

MEDIEVAL WOMEN: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

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VOLUME 27

NUNS' LITERACIES
IN MEDIEVAL EUROPE:
THE KANSAS CITY DIALOGUE

Edited by

Virginia Blanton, Veronica O'Mara,
and Patricia Stoop



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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	xi
Colour Plates	xv
Acknowledgements	xxiii
Introduction	xxvii

Educating the Sisters

Leoba and the Iconography of Learning in the Lives of Anglo-Saxon Women Religious, 660–780 VIRGINIA BLANTON and HELENE SCHECK	3
Collaborative Literacy and the Spiritual Education of Nuns at Helfta ULRIKE WIETHAUS	27
From Reading to Writing: The Multiple Levels of Literacy of the Sister Scribes in the Brussels Convent of Jericho PATRICIA STOOP	47
Her Book-Lined Cell: Irish Nuns and the Development of Texts, Translation, and Literacy in Late Medieval Spain ANDREA KNOX	67

Nuns Making their Letters

- Literacy in Neapolitan Women's Convents: An Example of Female Handwriting in a Late Fifteenth-Century Accounts Ledger
ANTONELLA AMBROSIO 89

- Step by Step: The Process of Writing a Manuscript in the Female Convent of Vadstena
NILS DVERSTORP 109

- Nuns and Writing in Late Medieval England: The Quest Continues
VERONICA O'MARA 123

Visualizing Meaning

- Implications for Female Monastic Literacy in the Reliefs from St. Liudger's at Werden
KAREN BLOUGH 151

- The Visual Vernacular: The Construction of Communal Literacy at the Convent of Santa Maria in Pontetetto (Lucca)
LORETTA VANDI 171

- Outside the Mainstream: Women as Readers, Scribes, and Illustrators of Books in Convents of the German-Speaking Regions
ANNE WINSTON-ALLEN 191

Engaging with Texts

- Líadain's *Lament*, Darerca's *Life*, and Íte's *Ísucán*: Evidence for Nuns' Literacies in Early Ireland
MAEVE CALLAN 209

- What Icelandic Nuns Read: The Convent of Reynistaður and the Literary Milieu in Fourteenth-Century Iceland
SVANHILDUR ÓSKARSDÓTTIR 229

Daily Life, <i>Amor Dei</i> , and Politics in the Letters of the Benedictine Nuns of Lüne in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries	
EVA SCHLOTHEUBER	249
A Web of Texts: Sixteenth-Century Mystical Culture and the Arnhem Sint-Agnes Convent	
KEES SCHEPERS	269
Literary Agency	
Courtly Habits: Monastic Women's Legal Literacy in Early Anglo-Saxon England	
ANDREW RABIN	289
Making their Mark: The Spectrum of Literacy among Godstow's Nuns, 1400–1550	
EMILIE AMT	307
The Personal and the Political: Ana de San Bartolomé's Version of the Discalced Carmelite Reform	
DARCY DONAHUE	327
Bibliography	341
Index of Manuscripts, Archival Documents, and Incunabula	389
Index of Texts	395
Index of Convents	401
Index of People	407

DAILY LIFE, *AMOR DEI*, AND POLITICS IN THE LETTERS OF THE BENEDICTINE NUNS OF LÜNE IN THE FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES

Eva Schlotheuber

The central role of monasteries as religious, intellectual, and cultural centres has long been among the key issues of medieval studies.¹ For convents, however, the question remains as to the extent to which the women, often living in strict enclosure, participated in the spiritual and intellectual life of their times or to what extent they were able to shape this life. While we are well informed about the scholarly education of monks and secular clergy in the monastery and cathedral schools, we know only a little about the training of the nuns, about their intellectual horizons, and about their participation in the religious-literary life of their time. In recent years, however, the history and culture of convents has attracted increasing international attention.² Medieval texts independently written by women are hard to find because

¹ See the current project 'Klöster im Hochmittelalter: Innovationslabore europäischer Lebensentwürfe und Ordnungsmodelle'/'Monasteries in the High Middle Ages as Innovators of Conceptions of Life and Organization in Europe', which is jointly organized by the Sächsische Akademie zu Leipzig (Prof Dr Gert Melville) and the Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften (Prof Dr Bernd Schneidmüller and Prof Dr Stefan Weinfurter); for the first results from the project, see *Innovation in Klöstern und Orden des Hohen Mittelalters: Aspekte und Pragmatik eines Begriffs*, ed. by Mirko Breitenstein, Stefan Burkhardt, and Julia Dücker, *Vita regularis*, 48 (Münster: LIT, 2012).

² *Krone und Schleier: Kunst aus mittelalterlichen Frauenklöstern, eine Ausstellung der Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Bonn, in Kooperation mit dem*

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the institutional Church banned them from publicly commenting on religious issues unless it was authorized by divine revelation.³ Earlier research therefore tended to consider religious women only to have been recipients of vernacular religious literature, and doubted that, in the late Middle Ages, they had the language skills necessary independently to read and understand the Bible, the writings of the Church Fathers, and the written legacy of Latin scholarship. Rather, nuns mostly seemed to be dependent on the interpretation of their provosts and confessors.⁴ While these issues can only be adequately addressed in detailed case studies, recent research has nevertheless clearly shown that nuns in northern German convents in particular had had a long tradition of scholarly education by the late Middle Ages, even if they, in contrast to their male counterparts, only rarely made this public.⁵ Language skills and education, as well as the

Ruhrlandmuseum Essen ermöglicht durch die Kunststiftung NRW, ed. by Jutta Frings and Jan Gerchow (München: Hirmer, 2005) [English translation: *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries*, ed. by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Susan Marti (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)]; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent*, California Studies in the History of Art, 37 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Elizabeth Andersen, Henrike Lähnemann, and Anne Simon, eds, *A Companion to Mysticism and Devotion in Northern Germany in the Late Middle Ages*, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition, 44 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

³ On the authorization of writing on the example of, among others, Elisabeth von Schönau, see convincingly Christel Meier, 'Autorschaft im 12. Jahrhundert', in *Unverwechselbarkeit: persönliche Identität und Identifikation in der vormodernen Gesellschaft*, ed. by Peter von Moos, Norm und Struktur, 23 (Köln: Böhlau, 2004), pp. 207–66 (p. 235).

