly reformed, transferred to Tulln (nowadays part of Austria), Pforzheim, Bamberg, Altenhohenau,²³ and so on. These migrating nuns took pivotal positions in their new convents, among them those of sexton²⁴ and singer,²⁵ positions directly linked to the liturgy. In addition, the migrating nuns regularly included sisters who were highly literate and especially able to write choir books.²⁶

A vast amount of detail is provided by the accounts of the reform in the three Dominican women's convents in Freiburg im Breisgau, for the Dominican chronicler Johannes Meyer was obviously present there in person. The reform in Freiburg-Adelhausen began with a procession into the church. Having sung the antiphon *Sub tuum* at the altar of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the reform sisters proceeded to the nuns' choir, where they sang the hymn *Veni creator*, including the versicle. What followed was the appropriate *oratio*. Meyer refers to this sequence as "how one usually does it when a cloister is to be reformed." Similar things happened in the second convent, St. Agnes: three initial steps of reform were the procession into the church, a *Salve regina* sung in a kneeling position, and the hymn *Veni creator* sung in the choir. Likewise, in the last of the three convents in Freiburg, that of the Magdalen Sisters, the antiphon *Sub tuum* was sung, then the hymn *Veni creator*, and finally—in honor of the *matroness* (as the fifteenth-century account puts it)—the antiphon *Intercede*, followed by a concluding sermon.²⁷

Johannes Meyer postulated an indissoluble link between the practice of reform and the practice of liturgy. This link was bolstered by all kinds of choir books written by the sisters. The Dominican women's convent in Nuremberg is the place of origin of a total of more than six hundred extant vernacular manuscripts, probably the largest library of a late medieval women's cloister in Germany, the major part written in the course of the reform.²⁸ The liturgical

22. *Ibid.*, from the reformed convent of Basle to Worms-Hochheim, 78f.; to Strasbourg-Nikolaus in undis, 80f.; to Bern, 101f.

23. *Ibid.*, from Nuremberg to Tulln, 95ff.; to Pforzheim, 102f.; to Bamberg, 107f.; to Altenhohenau, 122.

24. *Ibid.*, in Strasbourg-St Agnes, 134; in Basle, 54.

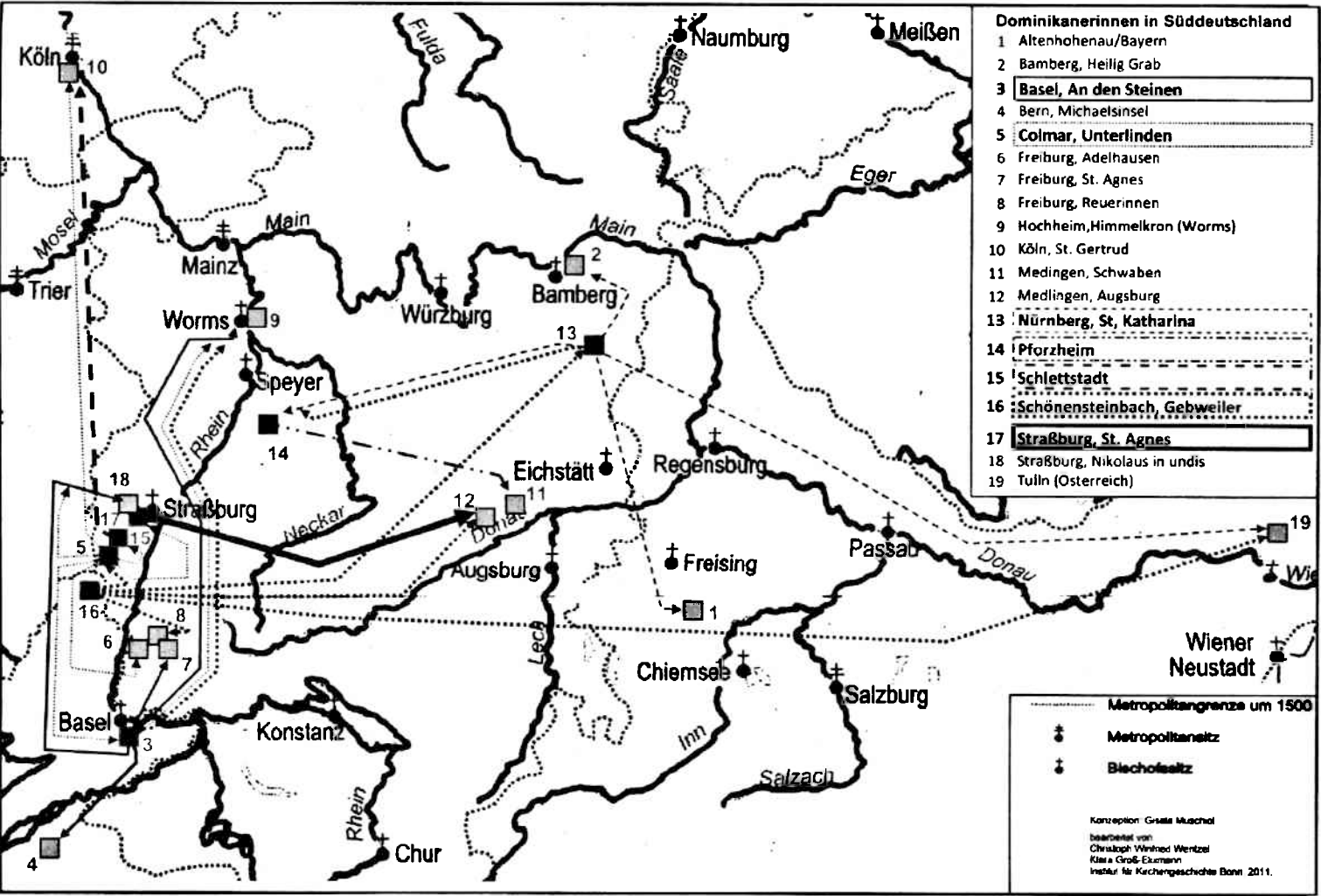
25. In Nuremberg Sister Margareth Kartäuserin assumed the office of singer; *ibid.*, 66.

