FEMALE AGENCY IN MANUSCRIPT CULTURES

Edited by Eike Grossmann

Female Agency in Manuscript Cultures

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Introduction: Issues in the Study of Female Agency in Manuscript Cultures

1 Preliminary remarks

The cultural technique of writing, and with it, the production of written artefacts, has originated in multiple locations, independently and practically simultaneously, resulting in the creation of multifaceted and complex manuscript cultures.[1] However, women's share in manuscript cultures remains largely unexplored and under-represented both in the manuscript cultures themselves and in scholarship. At first glance – or from an 'unacknowledged male perspective'[2] – the acts of writing, copying, illuminating, producing, circulating and consuming written artefacts appear to be gendered, dominantly male endeavours. Nevertheless, with the simple realisation that 'anonymous equals male' is a frequently unquestioned preconception in the way we comprehend, describe and construct the fabric of our world, recent advances in all scientific and scholarly disciplines have begun to focus on this obvious blind spot. Borrowing from Marylène Patou-Mathis, a specialist in prehistory, who poignantly exclaims in the introduction to her much-discussed monograph *L'homme prehistoric est aussi une femme* ('Prehistoric Men were also Women'):

> No! Prehistoric women did not spend their time sweeping the cave! What if they too had painted the caves of Lascaux, hunted bison, carved tools, and were at the origin of innovations and social advances? New techniques for analysing archaeological remains, recent discoveries of human fossils and the development of gender archaeology have challenged many preconceived ideas and clichés.[3]

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1 Cf. e.g. Damerow 2006; Olson and Torrance (eds) 2009.

2 Broomhall 1999, 11.

3 Patou-Mathis 2020, 14: 'Non! Les femmes préhistoriques ne passaient pas leur temps à balayer la grotte! Et si elles aussi avaient peint Lascaux, chassé les bisons, taillé des outils, et été à l'origine d'innovations et d'avancées sociales? Les nouvelles techniques d'analyse des vestiges archéologiques, les récentes découvertes de fossiles humains et le développement de l'archéologie du genre ont remis en question nombre d'idées reçues et de clichés'. Translation from the French original by the author.

Patou-Mathis further states that '[w]hile there was no tangible evidence to differentiate tasks and status according to gender, prehistorians gave a binary vision of prehistoric societies: strong, creative men and weak, dependent, passive women'.[4] This observation is not limited to the field of prehistoric archaeology but can be applied to almost all academic disciplines. Taking this proposition as a stepping stone for the study of manuscript cultures, we have sufficient reason to assume that when we state that 'men write' and 'read', the statement 'women write' is just as true as its counterpart, 'women read'.[5] The term 'female agency',[6] thus, encompasses the 'relatively unexplored aspects of women's participation in publication, women as readers, women printers, publishers, booksellers, women book collectors, women editors, women commentators and critics, and women as patrons commissioning published materials'.[7] To state this fact explicitly: female agency is not the 'rare and exceptional other'[8] but a decisive factor when it comes to our understanding of manuscript cultures in general.[9]

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4 Patou-Mathis 2020, 14: 'Alors qu'aucune preuve tangible ne permettait de différencier les tâches et les statuts selon le sexe, les préhistoriens ont donné une vision binaire des sociétés préhistoriques: des hommes forts et créateurs et des femmes faibles, dépendantes et passives'. Translation from the French original by the author.

5 Larsson 1980, 277. Interestingly, there seem to be more depictions in medieval and early modern written artefacts of women reading than of women writing, at least for the European case. See Smith 1997. Katrin Kogman-Appel analyses female literacy in her publications on Jewish manuscript culture (Kogman-Appel 2012 and 2017), discussing portrayals of women with books, focusing on written artefacts from European Jewry. While we encounter female readers, there is a notable absence of female writers.

6 For a discussion of the term 'female agency' and its scholarly usage in the interpretation of medieval and early modern sources, see Howell 2019.

7 Broomhall 1999, 11.

8 For this argument, see Broomhall 1999, 27. A convincing example from a manuscript study's perspective is Jitske Jasperse's monograph *Medieval Women, Material Culture, and Power: Matilda Plantagenet and her Sisters* (2020). Jasperse argues that the 'tendency to foreground the importance of the magnificent gospel book, while largely ignoring the smaller psalter' (Jasperse 2020, 71), exacerbated the perception of Henry the Lion as active duke and of his wife Matilda as passive duchess, and simultaneously ignored that there existed a 'genuine cooperation between the spouses' (Jasperse 2020, 115).

9 This introduction and the contributions of this volume follow the hypothesis of Julia Bruch, the current holder of the guest professorship Women in Manuscript Cultures at the CSMC, in that 'we cannot speak of a genuine "feminine manuscript culture"' since 'the life worlds of men and women' cannot be thought of as separate entities: <https://www.csmc.uni-hamburg.de/publications/blog/2023-10-30-julia-bruch.html> (accessed on 12 January 2024). This, for example, also holds true when we look at manuscript production in early modern female convents, such as Le Murate in Florence, where the nun-scribes produced manuscripts on commission and outsourced certain tasks, such as

Starting from these simple observations, the present volume pursues two major concerns. One is to explore women's engagement with the act of writing. Bringing their engagement to light, we hope to provide a counterbalance to the common impression of the gendered nature of handwriting and written artefact production.[10] The other is to ask questions about how this misled impression came to be manifest in the first place: what are our own scholarly blind spots that cement the androcentrism in manuscript studies, and what strategies can we employ in order to reduce and remove such biases? Were women really excluded from manuscript production? Or were their efforts just obscured and marginalised? If so, for what reasons? And what obstacles do we encounter in our attempt to unearth female agency?

Bearing these concerns in mind, the seven contributions to this volume present case studies whose spectrum ranges from East Asian inscriptions to ancient cuneiform epigraphy, Egyptian graffiti from Late Antiquity, to individual specimen and large-scale collections of manuscripts and codices in medieval and early modern Europe. Each paper sheds light on new findings, gives unique insights and discusses methodological considerations, contributing to the firm and sustainable establishment of female agency in manuscript studies. The outlooks, backgrounds, materials and approaches of the following papers are far from uniform. Rather, their kaleidoscopic variety reflects the diversity of roles women acquired and the multiplicity of challenges, obstacles and outright negations their engagement faced in specific cultural and historical settings.[11] However, what unites them is that they subscribe

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illuminating the manuscript, to secular male artisans. Lowe 1997, 137, 141–142. Also see Melissa Moreton's contribution in this volume.

10 For the purposes of the present volume, this introduction presupposes an – admittedly reductionist and artificial – binary gender relation. This collection, for heuristic and historiographical reasons, documents cases of female agency in the field of written artefact production. All authors do not discount the principal possibility of people identifying as neither male nor female, nor that of those identifying as both. The papers collected herein and the present introduction do not enter into a discourse on non-binary gender agency in manuscript studies due to our present constraints in topic, time and space. It shall be the task of future investigations to breach this topic, and it is our hope that our endeavour makes a first step into the direction of releasing the study of written artefacts from its largely androcentric presuppositions.

11 Note that none of the contributions to this volume focuses on a single, privileged female individual, although, in some cases, one exceptional individual might be the starting point. This takes into consideration, among others, Susan Broomhall's argument that '[s]tudies devoted to a select famous few women continue to obscure the study and reproduction of a wider body of female writings' (Broomhall 1999, 6). She further points out that '[i]nterest in sixteenth-century French women's writings has generally concentrated on the works of a few exceptional women. Typically, attention has focused on women who were notable because of their high social status' (Broomhall

to two basic hypotheses that must be emphasised and made explicit from the very start.

(1) Just as we may generally state that the production of any written artefact involves a sophisticated constellation of enabling and limiting factors, so women's contribution to such productions were complex and took place in several dimensions of material, spatial and processual proximities to the artefact in the making. These range from the individuum who personally put pen to paper, brush to silk or chisel to stone, to those artisans responsible for providing the writing materials; from the authors in charge of drafting the text to be inscribed to the donors and patrons who had taken the very first step in initiating the production process but themselves remain undocumented and unbeknownst in the background. To determine whether the individuals acting in these – and other – diverse capacities were male or female means relying on the documentation embedded in the artefact itself as well as its contexts. The attempt at a precise identification is frequently frustrated by the meagreness, corruption or silence of sources. If our initial suspicion of a universal androcentrism – be it thorough-going or relatively shallow – in the records of a given manuscript culture is correct, it seems entirely reasonable to assume a twofold reason for women's absence from and invisibility in sources. Firstly, specific roles in artefact production processes (e.g. the artisans) tend to remain relatively undocumented. Secondly, even if male agency in more prestigious capacities was recorded, female agency was possibly not.[12] This then entails a lesser degree of probability for the scholar to find documents of female involvement in their artefact at hand or its relevant contexts. Still, a word of caution in a variation of Carl Sagan's famous dictum, 'Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence',[13] is in order: the silence of sources on female agency does not necessarily document their absence from, or unimportance in, a manuscript culture. Instead, it is precisely the multiplicity of roles that has to be taken into account in the pursuit of traces of female agency in manuscript production.

1999, 5), ignoring the specific circumstances of the lives, social situations, occupations and financial statuses of women who were not in such privileged positions (Broomhall 1999, 7).

12 To paraphrase Lesley Smith: while male scribes draw themselves into manuscripts, female scribes do not. Nevertheless, the fact that there are more depictions of male scribes than of female scribes (Smith 1997, 29–30) cannot be equated with ascribing all written artefacts without depictions to men. Kate Lowe also points out that 'female scribes tend not to reveal their identity or to claim credit for their work', often 'they do not leave their names in manuscripts' (Lowe 1997, 133). For an exceptional instance of a fifteenth-century Italian nun's breviary, signed and with a self-portrait, see Arthur 2017.

13 Sagan 1997, 200.

(2) To ask the question of what role women played in manuscript cultures may easily be misunderstood as hunting for those few areas to which male dominance did not fully extend, or for the niches that remained in between men's more visible forms of involvement. If one were to aim at the identification of these marginal leftovers, one would still fall prey to the androcentric ideology of female passivity and find women only where men's rule did not, no longer or not fully hold sway. The pages that follow, by contrast, amply illustrate that female agency in manuscript cultures is an entity *sui generis* that needs to be recognized as both complementary to and often radically different from its male counterpart. Simply put, even if women had to navigate their own way through the labyrinth of cultural participation as it was constructed by men, their navigation relied on not only what they were allowed to do but also their active choices to chart unregulated waters, push and redraw boundaries, and subvert, ignore and redefine hierarchies.[14] Theirs is an agency in the full sense of the term: the capacity of exerting power – perhaps not one to discipline and punish but certainly one to create the space wherein to act as one sees fit. At the same time, we must not, for reasons of both historiographical and hermeneutic caution, make the mistake of trying to understand their actions under the premises of the modern and contemporary feminist projects. Women in premodern cultures may not have been interested in being men's equals at all, or in institutionalising equal rights or fighting for equal opportunities. Nonetheless, they did negotiate, understand, assert and exert their agency – even if they did so in divergence from what our own expectations in today's world may be.[15]

2 Women's roles in the production of written artefacts

In light of the difficulty of discovering female agency – that is, recovering it from the shadow of male entitlement and scholarly androcentrism – sensitivity to the multiplicity of roles involved in any production, preservation and transmission of

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14 On indirect female influence on manuscript production, and women's role as patrons of books and literature, see, for example, Johns 2003, esp. 30–49.

15 For a contemporary example of women challenging an exclusively male domain, see the case of six female scribes who finished a Torah scroll commissioned by the Kadima Reconstructionist Community in Seattle, Washington, in 2010 (Margolis 2011). See also the webpage of this endeavour: <https://www.kadima.org/womens-torah-project.html> (accessed on 14 January 2024).

cultural artefacts becomes all the more important. Take, for example, the intricacies involved in the interpretation of the famous *O utinam liceat* ('Oh, would that I could [...]') poetic graffito, discovered on a wall in Pompeii in 1888:[16] Its verbal declinations (*perdita nocte*, 'I [female gender] was lost in the night') clearly indicate the poem to have been written in a woman's voice. It also unmistakably addresses a female partner (*pupula*, 'poppet') in erotic or amicable terms (or perhaps even both). It then also seems natural to presume that the graffito was inscribed similarly by a woman's hand. Taken at face value, this written artefact appears to represent multiple female agencies: it was addressed to a woman, composed by a woman, and inscribed by a woman – and the latter two may or may not have been the same person.