⁴ German Studies research has found convents to have been the most important recipients of vernacular religious literature in translation: Klaus Grubmüller, 'Geistliche Übersetzungsliteratur im 15. Jahrhundert: Überlegungen zu ihrem literaturgeschichtlichen Ort', in *Kirche und Gesellschaft im Heiligen Römischen Reich des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Hartmut Boockmann, Abhandlungen der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, Philologisch-Historische Klasse, 3rd ser., 206 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), pp. 59–74.

⁵ 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 und Reformation, n.s., 24 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); Eva Schlotheuber, 'Sprachkompetenz und Lateinvermittlung: die intellektuelle Ausbildung der Nonnen im Spätmittelalter', in *Kloster und Bildung im Mittelalter*, ed. by Nathalie Kruppa and Jürgen Wilke, Studien zur Germania Sacra, 28, Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte, 218 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2006), pp. 61–87; Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Eva Schlotheuber, 'Books in Women's Hands: Liturgy, Learning and the Libraries of Dominican Nuns in Westphalia', in *Entre stabilité et itinérance: livres et culture des ordres mendiants, 13^e–15^e siècle*, ed. by Nicole Bériou, Martin Morard, and Donatella Nebbaj, Bibliologia, 37 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), pp. 129–57.

convents' spiritual tradition and the theological environment, were the main factors shaping the specific religious expressions of the individual communities. In this respect, regardless of their particular Order, the southern German convents certainly developed different traditions from the northern German ones, just as they were also part of different literary circles.⁶ In order to understand these phenomena better and to describe the development of the monastic world within various regions more adequately, the term 'Klosterlandschaft' ['monastic landscape'] has been introduced, which, in its comparative approach, is able to reveal both differences as well as similarities.

The methodology of the 'Klosterlandschaft' has been the subject of intensive and also controversial discussion in recent years. In 2012, Franz J. Felten summarized the respective research approaches and,⁷ especially methodologically, addressed Gert Melville's critique.⁸ Felten arrived at the conclusion that even though the term 'Klosterlandschaft' conjures up various connotations and thus evades a general definition, a 'pragmatic approach' to the research concept of 'convent landscape' as a heuristic term of classification and analysis might nevertheless be rewarding, as it allows for comparative studies.⁹ It should,

⁶ On southern Germany, see Marie-Luise Ehrenscheidtner, *Die Bildung der Dominikanerinnen in Süddeutschland vom 13. bis 15. Jahrhundert*, Contubernium: Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte, 60 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2004); Werner Williams-Krapp, 'Die Bedeutung der reformierten Klöster des Predigerordens für das literarische Leben in Nürnberg im 15. Jahrhundert', in *Studien und Texte zur literarischen und materiellen Kultur der Frauenklöster im späten Mittelalter*, ed. by Falk Eisermann and others, Studies in Mediaeval and Reformation Thought, 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 311–29.

⁷ Franz J. Felten, 'Klosterlandschaften', in *Landschaft(en): Begriffe — Formen — Implikationen*, ed. by Franz J. Felten and others, Geschichtliche Landeskunde, 68 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012), pp. 157–89; Gert Melville, "'Klosterlandschaft': kritische Bemerkungen zum wissenschaftlichen Wert einer Wortschöpfung: Vortrag Alzey 2004", in *Landschaft(en): Begriffe–Formen–Implikationen*, ed. by Franz J. Felten and others, Geschichtliche Landeskunde, 68 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012), pp. 195–222; and *Klosterlandschaften: methodisch-exemplarische Annäherungen*, ed. by Roman Czaja and others, Mittelalter Studien des Instituts zur Interdisziplinären Erforschung des Mittelalters und seines Nachwirkens, 16 (München: Fink, 2008).

⁸ Melville, "'Klosterlandschaft'", summarized on pp. 162–68. Melville argues that the term 'Klosterlandschaft' is too unspecific and too broad. He distinguishes between: (1) 'Klosterlandschaft' as quite a narrow geographic region ('Grundherrschaft der Klöster/Grangien'); (2) A region with a high density of monasteries and obviously impressed by them; and (3) The metaphoric use as a cultural landscape ('Kulturlandschaft'). He cannot see any added value in the unspecific use of 'Klosterlandschaft'.

⁹ Felten, 'Klosterlandschaften', p. 189.

however, always be remembered that the respective 'Klosterlandschaft' is not a historically given fact but that it constitutes itself differently according to perspective and analytical approach.¹⁰ Using the approach of 'cultural topography', Nigel Palmer and Hans-Joachim Schiewer try to develop a methodical way of describing the specificities of a certain cultural region, which is here defined as a 'linguistic area with unfixed borders'.¹¹ In contrast to this philological concept of a 'linguistic area', a more historical approach will try to define this space from its centres. In other words, the philological approach seeks to define the borders of a region by the language, or better still, dialect; the historical approach, I would suggest, does not try to find the borders — which is impossible in any case — but seeks to record the region from the centres. This is consistent with medieval conditions as geographical space was opened up from and dominated by the centres, that is, the castles and residences, the monasteries and religious foundations, the towns and central places. Even if the monks or nuns, the ministers or burghers, the princesses and princes, or high clerical officials were embedded in different frameworks or social networks according to their estate or their house, a region basically developed as a specific cultural landscape through the competitive cooperation between those palaces or houses. These religious, economic, and social centres were themselves shaped by their history and their language, by literary and religious traditions, and by laws and customs or *consuetudines*. The traditions defining their identity were communicated by all available means: through writing and images, through song and poetry, and, not least, through networks connecting the secular and religious courts with each other. Just as the monasteries did, the convents as religious, economic, and social centres shaped the region because medieval convent foundations were not only supported by the founding families but also by the social circles connected to these families. Their daughters shared their lives in the convents; their families were linked by marriage. The families gathered there for the main solemnities, and the nuns took care of their family tombs in the convents. The convents were thus always embedded in a dense network of social relations and obligations. Interestingly, the connections of these founding circles to their female religious relatives seem to have remained much closer

¹⁰ See 'Introduction', in *Schriftkultur und religiöse Zentren im norddeutschen Raum*, ed. by Patrizia Carmassi, Eva Schlotheuber, and Almut Breitenbach, Wolfenbütteler Mittelalter-Studien, 24 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2014), pp. 7–17.