26. In Comar-Unterlinden, *ibid.*, 101.

27. *Ibid.*, 118–20.

28. Willing, *Literatur und Ordensreform*, 22ff.; Barbara Steinke, *Paradiesgarten oder Gefängnis? Das Nürnberger Katharinenkloster zwischen Klosterreform und Reformation, Spätmittelalter und Reformation Neue Reihe 30* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 56–61; Ehrenscheidtner, *Die Bildung*, 21–29, 334–37.

*Routes of the migrating
Dominican nuns in
Southern Germany.*



manuscripts from Nuremberg have not yet been analyzed in their entirety. According to Meyer, the reforming nuns on the move taught singing, reading, and writing.²⁹ Sister Margreth Kartäuserin may serve as a concrete example. She is reported to have held the position of *cantrix* for more than thirty years and, as one of the migrating reform sisters, to have written the hymn books afresh, all of them—according to the sources—of laudable artistic quality.³⁰

The surviving records also document the exchange of books between observant women's convents: the Dominicans in St. Gall borrowed a gradual and an *evangeliar* from Nuremberg,³¹ as well as a handbook for the sacristan, which described all the proceedings of worship in the course of the year, including the necessary preparatory work.³² Likewise, the Dominican women in Nuremberg sent a *rituale* to Altenhohenau, thus supporting the reform endeavors of the sisters dispatched there from Nuremberg.³³

These chronicles tell us that the migrating nuns brought with them a modified liturgy that they regarded as more accurate than the older rites and that they introduced in their new convents both by heart and by books. In Nuremberg, for instance, the reform changed the rules governing the Liturgy of the Hours. Henceforth, the so-called “seven times” (with Matins and Lauds fused into one) were to be sung in the sister's choir—and by all the sisters, the possibility of a leave of absence no longer being provided for.³⁴

B. Migrating Nuns from the Bursfeld and Windesheim Reform

The women's convents in the Teutonia province of the Dominicans were not alone in considering the changes of the liturgy introduced by migrating nuns to be worth reporting. Comprehensive accounts of reform have also survived from the large zone of influence of the Bursfeld reform, whose exact size is no longer discoverable. As far as the “heath cloisters” in the Lüneburg area are concerned, pertinent accounts from Ebstorf, Lüne, and Wienhausen still exist;³⁵ in the case of Medingen we have a brief report, as well as a huge