At the same time, we must grant that the possibility cannot be ruled out that neither of these three roles is genuinely female: the inscription of a decidedly female poem may have been done by a male author for personal reasons or for the sake of provoking others; a male author may have adopted a female voice in order to jest or to circumvent literary conventions; the object of their love and friendship may have been no real woman at all but a lyric gesture or an imagined ideal. Careful analysis from multiple angles and with various tools – above all, the spatial contextualization of the graffito and its connection to other inscriptions in the vicinity – nonetheless, imparts the hypothesis with plausibility that CIL 4.5296 attests to a number of factual female involvements in the production of this written artefact in particular and their participation in Pompeiian manuscript culture in general.[17] The attempt at pinpointing the precise nature of their roles and statuses, however, underscores the difficulties in proving female participation over and against the 'male default' of taking for granted that men composed, wrote and read written artefacts. That such difficulties may yet be successfully mastered and overcome, in turn, is attested to in the contributions that follow.

With these qualifications on female agency in mind, we may confidently attempt to outline a systematic typology of women's contributions to the production of written artefacts. The following remarks will proceed from roles that seem (perhaps, in fact, are) simple and passive to those that are more complex, risk-laden and assertive – always seen from the vantage point of the written artefact as datum.

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16 Referred to in scholarship by its serial numbers CIL 4.5296 in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and/or CLE 950 in the *Carmina Latina Epigraphica*.
17 See the exegetical arguments presented in Graverini 2012–2013 and, more precisely, in Graverini 2017, esp. 125, n. 3. The newer study concludes the graffito to be a 'literary piece arguably authored by a woman, and in which a woman talks to a female addressee about her personal feelings' (Graverini 2017, 126).

2.1 Women as objects of written artefacts

If it is our intention to holistically observe, describe, investigate and analyse instances of female agency, the inclusion of women as the mere object of a given written artefact becomes necessary. Take, for example, a male author-scribe imagining a female protagonist, devising a narrative about her and writing down his text on paper. Indisputably, this leaves us with a written artefact that addresses a woman, fictional though she may be. To claim a female agency and her involvement in the production of such a written artefact, however, would be ironic and spurious at best, misdirecting and deceptive at worst. By contrast, if a male author's actual interaction with a living woman is documented in handwriting, the case was less clear-cut: the things she said and did inform the written artefacts to varying degrees and it, hence, would be an oversight to dismiss her agency altogether.[18] The more her actions become part of the written artefact, the more she is aware of being written about and assents, even chooses to contribute, the more pronounced we may evaluate her agency – or, in this case, her role – to be. Even in this seemingly obvious case of a purely passive, non-materialised role of a woman as the object in the production of a written artefact, we must not discount female agency wholesale.

I will select but one example from among an immeasurable amount of candidates:[19] The trial of Joan of Arc (1412–1431) – who, after her decisive participation in the Siege of Orléans (1428/1429) in the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) between England and France, was charged with heresy before an ecclesiastical court in Rouen, found guilty and subsequently burned at the stake – was meticulously recorded in a document autographed by the notary present, Manchon.[20] Several copies of the original document were made by the notary himself, and these as well as further copies were authenticated by the affixation of official seals to the writing supports (vellum and paper). Several copies are extant in various states of preservation and revision; one, by contrast, is extant no longer, since it was presented at the rehabilitation proceedings in 1455 (investigations began already in 1452) and

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18 For a case study on the graduations of such a female–male collaboration, see Ray 2009.

19 Some of the examples presented in the course of the following typology quote from British Library's wonderfully rich and varied 'Medieval manuscripts blog' (see <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitised manuscripts/index.html>, accessed 13 on January 2024), particularly the 25 March 2023 entry on 'Medieval and Renaissance Women: full list of the manuscripts' (see <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitised manuscripts/2023/03/medieval-and-renaissance-women-full-list-of-the-manuscripts.html>, accessed on 13 January 2024).

20 The transcript is introduced and translated into English in Barrett 2014 [1931] (also see <https://saint-joan-of-arc.com/trial-condemnation.htm>, accessed on 13 January 2024) and more recently in Hobbins 2007.

destroyed by court order when Joan was posthumously found not guilty of her charges. Naturally, the defendant and victim had no immediate hand in these written artefacts. But, by the same coin, it is quite obvious that their production (and that of several others, such as the handwritten transcript of the rehabilitation proceedings in codex format, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, latin 8838) would and could not have happened without Joan of Arc's actions – that is, without her agency.

2.2 Women as providers of context

These considerations immediately lead us to a second type of female agency – one in which the interaction between the male author-scribe and a female partner results in the creation of a written artefact that does not primarily involve the woman as the object but, nonetheless, could not have been produced without her. Such is the case with a manuscript written on textile support (London, British Library (hereafter BL), Cotton Roll XIV 8), which records the diet and menu of the year 1531 for the Princess Mary (1516–1558) – single surviving child to Henry VIII, who would become Queen Mary I of England (aka Mary Tudor) in 1553 – and her household.

The manuscript's structure is oriented along the household's hierarchy, with Mary occupying the leftmost column, followed by her advisors, senior officials, gentlewomen and gentlemen, junior staff and servants. Diet differed according to status, apparently, but the written artefact itself is targeted not merely at Mary's apex position; instead, it must be read as a general overview of administrative and logistic purposes. As such, the object of its representation is neither a female individuum nor the group of women living with Mary, but the functioning of the ecumene in which they all participated. Nonetheless, it was Mary's position in society as a royal scion and heir apparent (even if this status was temporarily revoked when her descent was judged illegitimate in 1533, but restored with the Third Succession Act of 1543) and the economical privileges it entailed that enabled, indeed necessitated, the culinary table in the first place.

This type of female agency, then, takes into account any social constellation in which a woman provides the context that enables scribes, artisans and/or artists to follow their profession and exact their competences. Even though her involvement in the production of the manuscript, inscription or artwork may not at all be directly perceptible in the created artefact, to disavow her agency would be to disregard the fact that without her funding, protection or endorsement, the creation could not have been realised. Granted, to state such a type of involvement means to rely not on the materiality of the written artefact in question as such but rather on circumstantial evidence, such as the artist's attestations or contextual records.

Still, the point – hypothetical though it may be – stands: if she donated money for the purchase of production materials, provided workspace, board and lodging, and brought to bear the influence, network and infrastructure at her disposition, none of these facts would necessarily make a visual appearance on the object – even though all of these factors were essential to its production.

2.3 Women as owners, collectors, readers and donors

Yet another form of female agency is, by and large, passive but may be formative to the gestalt of a written artefact. Women owned – no different from men – individual manuscripts and codices as well as libraries and archives, and their ownership left a visible mark on the object(s): Her hand may have inscribed her signature in short or full or any other indication of her possession, or she may have affixed her *ex libris*, her seal or other imprints on the written artefact(s).[21] While her contribution to the genesis of the written artefact may be considered secondary, inconsequential or inauthentic, one cannot dispute that the written artefact as we have it before us today would not be the same without her contribution.[22] Take, for instance, women not only reading but actively collecting, gifting and exchanging copies of plays by William Shakespeare in the first half of the eighteenth century: consulting a representative sample of such playbooks, Sae Kitamura has investigated women's signatures, *ex libris*, and other marks of ownership as well as their manuscript annotations to the source texts.[23] The result is the image of a tight-knit bibliophile network that spans several families laterally, and three to four generations. Or think about Empress Matilda (*c.* 1102–1167), who donated 'books from her personal chapel to the abbey of Bec-Hellouin on her deathbed in 1167, confirming that manuscripts were owned and gifted by women'.[24] It is also indispensable to

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21 See the illuminating reflections on the topic of *ex libris* and others in Burns, which reflect on her own practice of 'minor writing genres' (Burns 2010, 243b).

22 For a compelling collection of women's handwritten insertions, marginalia and addenda to folii, codices and manuscripts, see the 'Early Modern Women's Marginalia blog' at the Australian National University (<https://earlymodernwomensmarginalia.cems.anu.edu.au>, accessed on 12 January 2024).

23 See Sae 2017. Note that the author's identification in the journal as well as in the databases is erroneous, since Sae 紗衣 is the given, Kitamura 北村 the family name. The correct bibliographical reference should read Kitamura 2017.

24 Jasperse 2020, 68. For a valuable source for the identification of female book owners in Europe, see the database *Books of Duchesses: Mapping Women Book Owners, 1350–1550* (<https://booksofduchesses.com/>, accessed on 13 January 2024). The database also contains information on

acknowledge the fact that women did not necessarily leave any marks in the written artefacts they possessed. These books, in fact, could 'have been so generic that [...] they would not be recognized as once having belonged to women'.[25]

Again, to ignore female agency not in the production but in the preservation and transmission of the written artefact would be to fail the goal of a holistic scrutiny of the object's givens: we would – quite contrary to both objective fact and the project of reconsidering female participation – implicitly subscribe to a hierarchy of agencies, which is informed not by the materiality of the written artefact but by the – effectively male-centred – assumption of the superiority of a primary male creator (read: male author) over and against female epigones.

2.4 Women as initiators, patrons and commissioners

Wealthy and powerful women did much the same as their male counterparts when they made use of their resources, and through them, procured the skills of scribes, painters and artists. Even destitute women gave what was available to them in order to create indirectly, by way of relying on another's expertise, some kind of effect or benefit. Such cases, amply attested to in religious contexts, lead to the inscription of women's concerns and female agency in the written artefact.[26] While such inscriptions may not have been made by their own hands, they were certainly produced on their behalf and for their benefit.[27] Examples also abound in legal contexts and those of legitimacy: Isabel of Portugal (1397–1471) stated the lawfulness of her – and her offspring's – claim to the English throne after the demise of King Henry VI in the form of a lengthy document (London, BL, Add Ch 8043), dated 21 May 1471.[28] The text was clearly written by an expert scribe (observe the ornamented initials and the near-perfect regularity of the main body of the text), and the contents were drafted, in all probability, by notaries who also affixed their signatures at the end of the statement. While Isabel did contribute materially to the making of the written

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how women came into the possession of the written artefact using archival records, inscriptions and other sources.

25 Jasperse 2020, 69. Another example are books that may be part of a female convent's library as well as that of a male monastery. See particularly the contributions of Michael L. Norton and Patricia Stoop to this volume.

26 See the contributions by Wendi L. Adamek and Bryan D. Lowe to this volume.

27 The case of Angela da Foligno – who, being able to read but not to write, dictated her spiritual experiences to a Franciscan monk – is an exquisite display of this type of agency. See Cervigni 2005.

28 See <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2023/03/claim-of-thrones.html> (accessed on 14 January 2024).

artefact when she undersigned in her own hand, it was primarily her – effectively unsuccessful – entitlement and instruction that effected its production.

2.5 Women as authors, compilers and supervisors

The creation of a text is frequently dissociated from its inscription, even in highly literate cultures, since the two roles – author and scribe – require sets of skills that are altogether different.[29] This is particularly the case if the goal of writing down the created text is not the production of a rough draft but of a clean manuscript copy or, all the more, an epigraphic inscription.[30] In these instances, auctorial female agency may be synonymous with the imagination of what a written artefact was supposed to look like, what contents it was supposed to make available and what purposes it may serve in social practices. As such, the female author may be responsible for everything that precedes, indeed makes possible, the physical production as the final stage of an idea's manifestation. Her creativity and prestige may then, possibly centuries later, also become an anchor point for subsequent acts of inscription. Such is the case when a male calligrapher chooses lines from a woman writer's poems. Supposedly, his choice intentionally makes use of features – the status of female literature; the relative scarcity of highly visible women poets; the change of gendered voice and idiom – that were unavailable if he was to select male poetry. At the very least, her authorship informs the written artefact to a non-negligible extent that needs be acknowledged in the study of such manuscript specimens. More often, male scribes, readers and annotators openly and reflectively produce copies of female-authored texts or use those in various ways. The *Book* of Margery Kempe (1373–1438) survives today in only one manuscript copy (London, BL, Add MS 61823), written shortly after her death by one Richard Salthouse from Norwich. The manuscript subsequently entered the library of Mount Grace Priory, where the monks inscribed their ownership and made annotations and additions to the text.[31] The *Book* was evidently valued even among men not in spite but because of having been authored by a woman.[32]

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29 Cf. Smith 1997, 23.

30 For a discussion of female author-scribes in Mesopotamia and early Byzantine Egypt, see the contributions of Cécile Michel and Leah Mascia to this volume.