¹¹ See *Kulturtopographie des deutschsprachigen Südwestens im späteren Mittelalter*, ed. by Barbara Fleith and Renée Wetzels, *Kulturtopographie des alemannischen Raums*, 1 (Berlin: Gruyter, 2009), p. xi.

over many generations than was the case in the male monasteries. The convents operated within this web or social network of female communities which, of course, also included lay and religious male relatives, and their sphere of action was determined by this network of people.¹² The convents' influential and centre-forming function must therefore primarily be understood through the interaction of the nuns with their regional and supra-regional environment, for which, due to strict enclosure, writing played an important role.

Convents' social networks are generally difficult to assess either quantitatively or qualitatively. However, the collection of letters from the Benedictine convent in Lüne, hitherto practically unknown, can offer unique insight into the nuns' intellectual horizons and social practices.¹³ The letters not only show the means and forms of the literary exchange but also the nuns' language skills and their 'applied knowledge', that is, the knowledge that was crucial for their daily religious routine and their communication. The convent in Lüne was probably founded in 1172 as a canoness foundation for noblewomen, although the community followed the Rule of St Benedict from the second half of the thirteenth century.¹⁴ In the course of the late medieval monastic Reform, religious life was substantially reorganized in 1481, for which nuns from the neighbouring Benedictine convent in Ebstorf, which had already been reformed, were called to Lüne in order to assist in the revival of spiritual life according to the model of the Bursfeld Reform.¹⁵ The Reform tended to go back to the strict observation of the Rule, to re-form convent life so that the nuns really lived together in enclosure, to take better care of liturgical duties, and to encourage a better understanding of the theological basis of religious life: therefore, it was an economic reform, a liturgical reform, and a reform of

¹² On the convents as communication centres, see also Christine Kleinjung, *Frauenklöster als Kommunikationszentren und soziale Räume: das Beispiel Worms vom 13. bis zum Beginn des 15. Jahrhunderts*, Studien und Texte zur Geistes- und Sozialgeschichte des Mittelalters, 1 (Korb: Didymos, 2008).

¹³ I am planning a digital edition of the letter collection of Lüne as an outstanding example of female authorship and literary competence at the turn of the sixteenth century.

¹⁴ Uta Reinhardt, 'Lüne', in *Die Frauenklöster in Niedersachsen: Schleswig-Holstein und Bremen*, ed. by Ulrich Faust, Germania Benedictina, 11: Nord-Deutschland (St. Ottilien: EOS, 1984), pp. 377–402.

¹⁵ See Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung*, pp. 58–67; Ida-Christine Riggert, *Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster*, Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission für Niedersachsen und Bremen, 37, Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Niedersachsens im Mittelalter, 19 (Hannover: Hahn, 1996).

education.¹⁶ Even though the visitors did not record any serious malpractice or misdemeanour in Lüne, the Lüne prioress Bertha Hoyer, as well as the old subprioress, was deposed. Circumventing the community's voting rights, Sophia von Bodendik (1481–1504), a nun from Ebstorf and niece of the Hildesheim bishop Berthold von Landsberg (d. 1502), was promoted to prioress, and Gertrud Elzen, a niece of the provost, became the sub-prioress. Lüne thus became part of the dense Reform network of northern German convents. As part of the introduction of the Reformation in the Principality of Lüneburg, Duke Ernst der Bekenner (1497–1546) attempted to force the convent to adopt the new doctrine from 1528. In 1529 the duke appointed a new provost and took administrative control of the priory's assets. The nuns tried to resist a change in their way of life, and the convent only adopted the Protestant faith in 1562.

The adoption of the Reform at the end of the fifteenth century resulted in the nuns' intensified education — including their training in Latin — which led to a comprehensive written reflection on conventual daily life as a whole.¹⁷ A letter written in response by Bishop Berthold von Landsberg emphasizes the connection between monastic Reform and education; in March 1494, this bishop of Hildesheim — being responsible for the convent in Lüne as administrator of the Verden diocese — praises the nuns for their beautiful and elegant language and their good exegetical skills which their letters had revealed to him.¹⁸ The bishop

¹⁶ See Nikolaus Staubach, 'Zwischen Bursfelde und Windesheim: Nordhessische Klöster in den Reformbewegungen des Spätmittelalters', *Archiv für mittelrheinische Kirchengeschichte*, 52 (2000), 99–119; Kaspar Elm, 'Monastische Reformen zwischen Humanismus und Reformation', in *900 Jahre Kloster Bursfelde, Reden und Vorträge zum Jubiläum 1993*, ed. by Lothar Perlitt (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 59–111; *Die Generalkapitels-Rezesse der Bursfelder Kongregation*, ed. by Paulus Volk, 4 vols (Siegburg: Respublica, 1955–72).

¹⁷ The connection between literacy and Reform has frequently been discussed in scholarship: see Constanze Proksch, *Klosterreform und Geschichtsschreibung im Spätmittelalter*, Kollektive Einstellung und sozialer Wandel im Mittelalter, n.s., 2 (Köln: Böhlau, 1994); Heike Uffmann, *Wie in einem Rosengarten: monastische Reformen des späten Mittelalters in den Vorstellungen der Klosterfrauen*, Religion in der Geschichte, 14 (Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte, 2008); and Eckart Conrad Lutz, *Arbeiten an der Identität: zur Medialität der 'Cura monialium' im Kompendium des Rektors eines reformierten Chorfrauenstifts, mit Edition und Abbildung einer Windesheimer 'Forma investiendi sanctimonialium' und ihrer Notation*, Scrinium Friburgense, 27 (Berlin: Gruyter, 2010).