29. Meyer, *Buch V*, 61.

30. Ehrenschwendtner, *Die Bildung*, 289.

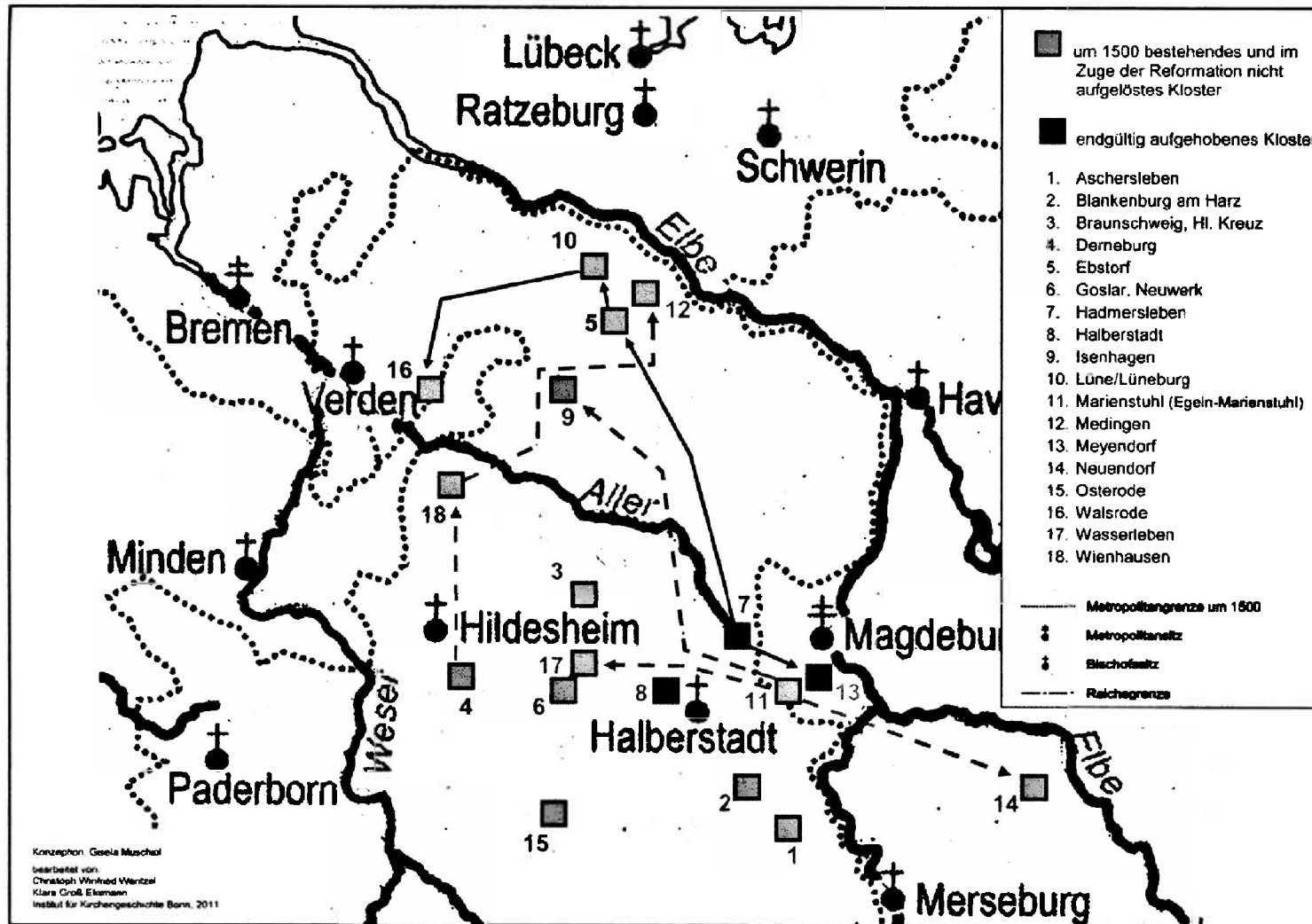
31. *Ibid.*, 291.

32. Weilandt, “Alltag einer Küsterin,” 165.

33. Ehrenschwendtner, *Die Bildung*, 292.

34. *Ibid.*, 152f.; that the rules could change is noted in the “Notel” of the sexton—cf. Weilandt, “Alltag einer Küsterin,” 173.

35. Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten*, 123–33; Helmut Härtel, “Die Bibliothek des Klosters Ebstorf im späten Mittelalter,” in *“In Treue und Hingabe”: 800 Jahre Kloster Ebstorf*, ed. Marianne Elster and Horst Hoffmann (Ebstorf: Kloster Ebstorf, 1997), 109–22; Ernst Nolte,



Routes of the migrating nuns from northern German convents.

number of manuscripts on liturgical matters that contain evidence of reforms.³⁶ None of these women's cloisters formally joined the Bursfeld Congregation or the Windesheim Congregation, yet all were affected indirectly by the reformist ideas emanating from Bursfeld and Windesheim.³⁷

The reform in Ebstorf required two attempts: in 1469 the abbess of Hadmersleben Abbey in the Diocese of Halberstadt and some of her nuns came to Ebstorf, following the explicit request of the provost of Ebstorf, to introduce the new liturgy of the Bursfeld reform.³⁸ In December of 1469, they returned to Hadmersleben. Obviously, the roots put down by the new liturgy were not deep enough, and difficulties developed. Therefore, in January of 1470, two nuns from Hadmersleben were dispatched to Ebstorf once again: Mechthild of Niendorf, who became the new prioress, and another nun, whose name is not known.³⁹ The reform saw the production of numerous manuscripts in Ebstorf, mostly of a liturgical character. Even though the manuscripts for Mass and the Divine Office have been lost (due to the sixteenth-century Reformation), the extant manuscripts indicate that, apart from enclosure, the renewal of the liturgy constituted the main component of the reform. The surviving books from Ebstorf include four breviaries and an equal number of breviary fragments, as many as ten Latin and six Low German prayer books and an equal number of corresponding fragments, three collections of sermons, two psalteries, and several collections and fragments of hymnaries, antiphonals, and gradual books.⁴⁰ Looking at the library as a whole, we can see that the reform of the liturgy initiated by the nuns from Hadmersleben evolved in three stages.⁴¹ During the first stage, which laid the foundation of the reform, the sisters in Ebstorf acquired writing skills as well

Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Nonnenklosters Lüne bei Lüneburg, vol. 1: *Die Quellen: Die Geschichte Lünens von den Anfängen bis zur Klostererneuerung im Jahre 1481* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932); Horst Appuhn, ed., *Chronik und Totenbuch des Klosters Wienhausen* (Wienhausen: Kloster Wienhausen, 1986).

36. See the research project of Henrike Lähnemann on the Medingen manuscripts: http://research.ncl.ac.uk/medingen/public_extern, accessed February 29, 2012. My thanks to Henrike Lähnemann for lively discussions.

37. Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten*, 126, 129, 132; cf. Philipp Hofmeister, "Liste der Nonnenklöster der Bursfelder Kongregation," *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktinerordens und seiner Zweige* 53 (1935): 77–102; Albert, *Caeremoniale Bursfeldenses*, 19–25.

38. Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten*, 126.

39. *Ibid.*, 127.

40. Härtel, "Die Bibliothek des Klosters Ebstorf," 118–21; cf. Giermann/Härtel, *Handschriften des Klosters Ebstorf*, with an overview of the all the manuscripts.

41. Härtel, "Die Bibliothek des Klosters Ebstorf," 109.

as a knowledge of Latin. The second stage consisted of catechetical instruction in the liturgy; in Ebstorf two explanations of the Mass, an exegetical text on the Lord's Prayer, and other catechetical texts have survived. The third stage of liturgical reform was a renewed and deeper grounding in prayer. The sixteen prayer books, though all unique and written by different sisters for their personal use, have one thing in common: they were in daily use, both for meditation during Mass and Divine Office and for the enrichment of the interim periods.⁴²



Console with two nuns in the cloister of the convent of Ebstorf. Photo by author.

The reform of the liturgy, and of convent life as a whole, proved such a success that between 1477 and 1482 the Benedictine convent at Ebstorf reformed four other women's convents and dispatched nuns to these convents.⁴³ One of the religious houses reformed by the migrating nuns from the convent at Ebstorf was Lüne Abbey. In 1481 seven nuns were dispatched from Ebstorf to Lüne, headed by Mechthild of Niendorf, prioress at Ebstorf and former nun at Hadmersleben. Out of these seven migrating nuns, two spent the rest of their lives in Lüne, assuming leading positions there; two other nuns stayed for three years; and the three remaining nuns, among them the prioress, spent only a

42. Ibid., 113; cf. Johanna Thali, "Qui vult cum Deo semper esse, frequenter debet orare, frequenter et legere: Formen und Funktionen des Lesens in der klösterlichen Frömmigkeitskultur," in *Lesevorgänge. Prozesse des Erkennens in mittelalterlichen Texten, Bildern und Handschriften*, ed. Eckart C. Lutz, Martina Backes, and Stefan Matter, *Medienwandel—Medienwechsel—Medienwissen* 11 (Zürich: Chronos, 2010), 421–58.