31 See Bale 2017; Fredell 2009.

32 Of course, the opposite reaction can be also observed. Broomhall describes a 'masculinization of poetry' (Broomhall 1999, 27) in early modern France: by trivializing poetic genres considered to be emblematic of female writers, men effectively excluded women from 'poetic activities in which

2.6   Women as scribes and copyists

Conversely, women also acted as scribes for male texts. This constellation may seem contra-intuitive at first glance but is, in fact, a frequent phenomenon. Think of the requirement to write a text with legal relevance in one's own hand: small wonder, then, that scholars attest to the existence of 'thousands of acknowledgement deeds written by divorced women'[33] from fifteenth-century Jerusalem alone, with which they certify to henceforth forgo all claims to their ex-husband's property. In order to prevent juridical ambiguities, the text they inscribed on slips of paper was formulaic and not of their own device – instead, we may presume, it was male authorities and the specifications they gave that authored the formulae. If one only starts looking for them, other examples abound. We may cite the case of the female monastic Abutsu 阿仏 (1225–1283) in medieval Japan,[34] whose skilled calligraphy copies the so-called *Settsushū* 摂津集, an anthology of *waka* ('Japanese songs') and, in the process, inscribes a number of poems from both male and female authors.[35] It bears emphasis that the poems are not of her own device, and that the poetry survives in a multitude of individual copies, personal and summary anthologies, in both manuscript and print. What lends the written artefact by Abutsu its prestige is not the extraordinary nature of its content but the mere fact that in it, one the most accomplished scribes and culturally emblematic figures in Japanese history put her brush to paper.[36]

2.7   Women as artists

For lack of a better term, we will call this seventh category in our typology of female agency 'women as artists'. This nomenclature will comprise all those cases in which

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[they] had been able to participate in the past' (Broomhall 1999, 28). On questions of female authorship and women's autobiographies in Muslim South Asia from the sixteenth century to the present day, see Lambert-Hurley 2018; Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley (eds) 2015.

33 Aljoumani and Hirschler 2023, 103.

34 For an overview of the nun Abutsu's life and contexts, see Laffin 2013; on questions of artistic prowess, esp. pp. 26–31. It bears mention that Abutsu was not only a respected calligrapher but also capable in a number of other arts, as well as a prolific author.

35 Monochrome digital images of the written artefact, archived at the Archives and Mausolea Department of the Imperial Household Agency (Kunaichō Shoryōbu 宮内庁書陵部) are available at <https://kokusho.nijl.ac.jp/biblio/100002856/5?ln=en> (accessed on 13 January 2024).

36 On the palaeographic intricacies in the unambiguous identification of Abutsu as the scribe, see Kuboki Hideo 2007.

a woman or several women contribute in a dominant, intentional and active fashion to the production of a written artefact or an identifiable group of written artefacts. When Japanese aristocrat Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (966–1025), lady-in-waiting to Imperial Consort Teishi 定子 (977–1001), autographed her impressions and reminiscences in the famed *Pillow Book* (*Makura no sōshi* 枕草子), she was simultaneously acting as author, scribe and object of her own prose.[37] Hence, her agency was one of literary artistry, and even though no holograph of the *Pillow Book* is extant, its existence is well-attested to and remains a constant point of reference also for later artists, both male and female. Another example is vividly presented by Babette Bohn: over the course of several decades, a group of women painters in early modern Bologna created self-portraits, as well as portraits of one another, in which the portrait's model was rendered not naturalistically but styled in the fashion of nuns and female saints. Women were acting as creators (i.e. as authors) who devised the painting's subject in pursuit of their own ambitions; as painters (i.e. as scribes) who realised the idea in colour and form; as models who posed for the artist and became the painting's object; as iconographic *topoi* for the painting's allusion and symbolism (i.e. as providers of context); as a social network which stimulated a serialized production of similar but not identical productions (i.e. as initiators); and as audiences whose interests and connoisseurship facilitated the production and subsequent transmission of the artefact (i.e. as owners) – all at the same time.[38]

Situations such as these make it obvious that, in many cases, women's roles were not singular but multifarious and heterogeneous. One woman may be the passive object of a written artefact in the moment of its creation and its owner in the next, later transforming the object by adding her own imprints or even destroying the artefact. It, thus, goes without saying that the aspects of this typology are frequently neither distinct from one another nor mutually exclusive. An illuminative, if obvious, case that exemplifies the multiple layers of female agency is *The Book of the Queen* (London, BL, Harley MS 4431), presented in 1414 by Christine de Pizan (1365–*c.* 1431) to Isabel of Bavaria (1370–1435), queen of France. The scene of the gift being offered is part of the manuscript (fol. 3ʳ): The colourful illumination depicts eight women, among them Isabel, who had commissioned the book, and Christine,

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37 On the *Pillow Book*'s impact on Japanese literature, see Bundy 1991. For the most recent English translation of the work, see McKinney (tr.) 2006.

38 Cf. Bohn 2004. The circulation of poems by female authors, their appreciation in female circles, and the inscription of connoisseuses' lines of admiration on the very same written artefacts in imperial China is described in Yang 2010, esp. 224–228.

who now presents the completed book to her.[39] This written artefact was not only commissioned by a woman (Isabel) from a woman (Christine). The latter was also involved in all aspects of manuscript production and took over various roles in its making process: employer of scribes and artisans, provider of materials, supervisor, copyist, compiler, translator, scribe and author, among others.[40] After 1425, a change of ownership must have happened, and the book reappears in a woman's collection around 1433/1435. The new owner is Jacquetta of Luxembourg (1415/1416–1472), duchess of Bedford, who kept it until her death in 1472, and left her mark in the book by inserting several inscriptions of her name and her motto.[41]

However, any attempt at identifying female agency also has to take into account that gender is not the only issue in play. Rather, the typical case is constituted by what we may call the intersectionality of agency.[42] In fact, at any given point in time, region and cultural development, the possibility of participation is distributed unequally throughout society. If women may have limited access to resources and

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39 See <http://www.pizan.lib.ed.ac.uk/gallery/pages/003r.htm> (accessed on 13 January 2024). For a vivid description of this scene and a brief outline of the gendered nature of *The Book of the Queen*, see Cooper-Davis 2023, 1–5. In her monograph *Christine de Pizan: Empowering Women in Text and Image*, Charlotte Cooper-Davis (2023) outlines various ways in which women acquired power through written artefacts in the late Middle Ages. Building on the case of *The Book of the Queen*, she analyses the roles of women as authors, patrons, presenters and receivers. On *The Book of the Queen*, also see <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2013/06/christine-de-pizan-and-the-book-of-the-queen.html> (accessed on 13 January 2024).

40 See Inès Villela-Petit's insightful study of Christine de Pizan's workshop (Villela-Petit 2020); also Laidlaw 2003, 231–249. Christine simultaneously appears in several miniatures in *The Book of the Queen*, and in various roles and settings: we see her making corrections in a book (fol. 4ʳ), sitting before an open book, teaching her son (fol. 261ᵛ) and instructing four men (fol. 295ᵛ), and presenting books to male patrons, such as Louis d'Orléans (fol. 95ʳ) or King Charles VI (fol. 178ʳ). Lori J. Walters argues that '[i]n placing miniatures that include depictions of parchment sheets and/or books at prominent spots in the iconographic cycle of the Queen's MS, Christine reinforces her oral and written authority; otherwise said, the authority she has to give advice to royalty, both during her own lifetime and in future times' (Walters 2012, online); for depictions of Christine in her other works, cf. McGrady 2012.

41 The ownership of London, BL, Harley MS 4431 during the fifteenth century can be traced through the database *Books of Duchesses*, <https://booksofduchesses.com/books/BL%20Harley%20MS%204431> (accessed on 13 January 2024). The database lists fifty-four books in the possession of Isabel of Bavaria, and her ownership of Harley MS 4431 is confirmed by the patron portrait mentioned above and dates between 1414 and 1425. Three of the five entries of written artefacts possessed by Jacquetta of Luxembourg bear Jacquetta's inscription, among them Harley MS 4431. Jacquetta's inscriptions in Harley MS 4431 are on fols 1ʳ, 52ᵛ, 115ᵛ, 387ʳ. See <https://blogs.bl.uk/digitisedmanuscripts/2015/12/traces-of-jacquetta-de-luxembourg-in-the-book-of-the-queen.html> (accessed on 13 January 2024).

42 See also Garrard 1976.

options when compared with men, it is also the case that poor women are deprived of the possibility to realise their agency more regularly, more systematically and more consequently than wealthy and powerful women. Even gendered invisibility, to put it differently, has graduations. Agency is limited not only by gendered discourses and habituations but also by economic facts and social standing. To disentangle such limiting factors from one another is a challenge that cannot be generalised, but is in need of the attentive, careful and unprejudiced deliberation of all the specifics that, while part and parcel of any case study, are especially salient to the reconstruction of female agency. And it is here that the contributions to this volume exemplify how such a project may succeed in spite of the silences and scarcities of sources, unexamined assumptions and lack of scholarship that may encumber it. Due to their extensive range, scholarly depth and richness in cultural specificity, this volume is kaleidoscopic in nature. Accordingly, the seven contributions follow a simple geographical arrangement oriented roughly along an East-West trajectory – Japan, China, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Italy, Austria and the Low Countries.

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Bryan D. Lowe

Patrons of Paper and Clay: Methods for Studying Women's Religiosity in Ancient Japan

Abstract: This chapter argues that women's most prominent role in ancient Japanese manuscript cultures was not as authors of texts but as patrons. Women likely commissioned the transcription of tens of thousands of scrolls of Buddhist scripture. They also produced short inscriptions, in colophons and on clay and other materials, that documented their patronage of temples, Buddhist images, and offerings. To recover women's voices and identify female patrons, scholars need to turn to new sources such as administrative documents, dedicatory colophons, and inscribed excavated objects. After outlining these archives, the chapter surveys prolific female patrons in the Nara capital, who were able to commission entire canons through the scriptoria that they helped manage. It then looks at women who joined collectives to copy sutras and sponsor Buddhist construction projects. The chapter concludes by reflecting on methods for studying non-elite women in provincial villages, who may have composed simple prayers for wealth on pieces of clay pottery.

1 Introduction

Where do we find women in manuscripts in classical or ancient (*kodai* 古代) Japan?[1] We may be tempted to search for authors. After all, the Heian Period (794–1185 CE) is famous for women such as Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (*s.a.*), Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (*s.a.*), and the Mother of Fujiwara no Michitsuna 藤原道綱母 (?–995), who brushed works now considered classics. These figures represent our typical image of women and manuscripts for Japan: women at court who were poetic geniuses, crafting literary masterpieces that live on today.[2]

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1 The precise dates and translation of *kodai* are disputed. For the best recent historiographical overview, see Piggott 2012, 21–31. She defines the period as sixth or seventh century through the late twelfth. While there is room to debate this periodization, something Joan Piggott too acknowledges, this is outside of the scope of this chapter, which focuses mostly on eighth and early ninth-century materials, an era clearly a part of *kodai* by any definition.

2 For a succinct overview of the rise of women authors in the Heian Period, see Shirane 2015, 98–99.

But these women were exceptional.[3] Few women ever composed the texts now considered classics, just as few men did. Murasaki Shikibu and others like her only represent one way that women related to manuscript cultures and a decidedly uncommon one at that. As Jessica Starling has recently pointed out, scholars of Japanese religions 'may need to give up [their] fixation on finding individual women who are named as the author of a written work'.[4]

Instead of authorship, women in ancient Japan played what was arguably a more prolific and likely earlier role in manuscript production: patronage.[5] It is in this position that women created the largest number of texts: not as authors or even as calligraphers, but rather as sponsors. They commissioned manuscripts as patrons, both individually and collectively, and recorded their acts as donors on a range of written surfaces from paper to clay.

This is not to say that female patrons never wrote texts or that they never acted as scribes or authors. We know, for example, that Kōmyōshi 光明子 (701–760), one of the period's greatest patrons of Buddhism and one of the main protagonists of this chapter, could write. This is demonstrated in calligraphy in the Shōsōin 正倉院 (a treasure house described below), in which she identifies herself as the Third Fujiwara Daughter (Fig. 1).[6] We also know that women were active poets in early Japan. Lady Ōtomo no Sakanoue 大伴坂上郎女 (*s.a.*) has amongst the highest number of poems included in the *Collection of Myriad Leaves* (*Man'yōshū* 万葉集), the earliest Japanese poetry collection, which was completed in the late eighth century.[7] While men outnumbered women as named authors, Sakanoue was not the sole poet whose purported work was included in the collection. A number of other poems in

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3 For a similar critique of how our study of religion in ancient Japan has been limited by our attention to these authors, see Blair 2016, 2.

4 Starling 2022, 476.

5 Barbara Ambros has also emphasized the role of women as lay patrons of Buddhism more generally. See Ambros 2015, 45–51.