¹⁸ 'Bertoldus dei gratia episcopus Hildensemensis et administrator Verdenensis ecclesiarum. Sincerissima in Cristo affectione premissa, religiose et dilectissime in Cristo filie, religiosam conversationem laudabilemque vitam vestram, dudum nobis perspectam, rerum magistra effecit experientia, hodie vero quis in doctrina fructus, in colligendo modus, in scribendo stilus, in dicendo ornatus personis vestris ornatissimis discipline studio accesserit, novissime

of Hildesheim calls the nuns of Lüne ‘doctae personae’ [‘learned persons’] and honours them with a rhetorically sophisticated reply. According to Berthold, their letters not only prove them to be well-versed in Latin, but also capable of particular qualities of consolation and edification. Their mastery of Latin enabled the nuns to communicate independently with high-ranking clergymen of their region, which made it possible for them to participate actively in topical religious themes by means of scholarly letters and written debates. A whole range of otherwise rare conventual letters has survived in Lüne, which allows the letter collection of Lüne to be organized historically and in terms of staff: the so-called *Chronik des Klosters* (1481–1530) of Lüne begins in the Reform year of 1481 and covers the years to 1530, thus also including the Reformation era struggles from the nuns’ perspective;¹⁹ a book of statutes adapts the new Rules of the Reform Statutes of Bursfeld to the conditions of a women’s convent;²⁰ a comprehensive and accurate description of her own election in 1504 is provided by the prioress Mechthild Wilde (1504–35);²¹ and in her administrative

hee [*sic*] littere docuerunt, unde non possumus merito non letari tante vestre probitati, que in aperto est, sanum intellectum sacrarum scripturarum, quantum satis est, multas dulcedines et consolaciones attulisse, quod quia rarum est vestro sexuique [*sic*] insolitum, nisi venerabilis prepositus vester veritatem persuasisset vix credere pre admiracione licuisset, sed agite ut cepistis doctas personas [...]’ [‘Berthold through the grace of God bishop of Hildesheim and administrator of the church of Verden. The most pure affection send in advance, my pious daughters beloved in Christ. Experience, which is in all things our teacher, has long since drawn my attention to your Christian journey, and to your praiseworthy manner of living. But not until today did your most recent letter teach me what fruit of scholarship, what healthy volume of material, what elegant style and what beauty of speech has become available to you, such excellent persons, through the efforts of your schooling. We must therefore rejoice that your moral virtues, which are obvious, and a sound understanding of Holy Scripture as far as is necessary have brought you much sweetness and comfort in abundance. As such things are rare and not at all common in your sex, pure astonishment would have rendered it hardly possible to believe all this, had not your honourable provost convinced us that it were true. So continue as you have begun, as educated persons [...]’]. The letter is dated: ‘Datis [...] raptissime manu propria feria quinta post Letare anno etc. XCIII solito sub signeto [13 March 1494]’ [‘Given promptly by my own hand, Thursday after Letare in the year 1494 under my familiar seal’]; Lüne, Klosterarchiv (hereafter KLA), MS 15, no. 64 (quire 6, fol. 21r–v).

¹⁹ Lüne, KLA, MS 13, *Chronik des Klosters* (1481–1530). See the partial edition in Johannes Meyer, ‘Zur Reformationsgeschichte des Klosters Lüne’, *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Niedersächsische Kirchengeschichte*, 14 (1909), 162–221.

²⁰ Lüne, KLA, MS 14 (*Statutenbuch*, 1481–1500).

²¹ Lüne, KLA, MS 24; on this, see Eva Schlotheuber, ‘Die Wahl der Priorin’, in *Frömmigkeit–Theologie–Frömmigkeitstheologie: Contributions to European Church History. Festschrift*

book, the sacristan gives an account of the various duties of her office.²² These conventual texts (intended only as information for the convent and perhaps for visitations) are completely written in Latin and attest to the nuns' extraordinary language skills and literacy after the Reform. Precise ideas had obviously been formed in Lüne as to which practical information they needed and how they wanted to access it, and the reformed Benedictine nuns exhibited a surprising level of professionalism in their written organization of the convent's daily life. A similar professionalization in dealing with their convent's writings was also shown by the nuns of St. Klara in Nürnberg, where Caritas Pirckheimer (1467–1532) was abbess at the turn of the sixteenth century. In their convent chronicle, assembled around 1500 and surviving in a Latin draft, a vernacular draft, and a vernacular final version, they used copies of letters and documents to compile the convent's history anew.²³ In the period of crisis during the Reformation, Caritas Pirckheimer used a similar approach in her famous *Denkwürdigkeiten* [*Memorabilia*] to collect and comment on her letters and conversation notes (that is, with the members of the city council, and so forth.)²⁴

für Berndt Hamm zum 60. Geburtstag, ed. by Gudrun Litz, Heidrun Munzert, and Roland Liebenberg, *Studies in the History of Christian Traditions*, 124 (Leiden : Brill, 2005), pp. 145–58.

²² Lüne, KLA, MS 23. The manuscript consists of three parts: (1) fols 1r–28r, calendrical news (1504–12) on the liturgical year, notes on holidays, celebrations of Mass, and on lections, as well as on the feasts of special saints; (2) fols 28v–59v, notes on the anniversaries of the deaths of deceased members of the convent and of those admitted to the monastery; (3) fols 60r–88r, reports on general events, dates of entry, names, and ages of the admitted nuns and of the lay sisters (1504–12).

²³ *Schreib die Reformation von Munchen ganz daher: Teiledition und historische Einordnung der Nürnberger Klarissenchronik (um 1500)*, ed. by Lena Vosing, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte und Kultur der Stadt Nürnberg*, 37 (Nürnberg: Stadt Nürnberg Stadtarchiv, 2012); Eva Schlotheuber, 'Humanistisches Wissen und geistliches Leben: Caritas Pirckheimer und die Geschichtsschreibung im Nürnberger Klarissenkonvent', in *Die Pirckheimer: Humanismus in einer Nürnberger Patrizierfamilie, Akten des gemeinsam mit dem Verein für Geschichte der Stadt Nürnberg, dem Stadtarchiv Nürnberg und dem Bildungszentrum der Stadt Nürnberg am 25./26. Juni 2004 in Nürnberg veranstalteten Symposions*, Pirckheimer Jahrbuch für Renaissance- und Humanismusforschung, 21 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2006), pp. 89–118. Vernacular draft: Nürnberg, Staatsarchiv, Kloster St. Klara, Akten und Bände, Nr. 1: 'Konzept der Deutschen Chronik' des Nürnberger Klarissenklosters (dated about 1490, with numerous addenda until 1503); (2) Latin draft: Nürnberg, Staatsarchiv, Kloster St. Klara, Akten und Bände, Nr. 2; (3.) The final version of 'Reinschrift der Deutschen Chronik' is München, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum, MS 1191.

²⁴ Caritas Pirckheimer, *Die 'Denkwürdigkeiten' der Caritas Pirckheimer (aus den Jahren*

The chronological order of the three copied books from Lüne shows that here also the nuns' struggle with their Protestant sovereign provided the incentive to structure and re-arrange the voluminous correspondence and thus to assure themselves of their own relationship network.