43. Klaus Jaintner, "Das Benediktinerinnenkloster Ebstorf im Mittelalter (ca. 1165–1550)," in *Das Benediktinerinnenkloster Ebstorf im Mittelalter: Vorträge einer Tagung im Kloster Ebstorf vom 22.–24. Mai 1987*, ed. Klaus Jaintner (Hildesheim: August Lax, 1988), 1–25, esp. 20f.

brief spell in Lüne.⁴⁴ The reform itself began with the celebration of Mass.⁴⁵ The manuscripts written in Lüne preserve a remarkable piece of evidence illustrating the importance of the migrating nuns as vehicles of reform. The extremely strict enclosure regulations provided only one reason for which sisters were permitted to leave their cloister: *pro activa vel passiva reformatione*.⁴⁶

About twenty years later, Lüne witnessed further liturgical changes enforced by a prioress who was influenced by the reform.⁴⁷ Excerpts from a manuscript of the *Caeremoniale Bursfeldensis*, written either still in Ebstorf or already in Lüne, have been handed down to us.⁴⁸ A comparison of this *Caeremoniale* with the manuscripts from men's convents of the Bursfeld Congregation reveals that most sections are the same, but female terms for the officers are used, and the chapter *De sacerdote* has been replaced in the manuscript from Lüne with a chapter *De collectoria*, dealing with the task of the female prayer leader in the Liturgy of the Hours.⁴⁹ One of the chronicles from Lüne provides in an initial section plentiful information on the organization of the liturgical year—for instance, the postponement of feasts of saints falling on a Sunday and the introduction of new feasts like that of St. Afra. In addition, special days of procession are mentioned, as well as special memorial Masses. A second section of the manuscript contains information on the burial rites that were presumably modified along the lines of the new liturgical regulations.⁵⁰

Moreover, reform in Lüne found a very specific mode of expression that was regarded—rightly or wrongly—as typically female, namely, the resumption of the manufacture of embroidered tapestries, which had long been made by the nuns.⁵¹ Thus, the first years of the sixteenth century, presided over by Abbess Mechthild Wilde, saw the manufacture of two embroideries for the nuns' choir, an Easter tapestry, and a resurrection tapestry.⁵² The two tapestries not only

44. Nolte, *Quellen und Studien*, 127; cf. Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten*, 129.

45. Nolte, *Quellen und Studien*, 127: "Et post missam iuerunt processionaliter ad locum capitularum."

46. Linneborn, "Die Reformation der Benedictinerklöster," 65f.

47. Prioress Mechthild Wilde; see Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten*, 130.

48. The manuscript itself was burned in Hanover during World War II; Albert, *Caeremoniale Bursfeldenses*, 53.

49. *Ibid.*, 22; Nolte, *Quellen und Studien*, 19f.

50. Cf. Nolte, *Quellen und Studien*, 31f.

51. Tanja Kohwagner-Nikolai, "Per manus sororum . . .": *Niedersächsische Bildstickereien im Klosterstick, 1300–1583* (Munich: Meidenbauer, 2006).

52. Tanja Kohwagner-Nikolai, "Zwischen Thomaszweifel und Nonnenglaube: Gestickte Bildteppiche für die Passions- und Osterzeit aus den Lüneburger Frauenklöstern," in *Passion*

illustrated the biblical stories but expressed a quite self-confident program: the resurrection tapestry shows three encounters of the women with the risen Christ. Christ's instruction that the women were to preach the resurrection is portrayed as an essential impulse of the reform and of the migration of the nuns. This instruction was intended to be right before the nuns' eyes during the celebration of the Divine Office.⁵³