6 For two pieces of her calligraphy, see *Gakki ron* 楽毅論 and *Toka rissei* 杜家立成, both in The Shōsōin Treasures, North Section 3; <https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp> (accessed on 14 November 2023). I refer to her as Kōmyōshi, a name that she used in the colophon to the 5/1 canon discussed below. She is also known as Queen Consort Kōmyō 光明皇后 and as the Third Fujiwara Daughter 藤三娘.

7 Different editions and possibly different ways of counting seem to render different results. According to Danica Truscott, she is tied for second in terms of the number of poems in the *Man'yōshū*, but H. Mack Horton ranks her third. See Truscott 2022, 3 and Horton 2015, 77. The title of the *Man'yōshū* is notoriously difficult to translate, since the term rendered here as 'leaves' (*yō*) can also mean 'ages', 'poems', or even 'pages'. For these difficulties as well as an overview of the collection, see Horton 2015, whose translation of the title I have followed. It is the oldest collection of Japanese poems, but not the oldest extant poetry compilation in Japan, an honour that goes to the *Kaifūsō* 懐風藻, a collection of literary Sinitic poems.

the *Collection of Myriad Leaves* are attributed to women, some of whom flourished as far back as the seventh century.[8] Women could and did both copy and compose literary works from the start of the classical age.
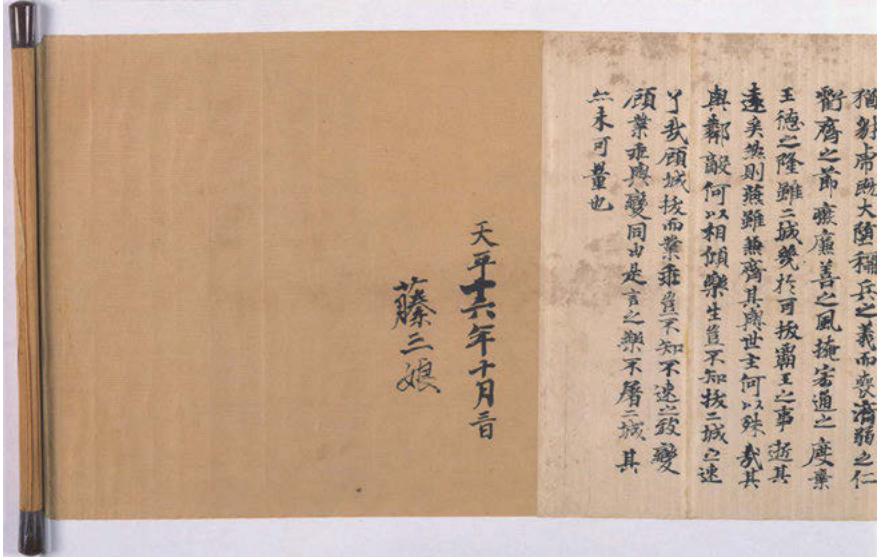

Fig. 1: *Gakki ron* 楽毅論 by Kōmyōshi, The Shōsōin Treasures, North Section 3, <https://shosoin. kunaicho.go.jp> (accessed on 14 November 2023); courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

However, women more commonly paid other people to copy manuscripts. Most typically, they sponsored the transcription of Buddhist works, which, as will be discussed below, were thought to bring religious merit to those who had them copied. Female patrons transcended barriers of geographic region and social class. Women at court in the capital naturally had the resources to order the transcription of large quantities of text, but women outside of these circles also sponsored sutra copying and created short texts with the inscription of their names and prayers on other objects such as clay pots or roof tiles. Provincial elite women certainly produced texts and poorer women may have as well.

This chapter takes up both the production of manuscripts by female sponsors and their records of patronage inscribed on other types of Buddhist objects. Some of this evidence takes the form of paper manuscripts, but women also documented

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8 Truscott 2022, 11–12; Horton 2015, 58–59.

their presence on clay and other media. After overviewing the relevant sources and Buddhist doctrines of merit, both as scholars have defined the term and as how the concept appears in ancient Japanese sources, this chapter will look at women at court who sponsored Buddhist scriptural canons, female provincial patrons, fellowships led by women, and possible evidence for poor women who may have inscribed their prayers for wealth on humble pots in villages throughout Japan.

2 Sources for women and patronage

2.1 Shōsōin documents

To see these women requires new sources compared to those typically used in the study of early Japanese Buddhism. Most scholarship has focused on court chronicles, legal codes, and Buddhist narratives. The research in this chapter is primarily based on four different types of sources: two manuscript and two epigraphic. The first manuscript collection is known as Shōsōin documents (*Shōsōin monjo* 正倉院文書). The Shōsōin is a treasure house located in the ancient capital of Nara now managed by the Imperial Household Agency that dates to the eighth century. Technically, the term Shōsōin refers to the larger compound and Shōsō indicates the main storehouse (Fig. 2). Scholars and the general public, however, typically use Shōsōin as a general designation for the building that housed its now famous collections, a practice I will follow.

Fig. 2: Shōsōin Shōsō 正倉院正倉, Creative Commons, cropped, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shosin-shouso.jpg (accessed on 14 November 2023).

The Shōsōin is best known for its treasures, objects that range from musical instruments to medicines, but it also holds a uniquely coherent and detailed archive of documents that has received far less attention, especially in English.[9] This corpus, a collection of more than ten thousand handwritten documents that date to the eighth century, was only reintroduced to the world in the 1830s by the antiquarian scholar and poet Hoida Tadatomo 穂井田忠友 (1791–1847), who was almost certainly the first person to closely examine them after they had otherwise been largely forgotten for more than one thousand years.[10] Almost all of these documents remain within the Shōsōin archive (now housed in a modern structure near the original Shōsōin), though a small number have entered private collections. [11] Shōsōin documents primarily relate to a single institution: the Office of Sutra Transcription (*Shakyōjo* 写経所).[12] The Office of Sutra Transcription, an eighth-century institution for copying scriptures, produced most of the archive that became the Shōsōin documents. The documents are decidedly mundane. The Shōsōin corpus is a record of day-to-day management. Typical documents include ledgers accounting for the receipt of paper, pay reports, requests for rations, budgets, labour productivity reports, workers' missives for time off, various memoranda, and numerous other types of documents (Fig. 3). Perhaps because of its mundane focus on daily minutiae, the Shōsōin corpus provides unparalleled insight into the life and culture of a scriptorium, allowing us to see its activities in detail with occasions of surprising intimacy.

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9 Helpful overviews of the Shōsōin include Sakaehara Towao 2011b, Ichikawa Rie 2017, and, in English, Farris 2007 and Inokuchi 2009. Also see Lowe 2017, 21–25 and Lowe 2014a, 287–289.

10 For the history of the discovery and reorganization of these documents in the nineteenth century, see Nishi Yōko 2002.

11 The ones that have left the Shōsōin are published in Kokuritsu Rekishi Minzoku Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1992. Images of the others are available both in print and online: Kunaichō Shōsōin Jimusho (ed.) 1988, vol. 1–17, and <https://shosoin.kunaicho.go.jp> (accessed on 4 January 2024). Unfortunately, the original order of the documents has been highly disrupted, as Hoida and his successors peeled and cut apart documents from the order in which they found the documents and rearranged them based on their antiquarian and historical interests. For a helpful brief survey of Hoida and the modern rearrangement of the collection, see Farris 2007, 403–415.

12 I use the word sutra (scripture) here in a very broad sense, which includes works technically classified as *vinaya* (monastic codes), *abhidharma* (exegetical works), commentaries, biographies, etc. This is how the term *kyō*, which I translate as sutra and scripture, appears to have been used at times, as the Office of Sutra (*kyō*) Transcription also copied all kinds of texts in the Buddhist canon, despite its name as a 'sutra' copying office. For the meaning and nature of the canon (typically *issaikyō* 一切経, literally all the scriptures) at this time, see Lowe 2014b. I return to the concept of canon and problems defining it below.

Fig. 3: Salary record from a Nara Buddhist scriptorium, Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Bequest of the Hofer Collection of the Arts of Asia, Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1985.356.

For the purposes of this chapter, Shōsōin documents are crucial because a high percentage of them relate to the sutra copying activities of Kōmyōshi, as well as her daughter who ruled twice as the sovereign Kōken 孝謙 (718–770, r. 749–758) and Shōtoku 称徳 (r. 764–770). As such, Shōsōin documents detail two women's patronage and management of a sutra copying bureau. The documents reveal when and what these women had copied. Sometimes it is even possible to tease out their motivations for sponsoring the transcription of Buddhist texts.

2.2 Sutra manuscripts

Shōsōin documents are not the only manuscript sources to shed light on how Buddhist scripture was transcribed in eighth-century Japan. Sutra manuscripts themselves represent a second source useful for studying women and manuscript cultures.[13] The difference between Shōsōin documents and sutra manuscripts is as follows: Shōsōin documents are administrative texts that record the workings of a scriptorium, which copied sutras; sutra manuscripts are the scriptures themselves, which were produced by various scriptoria (including but not limited to the Office of Sutra Transcription) as well as by individual sponsors or through more informal ad hoc organizations. Some of these sutras are the very manuscripts whose transcription is recorded in Shōsōin documents, so it is possible to read the two archives alongside one another.

These materials are currently housed in a range of facilities around the world. The largest collection of eighth-century scrolls is almost certainly that of the Shōgozō 聖語蔵, a sutra repository now managed by the Imperial Household Agency. The Shōgozō was originally part of Tōdaiji's 東大寺 Sonshōin 尊勝院 sub-temple, but was moved to the Shōsōin precincts around 1896 (Fig. 4).[14] It contains about 1,500 scrolls that date to the eighth century from several sutra copying projects, about half of which were sponsored by Kōmyōshi (Fig. 5) as well as a smaller number of additional texts by her daughter.[15] It also includes sutras imported from

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13 Lowe 2014a, 289–291.

14 For the most up-to-date study on the Shōgozō building, see Shimizu Shin'ichi et al. 2023. Tōdaiji was arguably the most important temple in Nara, though its construction was only completed toward the end of the Nara Period. In English, the best survey of its history remains Piggott 1987. Akiko Walley has recently highlighted objects buried beneath the pedestal of the Great Buddha in a series of articles: Walley 2018, 2022 and 2023. In Japanese, scholarship on Tōdaiji is voluminous, but the best collection of recent research can be found in Sakaehara Towao et al. (eds) 2016–2018.

15 For the manuscripts and their current classification, see Iida Takehiko 2012 and Sugimoto Kazuki 2021.

China, later Japanese manuscripts, and printed works as well, but those are outside of the scope of this chapter.

Fig. 4: Shōgozō, courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency, image from Shimizu Shin'ichi et al. 2023, 2.

Fig. 5: *Bussetsu kannōgyō* 仏説諫王経, part of 5/1 canon sponsored by Kōmyōshi; *Shōgozō kyōkan*, ed. Kunaichō Shōsōin Jimusho (ed.) 2001, Disc 23, manuscript no. 247; courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

While the Shōgozō archive is the largest single collection of eighth-century sutras and has especially close ties to female patrons, other manuscripts are scattered throughout temple, museum, university, and private collections around the world. The Nara National Museum, the Tenri Central Library at Tenri University in Nara Prefecture, and the temple Ishiyamadera in Shiga Prefecture are a few examples of modern collections that contain large numbers of eighth-century texts.[16] I would estimate that there are likely more than two thousand extant sutra manuscripts from the eighth century alone and the number could be higher.

For understanding female patronage, the colophons of sutra manuscripts are especially useful. Some colophons include longer prayers that describe the motivations behind the transcription. These prayers provide insight into the beliefs and practices of female patrons. Many colophons, even those lacking prayers, contain the names of women, including both individual sponsors and those who were part of a collective of patrons. Oftentimes, these names only appear in a single manuscript. As such, colophons are sometimes the only extant record of a woman's existence. For these reasons, colophons and sutra manuscripts are key sources for documenting the presence of women whose history has otherwise been lost.

2.3 Inscribed clay objects

Clay objects, namely inscriptions in pottery and roof tiles, also offer insight into women's patronage. Close to 200,000 pieces of ink-inscribed pottery or *bokusho doki* 墨書土器 have been excavated throughout Japan.[17] Most date to the eighth and ninth centuries, with the numbers of those in the capital region peaking in the eighth century and those in the provinces peaking in the ninth.[18] The largest numbers have been found in the provinces of eastern Japan with Chiba claiming the highest total for any prefecture.[19] Many come from village sites. As such, these sources are especially helpful for documenting daily life in the provinces.