The three manuscripts are preserved in the convent's archives in Lüne (Lüne, Klosterarchiv, MSS 15, 30, and 31), and have so far been only briefly mentioned by Ernst Nolte in 1932.²⁵ An anonymus nineteenth-century hand has inserted the following note in MS 15, a short overview that mainly reflects the view of older scholarship:

Eine Sammlung von allerley Briefen und einigen Predigten, die von der Priorin Sophia von Bodendik und Mechthild Wilde, auch einigen Lünischen Benediktinerinnen, innerhalb 1483 und 1535 mit Verwandten und Geistlichen der meisten Lüneburgischen Klöster gewechselt und nachgeschrieben sind. Die Briefe sind größtenteils ascetisch und mystisch und von keinem anderen Nutzen, als dass man daraus die Gabe verschiedener geistlicher Damen, sich fließend und ziemlich correct über mancherley Gegenstände in lateinischer Sprache auszudrücken wahrnimmt.²⁶

[A collection of various letters and some sermons that the prioress Sophia von Bodendik and Mechthild Wilde, together with some Benedictine nuns of Lüne, exchanged with relatives and clerics of most monasteries in Lüneburg between 1483 and 1535, which were recorded in writing. The letters are mostly ascetic and mystical, and of little other use than to prove the ability of various religious women to express themselves fluently and quite correctly on many topics in Latin.]

A scholarly codicological discussion of the manuscripts is still wanting, and MS 15 is even lacking continuous foliation. An initial evaluation of the three letter books has shown that the nuns copied 1,794 letters that they had received or sent within the time span of about fifty years. This impressive number hints at the great density of the communication network, even if an intensive communication by letter was quite typical for the period at the turn of the sixteenth century.²⁷ Of these, 260 letters are completely written in Latin, and 640 letters

1524–1528), ed. by Josef Pfanner, Caritas Pirckheimer — *Quellensammlung*, 2 (Landshut: Solanus-Druck, 1962).

²⁵ Ernst Nolte, *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Nonnenklosters Lüne bei Lüneburg*, Studien zur Kirchengeschichte Niedersachsens, 6 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1932).

²⁶ Lüne, KIA, MS 15.

²⁷ See, for example, *Elisabeth von Braunschweig-Lüneburg und Albrecht von Preußen: ein Fürstenbriefwechsel der Reformationszeit*, ed. by Ingeborg Mengel, Bausteine zur Geschichtswissenschaft, 13–14 (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1954).

are composed in Low German. The remaining letters are written in a characteristic mixture of both languages, showing an obvious connection between choice of language and addressee. The letters to the sovereign, to the council of Lüneburg (which governed the city), or to other laypeople are in German; those to the Bishop of Hildesheim, to other prelates, as well as to the nuns' own clerics are primarily addressed in Latin; and the communication with neighbouring convents is in a mixture of Latin expressions and Low German. The oldest letter book (MS 15) includes letters from the years 1462 to 1535, its textual contents thus going furthest back into the fifteenth century. Its octavo format consists of thirty-six quires written by different hands that were later bound together in a cover. Because two letters of the twelfth quire (nos 140 and 141) are dated 12 July 1535, the manuscript in its present form was probably only compiled after the death of Prioress Mechthild Wilde in 1535.²⁸ MS 30 (1499–1540, with supplements from the 1550s) is a roughly chronologically ordered register of outgoing letters, while MS 31 primarily contains the letters received at Lüne. Both are in quarto. In contrast to MS 30, MS 31 is structured according to the senders, while chronological aspects were only marginally relevant. None of the letter books seems to have been kept continuously; all three collections are more likely to have been created within a short period of time. In MS 15 existing transcripts were apparently simply bundled up, probably in the late 1530s. At about the same time, MSS 30 and 31 were probably systematically assembled with their division into addressee and sender. It is therefore quite likely that the copied books are connected with the nuns' struggle for their traditional form of life as an attempt to preserve the convent's writings, in order to be prepared for the coming conflicts and the Protestants' attacks against conventual life.²⁹

A further characteristic of the letters is that they are not only written by the prioress or the office-holders but also by the 'simple' nuns and the con-

²⁸ Nolte, *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Nonnenklosters Lüne bei Lüneburg*, p. 22.

²⁹ For further information, see Walter Ziegler, 'Braunschweig-Lüneburg, Hildesheim', in *Die Territorien des Reichs im Zeitalter der Reformation und Konfessionalisierung: Land und Konfession 1500–1650*, III: *Der Nordwesten*, ed. by Anton Schindling and Walter Ziegler, *Katholisches Leben und Kirchenreform im Zeitalter der Glaubensspaltung/Vereinschriften der Gesellschaft zur Herausgabe des Corpus Catholicorum*, 51 (Münster: Aschendorf, 1991), 8–43; *Geschichte Niedersachsens*, III. 1: *Politik, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft von der Reformation bis zum Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Christine van den Heuvel and Manfred von Boetticher, *Veröffentlichungen der Historischen Kommission für Niedersachsen und Bremen*, 36 (Hannover: Hahnsche, 1998), pp. 69–72.

vent schoolgirls. The community of addressees is wide ranging: the letters are addressed to the sovereign and his wife, to members of the court, to the mayor and members of the council of Lüneburg, to their own relatives, to housewives and widows in Lüneburg, to the monks of St. Michael (Lüneburg) and the superiors of surrounding monasteries, to the parish clergy of Lüneburg, to their own provost, or to their confessor. An especially close exchange connected the nuns of Lüne with the neighbouring convents of Ebstorf, Wienhausen, Medingen, Buxtehude, Walsrode, Isenhagen, Salzwedel, and so forth. The letters thus reveal a dense network of relationships among these convents.

The letters' range of subjects reflects late medieval life in a convent in all its facets both from an internal as well as an external perspective. In particular, however, the letters impressively attest to the various communication skills that the nuns had mastered, not least because of their accomplished language skills in Latin and German, as well as in verse and prose. An unnamed nun chose the verse form in a letter on the occasion of her biological sister's wedding which, due to her enclosure, she was unable to attend:

dy schal witlick syn, dat we jo wolden kommen hebben tho der hochtide din, men nu westu wol, wo dat myd uns is gheleghen, dat dat nicht mach wesen, des sy de benedyede god ghelovet, wente it uns in unsern closter alderbest haget.³⁰

[you should know that I would like to have attended your wedding but you know how it is with us [nuns]. Unfortunately, we cannot do this because we have made a vow to God and we, moreover, like it best in the convent.]