The Cistercian nuns at Wienhausen were another community whose reform was influenced by the ideas of the Windesheim Congregation. Johannes Busch, the most important reformer at Windesheim, personally initiated the changes at the Wienhausen convent. Once again migrating nuns set off. In 1469 five nuns left the Cistercian reform convent of Derneburg near Brunswick, among them the abbess and a nun by the name of Susanne Potstock, the future abbess at Wienhausen.⁵⁴ The prayer books and liturgical texts written in the wake of the reform have, as yet, been little studied. The late June Mecham has presented two remarkable essays on individual prayer books from Wienhausen.⁵⁵ A prayer book surviving in three different copies, the *Dornenkron* (crown of thorns) shows how the nuns at Wienhausen integrated a spiritual reform into their liturgical routine and testifies to the way in which the reforms brought about by the migrating nuns were adopted. Presumably, it was these reformed nuns who brought the meditation on the crown of thorns from Derneburg to Wienhausen, either directly or via another Cistercian community, the convent at Marienrode.⁵⁶ The prayer books united private and liturgical prayer, quoting from the liturgy as well as from meditative texts and from collections of prayers by reputable monastic writers.⁵⁷ According to the Wienhausen Chronicle, the new abbess brought plenty of liturgical books to Wienhausen with her (or, at later dates, made sure that such books were supplied) in order to have them copied for Wienhausen's own purposes. Many books are mentioned in the

and *Ostern in den Lüneburger Klöstern, Kloster*, ed. Linda Maria Koldau (Ebsterf: Kloster Ebsterf, 2010), 135–56, esp. 143, 153.

53. *Ibid.*, 153f.

54. June L. Mecham, "Reading between the Lines: Compilation, Variation and the Recovery of an Authentic Female Voice in the *Dornenkron* Prayer Books from Wienhausen," *Journal of Medieval History* 29 (2003): 102–28, esp. 125, with an allusion to the reformer Johannes Busch.

55. *Ibid.*, 113f., 116–18; June L. Mecham, "A Northern Jerusalem. Transforming the Spatial Geography of the Convent of Wienhausen," in *Defining the Holy: Sacred Space in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Andrew Spicer and Sarah Hamilton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 139–60, esp. 151–53.

56. Mecham, "Reading between the Lines," 125.

57. *Ibid.*, 121.

chronicle, among them antiphonals for the winter and the summer, as well as a breviary for sisters unable to attend the Divine Office in the church.⁵⁸ In addition, the nuns at Wienhausen adopted contemporary forms of piety. A pertinent example is provided by two manuscripts that present proposals for accommodating a Via Crucis within the monastic space. Stations of the Cross were established in many German towns and cities in the late fifteenth century.⁵⁹ Owing to enclosure, the sisters organized a meditative Way of the Cross in their own compound, thereby creating the possibility of a spiritual journey. June Mecham sums this up as follows: “Performance of the Stations thus dictated that a nun use the material space of the monastic complex, defined and regulated through architectural structures, to construct the imagined spaces of the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem, which were created through a combination of memory, movement and religious art.”⁶⁰

The reference to the presence of pious works of art touches on something else that influenced the liturgy in the reformed convents at Wienhausen and elsewhere. The special polychrome decoration of the nuns’ choir at Wienhausen is overwhelming to the present day; it is unmistakably related to the liturgy, with particular emphasis on the liturgies of the passion and of Easter.⁶¹ Within the confines of this essay, it is impossible to spell out the significance of the decoration for the history of art and of its relationship to the Divine Office or to the different liturgical celebrations within the year.⁶² Suffice it to say here that during the course of the reform, in 1488 the new abbess, according to the chronicle, had the wall paintings in the nuns’ choir repainted or restored by three members of her convent.⁶³ This artistic representation is not simply an illustration of Easter and the Easter liturgy; it is meant to place the liturgical actions of the nuns within the history of salvation as a whole. The program of decoration in the nuns’ choir—supplemented by sculptures, stained-glass

58. Appuhn, *Chronik und Totenbuch*, 26, 27.

59. Susanne Wegmann, “Der Kreuzweg von Adam Kraft in Nürnberg: Ein Abbild Jerusalems in der Heimat,” *Mitteilungen des Vereins für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg* 84 (1997): 93–118; cf. Mecham, “A Northern Jerusalem,” 140.

60. *Ibid.*, 147.

61. Susanne Wittekind, “Passion und Ostern im Bildprogramm des Wienhäuser Nonnenchores,” in *Passion und Ostern in den Lüneburger Klöstern*, ed. Linda Maria Koldau (Ebsterf: Kloster Ebsterf, 2010), 157–86, esp. 160.

62. *Ibid.*, 157, 160f., 174–76.