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16 For a helpful overview of these archives, see Ruppert 2006, 372–377.

17 Yoshimura Takehiko in Yoshimura Takehiko et al. (eds) 2023, vi. I will use the term ink-inscribed potsherd or pottery for *bokusho doki* 墨書土器, rather than ostracon, because, unlike ostraca, the Japanese objects were typically inscribed when the object was whole. For a key volume on these objects, see Hirakawa Minami 2000.

18 Yagoshi Yōko in Yoshimura Takehiko et al. (eds) 2023, 21.

19 *Bokusho doki* have been found throughout Japan and it is unclear to what degree the large number in eastern Japan represents a distinct regional culture or if it simply reflects the large number of excavations that accompanied the rise of Tōkyō suburbs in prefectures such as Chiba. For the large number in Chiba, see Chiba-ken Shiryō Kenkyū Zaidan (ed.) 2001, 357–358.

Ink-inscribed pottery are not as numerous as the relatively well-known wooden tablets called *mokkan* 木簡, but they are comparatively more useful for studying Buddhism.[20] *Mokkan* seldom contain information about Buddhist practice and institutions. In contrast, many pieces of ink-inscribed pottery include phrases explicitly tied to Buddhism such as the logograph for 'temple' (*tera* 寺).[21] Large numbers of ink-inscribed pots have been found in what scholars call village temple sites (*sonraku [nai] jiin* 村落[内]寺院).[22] Some of these potsherds found near village temples were used directly in diverse religious rituals by laypeople, while others appear to have been the property of temples or monks. Many include simple prayers for material blessings. Most are fragmentary and only contain a single character, but in some cases, we have entire names, such as the one illustrated here (Fig. 6), which was unearthed in Ōamishirasato city (Chiba Prefecture), naming a woman Osakabe no Sakanushime 刑部酒主女 (*s.a.*). In other cases, as we will see, ink-inscribed pottery preserves prayers, some of which were by women.

Inscribed roof tiles also provide important insights into premodern provincial Buddhism.[23] Roof tiles, which were most commonly used to cover the buildings of temples and government offices during this period, were inscribed with a range of methods including stamps and ink, but the most common tool used was a type of stylus, usually referred to as a *hera* 箆 in Japanese. The *hera* inscriptions were made prior to firing, when the clay was still relatively soft. Inscribed tiles often record personal and place names either tied to the manufacturer or the patron who sponsored it. In one of the more famous collections, those from Ōnodera 大野寺 in present-day Sakai-shi in Osaka Prefecture, inscribed roof tiles preserve the names of more than one thousand patrons who collectively built an earthen pyramid pagoda under the leadership of the eighth-century monk Gyōki 行基 (668–749). The group of patrons whose names are inscribed on tiles from this site include women (Fig. 7).[24] These objects show how

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20 For a short overview of the various types of excavated sources with writing, see Lurie 2007.

21 As Mikami Yoshitaka and Araki Shinobu have recently argued the logograph temple may not necessarily mean a temple existed at the site where the pottery was excavated. Rather, Buddhist rituals may have been performed there without the presence of a temple proper. As Araki notes, the space could have been temporarily sanctified as a temple, even without a permanent structure. Still, it should be remembered that there was almost always a temple structure nearby, such as at a neighbouring village, which is likely what is referred to in the inscriptions. See Mikami Yoshitaka in Yoshimura Takehiko et al. (eds) 2023, 36–37 and Araki Shinobu in Yoshimura Takehiko et al. (eds) 2023, 256–263.

22 For a brief recent overview, see Kawajiri Akio in Yoshimura Takehiko et al. (eds) 2023, 134–138.

23 The database *Zenkoku bokusho doki, kokusho doki, mojigawara ōdan kensaku dētabēsu* 全国墨書土器・刻書土器、文字瓦 横断検索データベース has 11,586 entries for inscribed roof tiles as of 29 August 2023, <https://bokusho-db.mind.meiji.ac.jp>. For a recent overview of inscribed roof tiles, see Nakamura Tomokazu in Yoshimura Takehiko et al. (eds) 2023, 69–84.

24 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 86–183 and Takeuchi Ryō 2020.

women both served as patrons, but also produced very simple texts, often composed solely of a personal name, as part of their pious practice.[25]

Fig. 6: Ink-inscribed pottery with the name Osakabe no Sakanushime 刑部酒主女, Ōami Yamada isekigun, location no. 3 (Shinbayashi iseki) 大網山田台遺跡群 No.3 地点 (新林遺跡), H058 1, Property of the Ōamishirasato Board of Education and image from the Ōamishirasato Digital Museum <https://adeac.jp/oamishirasato-city/catalog/mp000540-200050> (accessed on 14 November 2023).

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25 Inscriptions on Buddhist images are another source that could be used to assess female patronage not discussed in this chapter. For a discussion of one example by a 'royal wife' (*ōkō* 王后), see Walley 2013, 303–306 and Walley 2015, 18–20. For another early inscriptions explicitly commissioned by a woman, see Nara Kokuritsu Bunkazai Kenkyūjo Asuka Shiryōkan (ed.) 1979, 179–180.

Fig. 7: Roof tiles with woman's name Kudara no Kimi Tojiko 百済君刀自古 from Ōnodera, Tokyo National Museum, J-24264; source: *ColBase: Integrated Collections Database of the National Institutes for Cultural Heritage*, Japan <https://colbase.nich.go.jp/> (accessed on 15 November 2023).

3 The meaning of merit

To better understand texts related to women's patronage, it is first necessary to briefly outline the Buddhist doctrine of merit and explore how women cited these teachings in colophons to the manuscripts they sponsored. As Buddhist studies scholar John Kieschnick has explained, merit is

> the idea that there is an invisible moral order governing the universe, and that under this system one is rewarded in this life or the next for good deeds, including the production of certain specified types of objects.[26]

For laypeople, these good deeds traditionally took a range of forms, but they included practices such as commissioning Buddhist scripture, images, and temples, as well as making offerings to monks, burning lamps, or even just rejoicing in the merit of others. All who participated in rituals of dedication could partake in the merit generated at the rite.

Patrons, including women, often explicitly used this language of merit in their prayers. Take this section of a prayer by Kōmyōshi from the colophons of manuscripts she copied known as the 5/11 canon project after the date found in the prayer (namely, the eleventh day of the fifth month):

> 奉為　二親魂路敬写一切経一部。願以茲写経功徳、仰資　二親尊霊。帰依浄域、曳影
> 於覩史之宮。遊戯覚林、昇魂於摩尼之殿。次願七世父母六親眷属、契会真如、馳紫輿
> 於極楽。薫修慧日、沐甘露於徳池。

> On behalf of [Kōmyōshi's] two parents in the spirit path, [Kōmyōshi] reverently had transcribed one copy of the canon. [She] prays to use the merit from copying these very scriptures to respectfully aid the venerable spirits of her two parents. May they take refuge in the pure regions and draw their silhouettes to the palace of Tuṣita. May they frolic to the grove of awakening and raise their spirits to the hall of *maṇi*. Next [Kōmyōshi] prays for the seven generations of mothers and fathers and six relations of kin: may they converge with true thusness and be driven to [the land of] supreme bliss in purple palanquins. May they be perfumed in the sun of wisdom and be bathed in pools of virtue with sweet dew.[27]

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26 Kieschnick 2003, 157.
27 Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 31. The spaces in my transcription represent spaces left open in the manuscript as signs of respect. I have used modern simplified Japanese logographs in my transcription here and elsewhere in this chapter. For an annotated edition, see Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 231–242.

Kōmyōshi explicitly identified her sutra transcription as an act of 'merit'. The merit generated from the copying of Buddhist scripture was then offered first to her parents, so that they could journey to Tuṣita, the heaven of the future Buddha Maitreya, where there is said to be a palace made of jewels or *maṇi* in Sanskrit.[28] She then presented the merit to ancestors and kin so that they could enjoy the wonders of blissful births and ultimately escape suffering.

This language of merit is typical in prayers by men and women alike. Another woman, this one the wife of the military upstart, Sakanoue no Imiki Iwatate 坂上 忌寸石楯 (*s.a.*), a figure most famous for bringing back the head of Fujiwara no Nakamaro 藤原仲麻呂 (706–764) after a power struggle with Kōken/Shōtoku, offered a prayer together with her daughter and son for the deceased patriarch of the family. They inscribed it in a colophon of an extant but heavily damaged scroll of the *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* (Jp. *Dai hannya kyō* 大般若経):

> 仰願以此功徳先同奉資　先考之神路…

> We reverently pray that *these merits* may first be bestowed equally on the spirit path of our late father…[29]

The prayer goes on, much like Kōmyōshi's, to ask that Iwatate be born in the Pure Land of Supreme Bliss (*Gokuraku* 極楽) and rise up to the jade palace of *maṇi* (*mani no gyokuden* 摩尼之玉殿).[30] While these prayers are particularly explicit in using the phrase merit (*kudoku* 功徳), this broader reasoning rooted in Buddhist notions of karma was central to most acts of patronage. Women and men transcribed sutras, donated roof tiles to temples, and made offerings to Buddhist deities in clay pots to secure merit.

4 Women as patrons of sutra transcription

4.1 Kōmyōshi and sutra transcription

Many of the most prolific patrons of Buddhist manuscripts in ancient Japan were women. Some elite women even operated their own scriptoria. Amongst these,

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28 For the pair of terms Tuṣita and *maṇi* and some possible sources, see Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai 2016 (ed.), 237.

29 Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 75. For an annotated edition, see Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 439–456.

30 Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 451.

Kōmyōshi stands out. By all accounts, both in contemporaneous sources and in modern scholarship, she was an exceptional woman. Her obituary describes her as 'sharp-witted and wise from a young age [...] with great reverence for Buddhism'.[31] The daughter of Fujiwara no Fuhito 藤原不比等 (659–720), one of the most powerful courtiers of the time, Kōmyōshi came from an exalted background and went on to even greater prominence by marrying the future Emperor Shōmu 聖武 (701–756, r. 724–749). She was designated queen consort (*kōgō* 皇后) in 729, a title that meant her children would have priority for the throne. She was the first woman of non-royal blood to receive this title. She wielded significant political power, particularly after her husband's health began to fail in the 740s. Right through the time of her death, she continued to be an influential figure in her own right, helping to hold the fragile state together.[32]

She was also a devout Buddhist. According to Mikoshiba Daisuke, Kōmyōshi received a strong Buddhist influence from both of her parents: from her father, she learned how Buddhism can serve the state; from her mother, she inherited what he calls 'genuine faith'.[33] While we can and should readily dismiss Mikoshiba's rather stark and heavily gendered binary model that assumes a feminine 'genuine faith' is different from more masculine politicized religious practice, it seems likely that Kōmyōshi grew up in an environment where Buddhist patronage was normal and even expected behaviour and that she, like most people of her time, saw Buddhism as both political and personal at once. Her legacy as a supporter of Buddhism only grew after her death. Later legends often treated her as a Buddhist deity in the flesh.[34]

Her Buddhist practice manifested most prominently in patronage. She played a major role in establishing a provincial temple network system, in which the court built officially sanctioned monasteries and nunneries in every province in Japan.[35] She commissioned works of art and built Buddhist shelters and medicinal dispensaries for the poor.[36]

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31 *Shoku Nihongi* 6/7/Tenpyō Hōji 4, in Aoki Kazuo et al. (eds) 1992, vol. 14, 352–353. For a slightly different translation of this passage, see Bender 2016a, 167. In citing court chronicles, I provide the title of the text followed by the date (month/day/year in the traditional system) before giving the modern edition I referred to.

32 For a brief overview of her rise to the position of queen consort through the time of Shōmu's declining health, see Lowe 2017, 191–195, as well as 122–131.

33 Mikoshiba 2002, 22–30.

34 Lowe and Bethe 2019, 1022–1024; Meeks 2010, 36–47.

35 Mikoshiba 2002, 30–37.

36 Lowe and Bethe 2019, 1022.

Her best-documented activity, however, was sponsoring sutra transcription. She did this through a scriptorium that first emerged as a household transcription office and eventually grew into an 'imperially sanctioned office for transcribing the canon' (*chokushi sha issaikyō jo* 勅旨写一切経所).[37] This phrase simply denotes that the institution is a sutra copying office that has received official recognition from the emperor, not that the scriptorium is responsible for transcribing texts vowed by the emperor.[38] The earliest extant source related to Kōmyōshi's household scriptorium is a document that records the receipt of paper in the third month of Jinki 神亀 4 or 727 CE to copy the *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra*, an enormous six-hundred-scroll text.[39] As historian Sakaehara Towao has shown, Kōmyōshi probably commissioned this project as a prayer for the safe birth of the child she was carrying.[40] At the time, the twenty-seven-year-old aristocrat could command significant resources. She used well over ten thousand sheets of paper altogether for this project, a sum that implies access to wealth and technology. She also likely received material support from the father of the child, Emperor Shōmu, who had much at stake in the birth of a potential heir to the throne. In short, the earliest example of her sutra-copying activities is connected to safe childbirth. This was naturally a political concern but surely it was a personal and highly gendered one as well.