As her replacement, she summons Christ and Mary as well as various saints to the wedding celebration as spiritual guests of honour. As the letters frequently accompany material presents, such as images or statues of saints, special dishes, or animals, they also provide substantial insight into the 'culture of giving' at the northern German convents. With such exchanges, the religious women established their social relations, maintained them, or assured themselves of support in case of future conflicts. The letters strikingly show how these literary skills were also beneficial in the case of donations to the convent.³¹ As the

³⁰ Lüne, KLA, MS 15, no. 374 (quire 27, fols 6r–8v, Low German). See also the revealing examples in Anja Ostrowitzki, 'Klösterliche Lebenswelt im Spiegel von Briefen des 16. Jahrhunderts aus dem Benediktinerinnenkloster Oberwerth bei Koblenz', *Studien und Mitteilungen zur Geschichte des Benediktinerordens und seiner Zweige*, 124 (2013), 167–206.

³¹ See, for example, Lüne, KLA, MS 30, fol. 298r, by the abbess of Lüne, Mechthild Wilde, to the mayor of the town of Hamburg, in which she thanks him for a generous donation and promises him inclusion in the convent's 'memorial book'. This 'memorial book', which

collection of letters in Lüne contains several pieces that are concerned with economic aspects, such as claims to tributes and to the back payment of debts, they are also, as a whole, an important source for the economic history of the convent. In addition, of particular interest for the written communication are a number of *cedulae* ['small pieces of paper'] included in the letters and gifts which have survived as copies in the Lüne collection. They show how the letter as a medium was supplemented by less formal writings that were suitable for communication between people who obviously knew each other quite well.

The art of letter writing was a fundamental skill in the nuns' daily life in enclosure. In letters they objected to the decisions of the council of Lüneburg which would affect them negatively: they asked for help for their convent; they fought for their rights, for example, to present a person for a priest's or vicar's position; or they countered competing claims of ownership. Yet, they also had to communicate unpleasant information via letters, without, however, antagonizing important patronesses or patrons. In 1512 Prioress Mechthild Wilde probably wrote to the duchess of Lüneburg Anna von Nassau-Dillenberg (d. 1513)³² that she unfortunately would not be able to grant her wish to have Margarete Tytken admitted as a *conversa*, or lay sister.³³ In the past year, two new lay sisters had been admitted to the convent, so there was no need for another. The letter is written in an equally confidential as well as respectful style. The abbess had to find a difficult balance between, on the one hand, preserving the interests of her own community and, on the other hand, keeping the relationship confidential especially with the female members of the ducal family.

Finally, the abbesses, the female officials, and the nuns of the neighbouring convents were in close dialogue with each other. The style of these letters, usually written in a mixture of Latin and Low German, is full of allusions and very sophisticated. The frequently interspersed Latin expressions were quite often quotations from the liturgy. When the nieces of Elisabeth I von Elver, Dorothea von Elver, and Anne Schomaker,³⁴ were invested in Lüne in

apparently contained the convent's benefactors and the liturgical duties originating from these donations, has not been preserved.

³² This letter does not mention the Duchess of Braunschweig-Lüneburg by name. Anna von Nassau was the mother of Duke Heinrich I, for whom she temporarily reigned as a guardian. The letter might also have been addressed to Margarete, the first wife of Heinrich I, a daughter of Elector Ernst von Sachsen.

³³ Lüne, KIA, MS 30, fol. 15r.

³⁴ Anne was probably the daughter of Hartwig Schomaker (d. 1546) and of Gertrud von Elver, who had married in 1494. The other female members of the von Elver noble family primarily entered the convent at Medingen.

1518,³⁵ their aunt, the abbess of Medingen, honoured this occasion with a letter and small gifts for the girls. At that time, the eight-year old Dorothea von Elver had been living in the convent for three years, having entered Lüne in 1515, probably aged five. At the time of her investiture with the holy habit in 1518, which marked her entry into the class of the religious, she was therefore still under age, so that this act later had to be confirmed by profession. Two years later, in 1520, Dorothea von Elver graduated from the convent school with a ceremony and, in 1524 and thus of full age, finally celebrated her profession as a nun, ‘consecratio coronacionis’ [‘the consecration of the nun’s crown’]. On the day of her investiture, Elisabeth I von Elver addressed her nieces as ‘Concives angelorum, domesticæ dei ac sponse Christi’ [‘fellow citizens of the angels, members of the household of God and brides of Christ’].³⁶ By divesting themselves of the ‘worldly dress’ in order to attire themselves in the ‘spiritual’ one, the girls also canonically committed themselves to monastic life and permanently chose Christ as their bridegroom.³⁷ The abbess summoned them using the Introit to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception: ‘Worumme sprecke ik ny myt iuw illud propheticum canticum “Gaudens gaudebo in domino et exultabit anima mea in deo meo”’ [‘Therefore I recite with you this prophetic song “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God”’].³⁸ In her letter the abbess used elegant quotations from the liturgy of the investiture ritual (the office of St Agnes) which was celebrated as part of Holy Mass in the nuns’ choir. Afterwards, the two sisters were to ‘dede iuw wert kleydende vestimento salutis, in vestimento religionis et indumento iusticie circumdabit vos’ [‘envelop themselves with the garment of salvation, the robe of religion and the vestment of justice’].³⁹ The letter is a powerful admonition

³⁵ On the rite of investiture, see Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung*, pp. 134–46.

³⁶ Lüne, KIA, MS 31, fols 128v–129r (16 May 1518): ‘Concives anglorum, domesticæ dei ac sponse Christi in gloriosa ac ammirabili Christi ascensione per eius gratiam digne effici. Precordialissime in Christo sorores et consanguineæ [...]’ [‘Fellow citizens of the angels, member of the household of God and brides of Christ, through his favour dignified in the glorified and venerable resurrection of Christ. Most beloved sisters in Christ and relatives [...]’].

³⁷ On the concept of nuns as brides of Christ; see Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung*, pp. 134–46.