63. Appuhn, *Chronik und Totenbuch*, 28: “Ao. 1488 hat sie durch 3 Schwestern Gertrud genandt das Chor auff die neue bemahlen lassen. Da sie ao. 1495 einen Ohrt auff dem Chor mit Brettern übersetzen laßen.”

windows, and wall paintings in the cloister and in the other monastic buildings, by textiles such as tapestries and antependia,⁶⁴ and by manuscripts for private and liturgical use—creates a quasi presence of the pivotal biblical events, which time and again immerses the sisters celebrating the liturgy in the visualization both of monastic history and of the history of salvation.⁶⁵ Precisely this reattachment to the roots of their monastic existence in the central act of salvation in Christ motivated the female reformers.

With Wienhausen successfully reformed, the tried and tested principle of migrating nuns was resorted to once again ten years later. In 1479, nuns left Wienhausen for the nearby Cistercian women's convent of Medingen and reformed it on the basis of the ideas developed at Windesheim and Bursfeld.⁶⁶ More than forty surviving illuminated manuscripts from Medingen give an impression of the remarkable writing and painting activities sparked off at Medingen by the reform. Moreover, the manuscripts reveal that, in addition to enclosure, the reformers regarded liturgical renewal as a second, equally important element of reform.⁶⁷ The manuscripts, most of them small in size, were not only used in the liturgy but could be taken elsewhere by the sisters. The rubrics, for instance, contain the instruction that certain prayers had to be said *dum exis de choro*, that is, on the way from the Liturgy of the Hours to everyday work.⁶⁸ These prayer or devotion books, along with the extant liturgical manuscripts, such as psalteries, antiphonals, and so forth, draw on the whole canon of monastic literature, both traditional works and contemporary reform literature. In Medingen also, what is remarkable is the depiction of the Easter events. According to Henrike Lähnemann, "The nuns at Medingen . . . enter Christ's communion with Mary of Magdala and the apostles and together with them encounter Christ and Mary."⁶⁹ The scenes convey a "new potential of imagery and significance" and prepare for the "inner vision of Christ during

64. Kohwagner-Nikolai, "Zwischen Thomaszweifel und Nonnenglaube," 153f.; Marianne Schmidt, "Der Osterteppich aus Kloster Lüne. Ein Bild der Liturgie und der Theologie der Osternacht," in *Jahrbuch des Museums für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg* 13 (1994/96): 55–86; Angela Karstensen, *Der Auferstehungsteppich zu Kloster Lüne. Bildtradition und Singularität* (Münster: LIT, 2009).

65. Wittekind, "Passion und Ostern," 185.

66. Lähnemann, "Der Auferstandene im Dialog," 105; cf. Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten*, 133.

67. See the website on the Medingen research project (http://research.ncl.ac.uk/medingen/public_extern) with a complete bibliography and a catalogue of the manuscripts.

68. Lähnemann, "Der Auferstandene im Dialog," 106.

69. *Ibid.*, 129.

the performance of the liturgy.”⁷⁰ Given the similarity of many manuscripts to text and images from Wienhausen and Lüne, Medingen too exemplifies the importance of the personal transfer of liturgical ideas, images, and books through the migrating nuns.

III. Migrating Nuns—Migrating Liturgy

Traditionally, investigations of the liturgical history of the Middle Ages focus above all on the written outcome of liturgical practice. Perceiving and interpreting liturgy as codified in books seems to be the best way of reconstructing historical forms of liturgical practice and their geographical migrations. Thus, wherever the surviving historical records are in short supply or lack useful information, scholars quickly reach the boundary of historical knowledge. Late medieval women’s convents have handed down to posterity only a few codices explicitly and exclusively intended for use in the liturgy. Rendering visible channels of personal transmission widens the possibilities of detecting liturgical migrations. The Divine Office in the Dominican women’s convents and in the convents of the Bursfeld and Windesheim congregations changed only when personal initiative came into play. The migrating nuns taught their new sisters first of all Latin, then singing, writing, painting, and embroidering—thus transplanting their own practice of liturgy into the convent to be reformed. The implementation of these new liturgical practices, however, is not restricted to the Divine Office but is reflected in renewed types of private prayer and devotion. Evidence of this liturgy in migration, far from being confined to the world of books, includes paintings, tapestries, prayer books, concepts of space, chronicles, sculptures, and the nuns themselves, whose spiritual and liturgical identity changed: human relics of a liturgy in migration.

70. *Ibid.*, 129.