The same document that records this project to copy six hundred scrolls includes other texts that reveal wide-ranging interests.[41] She sponsored a number of canonical Buddhist works including philosophical and cultic texts that have no obvious connection to the state and were likely used for scholastic and ritual purposes. But she also copied stories of virtuous women, called *Biographies of Female Exemplars* (Ch. *Li nü zhuan*, here transcribed as 烈女傳 but more commonly written 列女傳), and we can speculate that Kōmyōshi would have been interested in learning about these female Chinese paragons as models for her ethical development.

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37 For the uses of this phrase in primary sources, see Yamashita Yumi 1999b, 392–401.
38 Yamashita Yumi 1999b, 401.
39 Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo (ed.) 1901, vol. 1, 381–383.
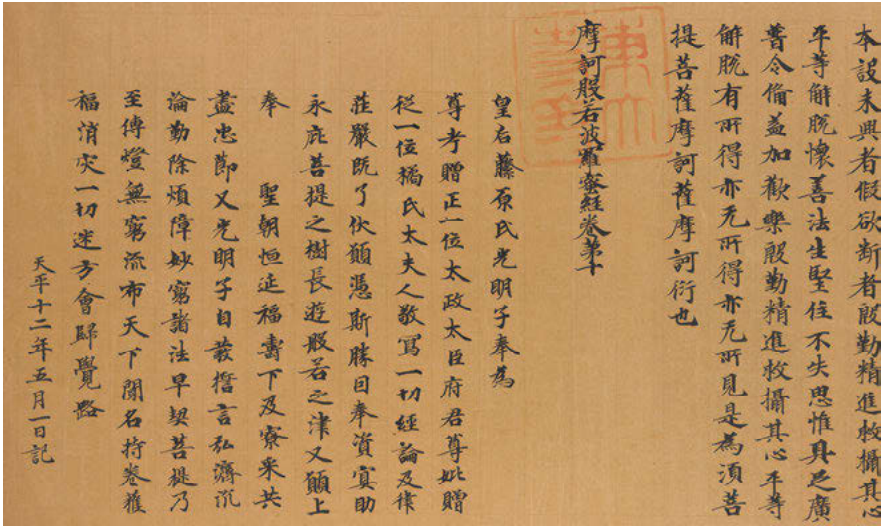**40** Sakaehara Towao 2000, 263–278.
41 Lowe 2017, 123–124.

Fig. 8: Colophon to *Kōsan maka han'nya haramitsu Sanmaibon no yo kan jū Kōsangyō kanbon dai jūshichi* 光讃摩訶般若波羅蜜三昧品之餘卷十光讃経観品第十七 with 5/1 canon prayer by Kōmyōshi; Princeton University Library, BQ1100.T67; Courtesy of the East Asian Library, Princeton University Library.

As her wealth, power, and responsibilities increased, so too did her sutra copying output. This transformation is perhaps best reflected in a project known as the '5/1 canon' (*gogatsu tsuitachi issaikyō* 五月一日一切経) after the date inscribed in the prayer: the first day of the fifth month of Tenpyō 天平 12 or 740 CE. The term canon is a complicated and slightly problematic term, but her collection was based on the Chinese *Kaiyuan Catalogue* (Ch. *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄) from 730 CE, which came to define a version of canonicity in East Asia based on its judgments of the authenticity of translated sutras.[42] Kōmyōshi's canon, however, eventually expanded well beyond this catalogue, both in terms of the total number of texts and type of works included, a fact that shows the fluidity in the concept of a canon at this time.[43] The date is also something of a misnomer. While Kōmyōshi's prayers at the end of each of these 5/1 canon manuscripts all have a date of the first day of the fifth month of Tenpyō 12, the project

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42 For an excellent overview of the broader problems with the term 'canon' in the Buddhist tradition, see Silk 2015. For the problem of defining the canon in the eighth-century Japanese Buddhist context, see Lowe 2014b. For a recent collection of essays on the development of the canon in East Asia, see Wu and Chia (eds) 2016. For the role of the *Kaiyuan Catalogue* in shaping notions of canonicity, see Tokuno 1990 and Storch 2014, 123–128.

43 Lowe 2014b, 230–234; Yamashita Yumi 1999a.

took far longer than a single day (Fig. 8).[44] Many of these prayers were written before the date listed in the colophon, which refers to a ceremonial dedication. Others, somewhat surprisingly, were transcribed after the first day of the fifth month of Tenpyō 12, but still include this date in the colophon. The start of the fifth month was likely chosen as a ceremonial day on the Buddhist ritual calendar (it was the start of one of three months of prolonged abstinence [*chōsai* 長斎] and the most common month for sutras to be dedicated in East Asia), and the year of Tenpyō 12 was possibly selected as part of celebrations for Kōmyōshi's fortieth birth year, which was seen as an important milestone and represents half the lifetime of the Buddha.[45] In fact, the project took around twenty-four years to complete altogether. In the end, Kōmyōshi sponsored a canon composed of roughly 6,500 scrolls. In addition to its impressive scale, it was the most authoritative canon, as it used the latest imported texts, was proofread twice for mistakes, and then later collated against different manuscripts. In the process of copying this canon, her scriptorium was transformed from a personal household sutra copying office to an imperially sanctioned scriptorium. An enormous bureaucracy came into being under her authority, one that made Japan a country rich with Buddhist texts for the first time.

Beyond imperially sanctioned canons, however, Kōmyōshi also completed an additional canon through her private household scriptorium. This one was dedicated on the eleventh day of the fifth month of Tenpyō 15 or 743 CE, just three years after her 5/1 canon, and is known as the 5/11 canon. In this project, much like in her calligraphy, she calls herself the Third Fujiwara Daughter, rather than using the title of queen consort, which appears in the 5/1 prayer.[46] This clue alongside several other subtle differences points to a more personal quality to this second canon. For example, both canons contain prayers for her parents in the colophons with different locutions. Where the 5/1 canon lists their ranks and titles, the 5/11 canon just refers to them as her two parents. Moreover, the 5/1 canon has a second prayer on behalf of the emperor (or more literally the 'sagely court' [*seichō* 聖朝]), but the 5/11 canon instead prays for generations of ancestors and kin. This all points to a more familial quality, less connected to her official duties as queen consort to Emperor Shōmu.[47]

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44 For the two best overviews of the 5/1 canon, see Minagawa Kan'ichi 2012, 84–165, and Yamashita Yumi 1999b, 402–463. My discussion largely follows their work, especially Yamashita Yumi's.

45 Lowe 2011, 14–15 and Lowe 2016, 560–568. Also for the more general significance of the fifth month in East Asia, see Lowe 2017, 46–50.

46 Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 240.

47 Kōmyōshi had also started another canon shortly before she died. This incomplete project was suspended with only 760 scrolls completed at the time of her death. A separate memorial canon project began again after her passing. For this, see Yamamoto Yukio 2002, 299–329.

What is especially striking is that although the Shōsōin preserves detailed records of most of Kōmyōshi's sutra copying practices, it does not contain any documents about this 5/11 canon. This has led scholars to conclude that it was likely transcribed through a separate, independent household scriptorium since the office that copied the 5/1 canon had by this time been charged with imperially sanctioned versions.[48] Despite this less official quality, the 5/11 canon used different exemplars from those of the 5/1 canon and appears to have likely been a more accurate transcription.[49] In other words, Kōmyōshi had significant personal resources for personal projects, separate from the ones she commissioned in her official role as queen consort. Her Buddhist patronage cannot be reduced to her political position or her ties to the state. It had a decidedly personal element as well.

4.2 Other canons by women at court

Kōmyōshi was not the only woman to sponsor a copy of the Buddhist canon in Japan. Her daughter, Kōken/Shōtoku, who twice ruled as emperor, continued the familial tradition of ambitious sutra copying projects. She created her own canon, which surpassed her mother's effort in terms of scale, adding texts by incorporating newly imported works, and also improving the quality by utilizing the latest manuscript editions.[50] Like her mother, Kōken/Shōtoku affixed a prayer at the end of the manuscripts (Fig. 9). By the end of the project, hers was the most complete, accurate, and authoritative canon in Japan. It seems that these may have been the only two official imperially sanctioned canons of the Nara Period.[51] Both were produced by women.[52]

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48 Sakaehara Towao 2000, 21.

49 Hayashidera Shōshun 2019; Ichikawa Rie 2021, 37.

50 For the classic study see Sakaehara Towao 2000, 83–124. For a recent study, which revises some of Sakaehara's findings, see Uchida Atsushi 2012.

51 Yamashita Yumi 1999b, 489–491.

52 In addition to this project, Kōken initiated other canon projects, but she died before seeing them to completion. Her successor, the male sovereign Kōnin 光仁 took over these projects. See Mori Akihiko 2001 and Lowe 2017, 132–133.
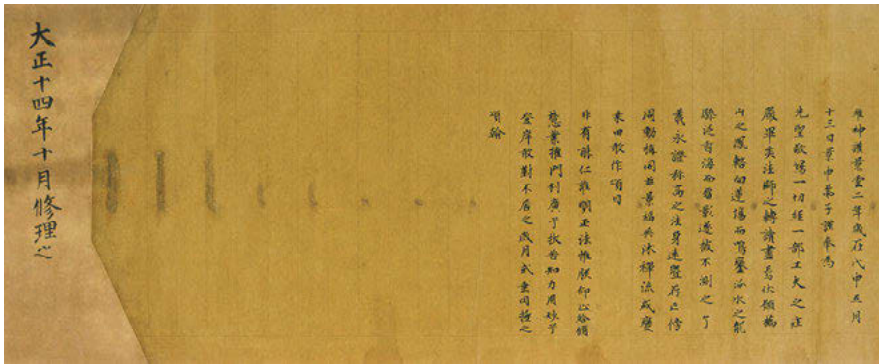
Fig. 9: Colophon to *Daijō hi fundari kyō* 大乗悲芬陀利経, with prayer by Kōken/Shōtoku; *Shōgozō kyōkan*, ed. Kunaichō Shōsōin Jimusho 2007, Disc 89, manuscript no. 994; courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

Other women too seem to have managed household scriptoria that were capable of copying entire Buddhist canons, though these were not imperially sanctioned ones. Fujiwara Bunin 藤原夫人 (?–760), another consort of Shōmu and the daughter of the courtier Fujiwara no Fusasaki 藤原房前 (681–737), also sponsored a canon that seems to have been copied from 739–740 CE and was dedicated less than two months before the 5/1 canon.[53] Fujiwara Bunin relied on Kōmyōshi's material support. This is perhaps not surprising since Fujiwara Bunin's father and mother, who were two of the beneficiaries of the merit, were Kōmyōshi's half-brother and half-sister.[54] Court women sometimes supported one another in their pious projects.

Beyond the material connections, the prayers of Fujiwara Bunin's canon and Kōmyōshi's 5/1 canon also have striking parallels in terms of the ideas, terminology, and a common three-part structure that seems unique to these two colophons.[55]

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[53] Notably, there is another prayer for a sutra by Kōmyōshi for her parents dated one week earlier than Fujiwara Bunin's. See Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 480–484.

[54] Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 177.

[55] The resemblance between the two was first pointed out in Nakai Shinkō 1981, 16, though he does not elaborate on this point.

Table 1: Three-part structure of prayer.