³⁸ Lüne, KIA, MS 31, fols 128v–129r. Introit on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (8 December): ‘Gaudens gaudebo in domino et exultabit anima mea in domino meo, quia induit me vestimentis salutis, et indumento iustitiæ circumdedit me quasi sponsam ornatam monilibus suis’ (Isaiah 61. 10).

³⁹ Lüne, KIA, MS 31, fols 128v–129r. Responsory 3, on the day of St Agnes (In primo

that they, having been chosen as brides of Christ from thousands upon thousands of people ('mille milia hominum'), meet the high demands of convent life. The exalted self-conception expressed here of 'having been chosen amongst thousands' is primarily legitimized by the nuns' special access to God. In this, we are able to come close to the nuns' 'communicative sphere', their spiritual cosmos. The profound engagement with the liturgy that permeated and structured their religious daily life as well as their feast days had a long tradition in German convents.⁴⁰ Their allegorical exegeses and their ability continually to evoke transcendental levels of meaning allowed for and supported a permanent interpretation of their monastic daily life.

The girls' education in the art of writing letters and in scholarly Latin started at an early age, as soon as they entered the convent. This literary exercise, which simultaneously was an introduction to the convent's communication network, is powerfully reflected in a letter written around 1490 by the convent school-girls of Lüne to their provost Nikolaus Grawerrock (1457–93):

Qui vult ridere
debet ista scripta videre.
Penna fuit vilis,
sensus et manus puerilis,
penna nihil valuit,
dicit qui bene scribere nescit.
Iuniores domine dilecte vestre filie.⁴¹

[If you want to laugh, look at this letter. The quill pen was worthless, the sense and the hand childish; the quill pen does nothing for someone who cannot write well. The young ladies, your beloved daughters.]

Of course, one should not be fooled by the humorously humble verses with which the girls conclude their lengthy communication. This letter on the occasion of Palm Sunday was written by 'young girls' who had not yet taken their profession and is not only composed in fluent Latin but also contains sophisticated subject matter. Written in end rhymes throughout, it accompanied the nuns' material donation, a lavish feast for Palm Sunday, as a 'literacy' present

nocturne): 'Induit me Dominus vestimento salutis, et indumento laetitiae circumdedit me: Et tanquam sponsam decoravit me corona.' For a detailed discussion of the liturgy of the crowning of the nuns, see Schlotheuber, *Klostereintritt und Bildung*, pp. 167–74.

⁴⁰ Hamburger and Schlotheuber, 'Books in Women's Hands'.

⁴¹ Lüne, KIA, MS 15, no. 13 (quire 2, fol. 12v).

for the host. The humorous lines of the ‘young girls’ were obviously intended to be read aloud at the provost’s table, which is why the recipients, the nuns’ male supervisors, are each addressed by name and honoured with a short turn of phrase. Here is a sample:

Prandeat inde gaudiose cum suis edalibus
 in prandio vel cena semper suis commensalibus.
 Prebeat inde frustum domino Hynrico, nostro confessori
 honorabili presbitero et animarum zelatori.
 Reficiatur eciam dominus Arnoldus, servitor noster primogenitus
 et oret sedulo, ut propicietur nobis dei unigenitus.
 [...]
 Recreetur eciam dominus Johannes, qui sonat Dei gratia
 ut per eius precamina scandamus celi pallacia.

(Lüne, Klosterarchiv, MS 15, second quire,
 fols 9r–12v, here fols 9r–9v)

[May the provost and those who share his table take pleasure in partaking of this gift from the nuns for breakfast or supper. He is to offer some of it to lord Heinrich, our confessor, an honourable priest and ‘lover’ of souls. May he refresh lord Arnoldus, our first servant, with it, and may he pray diligently so that God may have mercy on us. [...] May he give a certain amount of it to Herr Johannes, who is called *Gratia Dei* to make us hurry to the heavenly palace.]

In this manner, all the male supervisors are attended to down to the ‘claviger’ or key master Ludolf, who is instructed always to remain near the church during the twilight of Lent — evidently a little sideswipe so that the nuns would not have to wait too long for him. The girls continue in this humorous and richly allusive vein, describing and simultaneously interpreting both the order of events on Palm Sunday and the feast prepared for it. Running throughout the whole text is the metaphor of the vineyard (standing for the convent), which culminates in a spiritual interpretation of the various varieties of medieval wine in their hierarchical order: together with the virgins, the provost might then drink the threefold wine of repentance, of humility, and of sacramental refreshment (Lüne, Klosterarchiv, MS 15, fols 11v–12v):

Sed nos pacifice, mansuete et pie ad laborandum in vinea instruatis
 ut una nobiscum haurire valeatis
 vinum triplex videlicet compunctionis
 devocionis et sacramentalis fruitionis
 ut in futuro recipiatis vinum septemplicis retributionis.
 [...]

Primo vinum ferratum de Christo humanitate
 in passione et crucis acerbitate
 secundo cum angelis vinum defecatum
 tercio vinum claretum apostolicis principibus datum.⁴²

[But you, kindly and devoutely teach us to work in the vineyard, so you can drink together with us the threefold wine of repentance, of humility and of sacramental refreshment, in order later to receive the sevenfold wine of reward. [...] First, the 'iron wine' of Christ's humanity in the Passion and the harshness of the cross; second, the pure, clear wine with the angels; third, the spiced wine given to the apostles and principles.]

Fourth, he would enjoy 'vinum rosatum' ['rose wine'] with the martyrs; fifth, 'vinum salviatum' ['sage wine'] with the confessors; then sixth, the 'vinum conditum' ['spiced wine', often drunk warm], which is enjoyed by the host of virgins; and finally, the 'vinum glorificatum' ['glorified wine'] that rewards the number of the elect. Each of the seven heavenly hierarchies is thus expertly dealt with, the spiritual virgins elegantly positioning themselves as the 'brides of Christ'. This is a spiritual friendship letter accompanying the nuns' material gift.⁴³ Its overall high level of linguistic and theological competence was evidently designed to demonstrate to the provost that they, the convent schoolgirls, knew how to express themselves in scholarly Latin, that they had understood the liturgy for Palm Sunday, and, furthermore, that they knew how to contextualize spiritually and interpret the meal prepared for the occasion. Such was the result of a thorough education! The convent school taught not only the *ars dictaminis* or art of letter writing, but also how the interpretation of the world they lived in, thereby imbuing it with a specific symbolism and deeper meaning. The letter is thus not only a product of late medieval Reform efforts, which strove for an internalized religiousness and an all-encompassing spiritual outlook, it also bears testimony to the intensive education provided for the novices at Lüne, as they evidently possessed fluent active and passive Latin skills.