	Kōmyōshi 5/1 prayer	Fujiwara Bunin prayer
Section 1	Prayer for parents	Prayer for parents
Section 2	Prayer for 'sagely court' (i.e. the sovereign)	Prayer for 'sagely court' (i.e. the sovereign)
Section 3	Vow that 'Kōmyōshi herself' utters to act as a bodhisattva (being on path to full awakening)	Prayer for Fujiwara Bunin to herself achieve full awakening

First, they both offer prayers for their parents followed by ones for the emperor. These are arguably the two most typical objects of prayer in the eighth century, so it is perhaps not all that surprising that they appear in both texts. Still, this shared pairing and common structure, as well as identical terms such as 'sagely court' for the emperor, indicates a connection between the two canon prayers, an idea strengthened by the material support from Kōmyōshi and the close temporal proximity of the two projects. More surprising, however, is the fact that both women follow these prayers for parents and the emperor with their own names and highly personal prayers for their own spiritual growth, features we do not see in any other Japanese colophons from this time to my knowledge. Fujiwara Bunin writes:

> 及、檀主藤原夫人、常遇善縁、必成勝果。

> And may the chief patron, Fujiwara Bunin, always encounter good conditions and surely achieve the superior fruit.[56]

This is a prayer by Bunin for her own awakening. As Charles Muller has pointed out, the term I have rendered 'superior fruit' (*shōka* 勝果) points to 'the attainment of Buddhahood, in contrast with Hīnayāna lower aims; two of these fruits are transcendent nirvana and complete *bodhi*.'[57] In other words, this represents not what is sometimes characterized as the selfish goal of the *arhat*, a form of awakening that is treated as inferior in the Mahāyāna tradition, but rather the *superior* awakening or *bodhi* one gains through the arduous bodhisattva path.

Prayers like this where the patron inserts their own name and expresses their personal aspirations are highly uncommon in eighth-century Japan. The only other clear example found in colophons from this period is Kōmyōshi's 5/1 canon prayer, where she recorded the following (Fig. 8):

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56 Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 22. For an annotated edition, see Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 166–177.
57 Muller (ed.) 2023, *s.v.* '勝果'.

又光明子、自発誓言、弘済沈淪、勤除煩障、妙窮諸法、早契菩提。

Next, Kōmyōshi herself utters this vow to broadly save those sinking [in the sea of *saṃsāra*], to diligently remove afflictive hindrances, to subtly investigate all dharmas, and quickly achieve *bodhi*.[58]

The expression 'Kōmyōshi *herself*' emphasizes the personal nature of this section of the colophon. Earlier parts are marked as prayers (*gan/negai* 願), but this particular utterance is labelled a vow (*sei/chikai* 誓). As I have argued elsewhere, while the terms 'prayer' and 'vow' were sometimes used interchangeably, some Korean and Chinese commentaries associate vows with the selfless behaviour characteristic of a bodhisattva, someone, who like Bunin and Kōmyōshi, was on the path to attain the 'superior fruit'.[59] In fact, that is precisely what seems to have been intended in this text. Kōmyōshi's vow is a slightly poeticized version of the four universal bodhisattva vows: to save all beings, to end all afflictions, to master the teachings, and to attain supreme awakening.[60] It is the vow that would have been uttered by someone when they set out on the long path of a bodhisattva, aspiring for the full awakening of a buddha. Kōmyōshi ultimately, like Bunin, hoped to learn all of the teachings and achieve awakening. In these two prayers, we can see these women expressing their desires to eventually attain liberation from the cycle of suffering. They did so with an identical three-part structure of prayer beneficiaries: parents, emperor, and self, a trio that seems unique to these two canons in Japan at this time.

Two final examples of canon copying by women in the capital stand out and deserve attention. The first is a project by Kibi no Ason Yuri 吉備朝臣由利 (?–774), an elite woman who was especially close with the female ruler Emperor Shōtoku. A short prayer recorded in colophons to her canon from Saidaiji 西大寺 temple reveals that it was, in fact, copied on behalf of 'the heavenly court' (*tenchō* 天朝), a reference to Shōtoku.[61] Based on records from Saidaiji, where the sutras were donated, we know the scale and composition of this canon as well. Altogether, it was made up of 5,282 scrolls, including not only sutras, monastic codes, and treatises, but also commentaries, biographies, and even extra-canonical texts.[62] Kibi no Ason

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58 Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 23–26. For an annotated edition, see Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 178–196.

59 Lowe 2016, 570–571.

60 Lowe 2016, 571–572.

61 Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 68; for more information, also see Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 420–423.

62 Takeuchi Rizō (ed.) 1962, 406.

Yuri is yet another example of a prolific female patron from eighth-century Japan responsible for creating thousands of scrolls.

Finally, there are around thirty extant scrolls of a canon copying project organized by a nun named Zenkō 善光 (*s.a.*), who was based at the Hokkeji 法華寺 convent. The canon was transcribed between 754 and 760. The colophons for this project include a red seal with Zenkō's name on it, which helps identify her involvement in the project, as well as the names of the copyists, proofreaders (three per scroll), and assemblers, those tasked with transforming individual sheets of paper into a lined scroll complete with a roller and cover sheet.[63] As Shōsōin specialist Yamashita Yumi has shown, this was not simply a private project, but rather one that aimed to give the convent Hokkeji its own authoritative canon of the highest quality, a collection worthy of the central temple of the official Provincial Nunnery (*Kokubunniji* 国分尼寺) system.[64]

Clearly, women were active patrons of Buddhism, sponsoring multiple canons at a time when Buddhism in Japan barely had a textual footprint. In fact, the two most authoritative canons were both sponsored by women. Men too, such as Shōmu, sponsored canons. But his efforts, at least as we can tell from extant sources, paled compared to those of Kōmyōshi. While the people who performed most of the labour of writing in scriptoria may have been male scribes, it was wealthy and powerful female sponsors who led the way in building a flourishing manuscript culture in early Japan.

4.3 A provincial woman as a patron of sutra transcription

The best-documented sutra copying in early Japan was that of women at court, but it seems that some elite women from the provinces were able to copy scriptures as well. The most intriguing example is undoubtedly Ikue no Omi Iemichime 生江臣家道女 (*s.a.*). A Shōsōin document compiling the receipt of manuscripts by the Office of Sutra Transcription records a donation from her and her mother of nine hundred scrolls including one hundred copies of the *Lotus Sutra* (*Hokkekyō* 法華経) and one complete set of the one-hundred-scroll *Yogācāra-bhūmi-śāstra* (*Yuga [shiji] ron* 瑜伽[師地]論) (Fig. 10).[65] The document lists her as the chief patron (*ganshu* 願主) from Eshimo town,

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63 For more on the specific responsibilities of these positions, see Lowe 2017, 110–113.

64 Yamashita Yumi 2001, 85. For the best recent study of the Zenkō canon that refines some of Yamashita's arguments, see Ichikawa Rie 2021.

65 Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo (ed.) 1918, vol. 12, 292–293. For more on the longer document that this entry is a part of, see Sakaehara Towao 2011a, 5.

Asuwa district, Echizen Province 越前国足羽郡江下郷 (present-day Fukui Prefecture). The date of the donation, the second day of the fifth month of Tenpyō shōhō 天平勝宝 9 or 757 CE, corresponds to the one-year memorial for Emperor Shōmu's death. In fact, the donation record is accompanied by a prayer transcribed in a vernacular style filled with Japanese locutions for the former ruler and also for the retired emperor's newly appointed daughter, Emperor Kōken, asking that she have peace and stability during her reign.[66] In other words, it was donated as an expression of service to the throne, both past and present, by a provincial woman.

Iemichime's family appears to have been well-connected to the capital and to Buddhism. The very fact that she could sponsor large-scale sutra copying in the provinces and send the scrolls to Tōdaiji proves that she had human and economic resources at her disposal and ties to temples in the capital, which she may have relied on to secure the source texts. These contacts may have been familial. A remarkably successful individual named Ikue no Azumabito 生江東人 (*s.a.*) from the same district and kinship group as Iemichime left behind detailed records of a career connected to Tōdaiji and Shōmu's court. Beginning in 749, Azumabito first appeared as a secretary at the Tōdaiji Construction Agency (*Zō Tōdaiji shi* 造東大寺司), a powerful extra-codal bureaucratic organ that also oversaw the Office of Sutra Transcription. His rank at that time of Great Initial Upper would have put him within but at the bottom of the court-bestowed hierarchy.[67] In 755, he served as a district official in his hometown and managed one of Tōdaiji's early estates.[68] He continued a long career, helping develop Tōdaiji's Kuwabara estate in his home province.[69] In 768, he reached Outer Junior Fifth Rank Lower, presumably for his service to the temple.[70] Given his geographic proximity to Iemichime and prominence, it is reasonable to speculate that he was her close relative, if not her father. A number of other people with the surname of Ikue from the Asuwa district also worked with Tōdaiji and its estates, a feature that suggests this family had some success and held close ties to the religious culture of the capital.[71] The women of these elite provincial families, such as Iemichime and her mother, had the resources to copy hundreds of scrolls of Buddhist scripture at a time, possibly due in

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66 Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo (ed.) 1918, vol. 12, 292.

67 Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo (ed.) 1903, vol. 5, 543. As Joan Piggott explains, the Tōdaiji Construction Agency, which was tasked with building the temple Tōdaiji, was founded in the mid-eighth century and 'mushroomed into the largest agency ever to serve the *tennō*'s government'. Piggott 1997, 263. For a more detailed overview, see Piggott 1987, 127–165.

68 Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo (ed.) 1903, vol. 4, 58.

69 For more on his career and activities with the estate, see Farris 1985, 85–87.

70 *Shoku Nihongi* 2/1/Jingo Keiun 2, in Aoki Kazuo et al. (eds) 1995, vol. 15, 188–189; Bender 2016b, 102.

71 Takeuchi, Yamada and Hirano (eds) 1958, vol. 1, 156–158.

part to the activities of their male relatives, who forged political connections and accumulated wealth. While they may have been unable to copy a full canon as Kōmyōshi was able to, they could still put together impressive projects.[72]
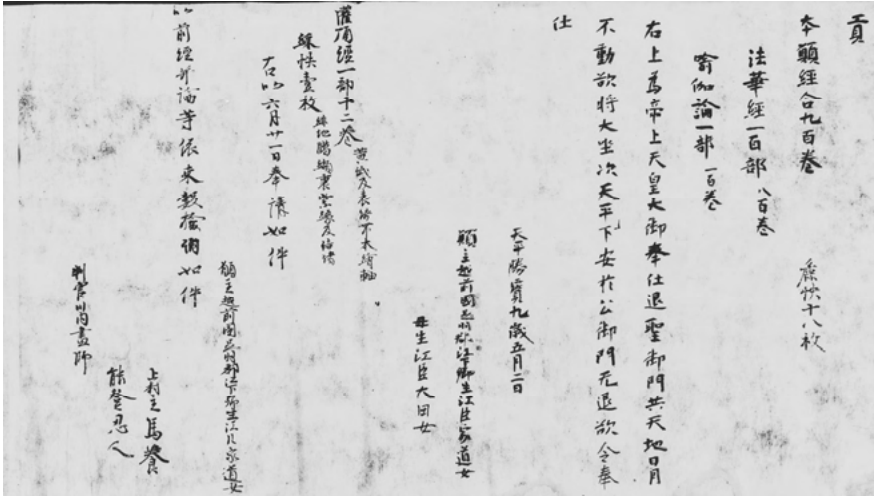

Fig. 10: Document recording donations of sutras by Ikue no Omi Iemichime; Shōsōin, Zokuzoku shū, dai 15 chitsu, dai 8 kan 続々修 第 15 帙 第 8 巻; courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

For most provincial women, we know very little about their lives. In many cases, they only appear in a single record, and it is impossible to piece together anything other than their name and hometown. But, by chance, Iemichime appears again in a tantalizing record from a court chronicle dated to Enryaku 延暦 15 or 796 CE.[73] Here, Iemichime is identified with a transliteration of the Sanskrit *upāsikā* (*ubai* 優 婆夷) or female lay practitioner, a figure who likely upheld some precepts and may also have worn special robes.[74] The record notes that she was banished back to her home province for recklessly preaching in the capital's markets. What happened to her in the forty years between her sutra copying and her exile is something of a mystery, but her case provides an example of a woman who was able to first act as a sponsor of sutra copying and then later work as an unofficial lay Buddhist

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72 There was at least one provincial canon copying project carried out by a male provincial doctor. For this, see Lowe 2017, 89–91.

73 *Nihon kōki* 7/22/Enryaku 15, in Kuroita (ed.) 2007, 4.