An example of the transcendence of daily life and of the literary overcoming of death and grief is the obituary of G[ertrud] Elzen, a former Benedictine nun at Ebbsford, who became sub-prioress at Lüne during the Reform in 1481 (Lüne,

⁴² Lüne, KLA, MS 15, no. 13 (quire 2, fol. 12v).

⁴³ Hartmut Beyer, 'Nesciunt muta esse munera sapientis: Geschenkexegese und Geschenktheorie in der lateinischen Epistolographie des Mittelalters', in *Geschenke erhalten die Freundschaft: Gabentausch und Netzwerkpflege im europäischen Mittelalter*, ed. by Michael Grünbart, Byzantinische Studien und Texte, 8 (Münster: LIT, 2011), pp. 13–54.

Klosterarchiv, MS 15, fols 5v–10r). The letter is addressed to the neighbouring community in Ebstorf, which, with Sister Gertrud's death, had lost one of their former members. It was written in July 1496 by another nun originally from Ebstorf who apparently had been a long-time companion of Gertrud, and who, as usual, only refers to herself by her initials (B. H.). Typical of written documents to the neighbouring convents, the letter is composed in a mixture of Latin and Low German. These letters always begin with 'Salutatio', a general aphorism that sets the letter's tone and theme before the personal connection is established by naming the recipient. In this particular case, a letter of condolence, a theme of solace is chosen: 'Ex fonte miseracionum domini in tribulacionibus pie consolari' ['May the Lord's fountain of mercy provide you with pious comfort in your tribulations'].⁴⁴ The grief at her fellow sister's death: 'Visis dolorosis et querulosis scriptis obitum videlicet karissime vestre ac nostre G[ertrud] Elzen insinuantibus concussa et conturbata sunt intima nostra precordia ob amissionem tam care, utilissimeque matris' (fols 5v–6r); ['Since I have seen the painful and disturbing letter which told me about the death of your and our most beloved Gertrud Elzen, my inner heart is pierced and troubled due to the loss of the much beloved and beneficial mother'], is first impressively put into words and emotionally rooted in the body: the nuns' inner hearts (*precordia*) are in anguish at the loss. Almost imperceptibly, the readers are led from this expression of deep mourning and sadness to a retrospection and a veneration of Gertrud Elzen's life: she had borne the ripe grapes of religious life in Christ, the true vine, when she embarked on the path of the holy Reform with the beloved (Reform abbess) Sophia von Bodendik — a metaphorical description of her transfer from Ebstorf to Lüne where she instructed the nuns in the life according to the Reform. The subsequent lines in Low German are shot through with countless Latin expressions. According to the letter, Gertrud Elzen had received an excellent education in Ebstorf from earliest childhood on ('a tenera infantia'); she had been introduced to the austerity of the Reform (fol. 6v): 'wente sse [*sic*] in domo Ebbeken a tenera infantia delicatissime iss enutriert unde hir sulves in iuventute florida utiliter instruert in una nobiscum scola virtutum per dulcem et prudentem magistram videlicet karissimam dominam matrem nostram pie recordationis' ['since she is brought up carefully from her earliest childhood in Ebstorf and educated there usefully in her flourishing youth together with us in the school of virtues by the sweet and wise schoolmistress, our most beloved mother and mistress [whom] we remember piously']; and had thereby grown strong in the Lord's vineyard and

⁴⁴ Lüne, KLA, MS 15 (quire 3, fol. 5v).

had brought forth rich fruit. On this basis, the reader is comforted as the letter of condolence enumerates the heavenly joys deservedly awaiting Gertrud Elzen as the bride of Christ in heaven among the other virgins. This deeply affecting and skilfully composed letter also demonstrates great professionalism in its literary expressions. As Bishop Berthold von Landsberg had already emphasized, the nuns at Lüne possessed the art of comforting through words and of transcending the constant danger and threat of death experienced in everyday life. This made them desirable as correspondents, as evinced by the large number of letters both written and received in the few years following the Reform. Not only did they possess their own communication networks through their connections to the other convents, they also occupied an independent and respected position in the regional communication network of laity and clergy.

The intensive correspondence of the Benedictine nuns of Lüne needs to be seen within the context of the nuns' dense network of connections that linked them to the all important powers of the region. The strict enclosure of the convents particularly contributed to a reflection of their religious and secular daily life, and monastic Reform even intensified this long established tradition in the convents. However, the conventual writings and the letters of the Benedictine nuns of Lüne are not only proof of their great skill in expressing themselves in a foreign language but also attest to the convents' intensive dialogue with each other during and after the Reform. They also point to their interaction: in a sense, the interconnected convents were able to maintain their own 'linguistic climate' relating to their own specific needs. Their allegorical reading of the religious and secular daily life, as well as their expertise in its interpretation, shaped the nuns' thoughts and their verbal articulation. With its various layers of meaning, the allegorical language allowed the nuns to make references to reality as well as to express the transcendent level of their being and their actions. The nuns of Lüne were by no means merely recipients of spiritual literature; the quill was very much their medium in manifold ways. They created a language that was suitable to their purposes and that was able to reflect adequately their daily life in the convent as well as their religious aims. The scholarly nuns and the theological discourse they engaged in thus formed a special environment in which mystical ideas could resonate and remain alive in ever new ways; this enabled the women to forge a deep understanding of their own religious duties and of their religious life as an inner spiritual path, even within the context of the new internalized theology of the fifteenth century.⁴⁵ Scholarly Latin afforded

⁴⁵ Berndt Hamm, 'Normative Zentrierung im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert: Beobachtungen zu Religiosität, Theologie und Ikonologie', *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 26 (1999), 163–202.

them a degree of emancipation from their male supervisors, as they were thus able to communicate independently with high-ranking clergymen. It also gave them access to a literary exchange within the educated Reform circles. The collection of letters by the nuns of Lüne demonstrates above all that they related their theological knowledge and aptitude for allegorical interpretation to their particular position as spiritual virgins and brides of Christ. From this position, they achieved a special authority in speaking, which made them revered and sought-after correspondents for religious and lay people alike.