74 For more on this term in the Buddhist tradition and in Japan at this time, see Lowe 2017, 101–102.

preacher in the capital's marketplace. This implies some degree of devotion to Buddhism that lasted her whole life. Her dedication to promoting Buddhist teachings was so strong that she engaged in illegal sermons, dangerous acts that had severe legal consequences, which she likely knew about but preached anyway. It is a hint of a story, one that reminds us that women had rich religious lives to which we have little access. Most women (and men) exist to us as no more than an occasional name in a colophon or record in a scriptorium archive, but there was so much more to them that we have lost.[75]

5 Women as patrons in fellowships

5.1 Women as members and leaders of sutra copying fellowships

In addition to acts of individual patronage, women also joined fellowships to collectively sponsor transcription. In some cases, individual patrons may have had the means to act as sponsors of their own projects, but they chose to join forces, perhaps out of ideas of religious piety and community. In other cases, people likely lacked the financial resources to transcribe a large project and required cooperation with others.[76] These fellowships were based on a Buddhist idea of virtuous friendship, a term known in Japanese as *zen chishiki* 善知識. Members formed these groups of friends, which were often led by a monk but composed mostly of laypeople, so that the participants could help one another inculcate habits in accord with proper Buddhist conduct. Across East Asia, these groups joined together to participate in a range of activities including copying scripture, commissioning images, constructing temples, and building bridges.[77]

Women were just as common as men in these groups, sometimes roughly equalling male patrons and other times significantly outnumbering them.[78] In one especially well-documented sutra copying project led by a monk named Kōkaku 光

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75 Beyond the sutra copying projects I have discussed in this chapter, there are a few other cases in which what appear to be women's names appear in colophons, but we have little information to make sense of their roles and activities. For example, Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 46, 50 and 76. I am currently preparing a more detailed study of Iemichime to be published in my book manuscript, *How Buddhism Spread in Japan, 650–850 CE*.

76 Lowe 2017, 87–96.

77 Lowe 2017, 83–87, 99–103.

78 Lowe 2017, 95.

覚 (*s.a.*), which included some manuscripts transcribed for a memorial ritual for Kōmyōshi, 49% of the fellowship members were women based on names found in colophons.[79] A colophon from a sutra sponsored by a group known as the Fellowship of Intimate Service of Yoga Practice (*gonji yugyō chishiki* 近事瑜行知識) lists twelve women and nine men amongst its members (57% female).[80] In another group from Kawachi Province 河内国 (present-day Ōsaka Prefecture), there may have been as many as three women for every man.[81] In an especially large fellowship, a district official organized 709 individuals from a single town in Izumi Province 和泉国 (present-day Ōsaka Prefecture) to copy the *Yogācāra-bhūmi-śāstra* in one hundred scrolls. Of these 709 individuals, 432 or 61% were women.[82] In other words, hundreds of women, likely from diverse walks of life, at least nominally contributed to the project in some way and would have received religious merit for doing so.

Women sometimes helped organize fellowships. In the Kōkaku group, a female lay practitioner or *upāsikā* served as the 'head' (*kashira* 頭) of a subset within the larger fellowship, a position that implies some organizational responsibilities.[83] In other cases, women with the title *toji* 刀自 appear in colophons as leaders of groups.[84] This term refers to women who held positions of responsibility in their family estates or villages, sometimes supervising labour and managing agricultural projects.[85] In one sutra copying project from Harima Province 播磨国, four such women appear in colophons. As Sakaehara Towao has demonstrated, this one-hundred-scroll project was organized in bundles of ten to twenty scrolls, each representing its own mini-fellowship within the larger whole. Beginning with scroll number 41, each of these subsets was led by a member of the Harima no Kuni-no-Miyatsuko 播磨国造 kinship group, whose name appears in the first scroll of each bundle.[86] Most of these leaders were admittedly men, but a *toji* woman's name, Harima no Kuni-no-Miyatsuko Aka toji 針間國造赤刀自 (*s.a.*), is listed in the colophon of scroll number ninety-one (Fig. 11). She was likely the

79 Katsuura Noriko 2000, 364.

80 Takeuchi Rizō (ed.) 1962, 621. For the gender identification, see Matsumoto Nobumichi 1979, 28 and Takeuchi Ryō 2016, 273.

81 Inoue Shōichi 1964, 53.

82 Takeuchi Rizō (ed.) 1962, 612; for an annotated version, see Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 464–468.

83 Katsuura Noriko 2000, 362.

84 See e.g. Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 505.

85 Yoshie 2005, 451–465; Yoshie Akiko 2007, 51–77.

86 Sakaehara Towao 1999, esp. 63–76. Also see Imazu Katsunori 2010, esp. 482–491 and Iwashita Tōru 2022, 104–146. In English, see Lowe 2017, 92–94.

organizer of a subgroup, responsible for collecting donations for ten scrolls. She came from a prominent family in the region, so this example shows how provincial elite women could both participate in and help lead Buddhist fellowships tasked with copying scripture. Altogether, the names of at least eight to ten other laywomen appear between scrolls 41 and 100 (it is difficult to determine the gender of two of the names).[87]

The organization of the scrolls prior to number 41 is somewhat mysterious, since few are extant or in known locations. Again, the gender of some of the names is unclear, but it is possible that all of the names on these extant or previously identified earlier scrolls are by women.[88] These earlier bundles seem to have been organized not by the Harima no Kuni-no-Miyatsuko, but rather by clergy and novices. Scroll 31, which would have been the first of the fourth bundle, features the name of a novice nun, for example. Many of the other names, which include novices and female lay practitioners, imply that this part of the project was carried out not by ordinary laypeople, but rather by individuals with deeper commitments to upholding Buddhist precepts.[89] While the evidence is more fragmentary for these earlier scrolls, it seems clear that women, both purely lay and those with some level of ordination status, played key leadership roles in this fellowship.

In sum, an examination of women in fellowships shows that they commonly participated in these groups, sometimes more frequently than men, and that they, at least on occasion, took on leadership positions within these Buddhist organizations. This is, of course, not to say that men were never dominant in these collectives. They were in some cases, such as a fellowship of male sutra copyists, whose activities are recorded in Shōsōin documents.[90] Still, the evidence presented above demonstrates that women were actively involved in many, likely most, groups, both as leaders and as members. More generally, women were active patrons of sutra copying as individuals and as parts of larger collectives.

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87 Iwashita Tōru 2022, 116. For another example of possible leadership by a laywoman, see Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 53. Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 347 speculates that she may have had some authority in the kinship group and was likely an elder based on her position as the first name of the Haji patrons.

88 Iwashita Tōru 2022, 118.

89 For another example of a scroll from a different project in which novice nuns may have played leadership roles based on their position in the order of names in the colophon, see Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 57.

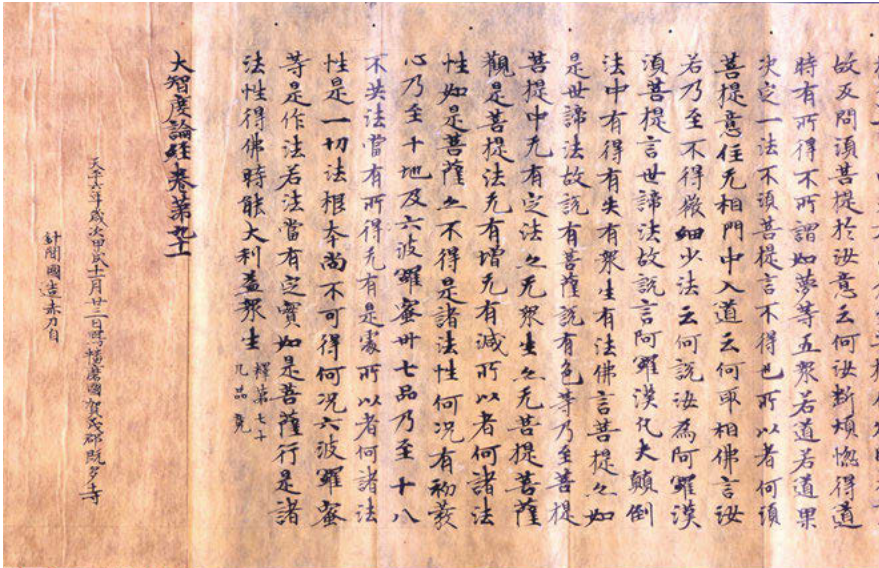**90** For this group, see Ōkusa Hiroshi 2014, 46–83.

Fig. 11: Colophon of *Dai chido ron*, 大智度論, scroll 91, with name of sponsor Harima no Kuni-no-Miyatsuko Aka toji 針 間 國 造 赤 刀 自 ; courtesy of the Kobe City Museum Collection.

5.2 Women's names in fellowships recorded on clay roof tiles

Women's patronage was not limited to manuscripts. Women also sponsored a range of other projects such as the construction of halls and temples, as well as Buddhist images, often as members of a fellowship. For these projects, they commonly left their names inscribed on the objects they commissioned, creating short texts of a few graphs marking their presence and participation. Unlike the colophons on paper that document women's participation in sutra copying, many of the sources tied to these other forms of patronage were written on clay or cast in metal. This section will focus especially on clay roof tiles from fellowships with the names of women inscribed on them.

The examination of names in roof tiles reveals at least three patterns of collective patronage: predominantly female fellowships, roughly evenly distributed ones with slightly more men, and a predominantly male group that trends female over time. The Miya-no-mae haiji 宮の前廃寺 temple site from Hiroshima Prefecture in western Japan represents a case of a largely female fellowship. Altogether twelve roof tiles have been found from this site inscribed with names. Of those names, two

are men's, three lack a legible given name and, therefore, are of indeterminate gender, and seven are clearly those of women.[91] In other words, 78% of the identifiable names are women. Judging by the presence of court-granted titles known in Japanese as *kabane*, it seems that these women were provincial elites. The tiles, which date to the mid-eighth century, were excavated from the area where the pagoda once stood, so they likely once covered the roof of that structure.[92] The archaeologist Kondō Yasushi speculates that the strong presence of women may point to the temple's identity as a nunnery.[93] Here, caution is needed. Women contributed regularly to monasteries as well and we should not assume that institutions are gendered in ways that match the identity of patrons.

The Miya-no-mae case may be somewhat unusual in claiming 78% female patronage, but it is clear that women were involved in other fellowships tasked with building temples in roughly equal proportion to men. Roof tiles from another eighth-century temple, Yamazakiin 山崎院, are comprised of 58% men and 42% women, which is close to evenly split, though favouring men.[94] One of the tiles by a woman includes the phrase 'honourable prayer' (*gogan* 御願); women expressed their aspirations too, it seems, though damage to this tile prevents us from deciphering them in this case. Still, it is clear that women were actively involved and were even able to express their aspirations in prayer as part of the project. Judging from the woman's title of *ōtoji* or grand *toji*, she seems to have likely been a woman of status in the local community.[95]

In some cases, men may have started as the primary sponsors, but women took over later. This is best demonstrated in the famous earthen pagoda at Ōnodera built by Gyōki and his followers: 74% of the tiles from the initial phase of construction record men's names; for subsequent additions and repairs from the latter part of the eighth century, however, women's names represent 61% of the total.[96] It is unclear why women's participation increased like this, but perhaps they were more intimately involved with the space and continued to support it after the initial fanfare had settled down. Men may have shown up for the dedication ceremony, but it was women who kept the temple alive.

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91 Fukuyama-shi Kyōiku Iinkai 1977, 82–83.

92 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 224–228.

93 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 232.

94 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 200.

95 Yoshie Akiko discusses the title of *ōtoji* and notes how it was often used for consorts of the sovereign in the Nara Period. The earlier and broader usage, however, was for women of leading lineages. Here, it seems to mean something closer to the earlier meaning and likely served as an honorific used by a provincial elite woman. For more on the term, see Yoshie 2005, 466.

96 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 160, 200.

The evidence from manuscripts and clay roof tiles reminds us that women were present and active in Buddhist patronage in early Japan. They left little behind but their names and a piece of clay or a single scroll, but even these small pieces of information remind us that they were present in these groups and played key roles in promoting Buddhism in Japan.

5.3   Did women inscribe their own names?

To answer our subtitle's question, it is necessary to consider how and when inscriptions on clay tiles were produced. Roof tiles could be inscribed in several ways, including using a stylus, a stamp, or even ink. Typically, a stylus would need to be used when the clay was still relatively soft, prior to firing but after it had been shaped into a roof tile.[97] All of the examples of tiles with women's names described above were written before firing. This leaves a small window of time when the inscriptions could have been made and means the names were inscribed on site. Who inscribed them? The craftsmen working from a list of names? The individuals themselves? A representative?

All of these answers are possible. One way scholars have tried to answer this problem is by comparing graphic forms to see if a single hand was responsible for multiple tiles. If there is great variety and individualization, people likely inscribed their own names on site. Unfortunately, the small number of tiles with common characters makes it difficult to determine the hand in many cases. According to Kondō Yasushi, the hands from the Miya-no-mae site look similar in some cases, but also leave an impression of different hands for others. Ultimately, he speculates that there may have been a single representative or a small number of proxies, who inscribed all of the names working from a pre-existing list.[98] In the end, the sample size is probably too small to reach any definitive conclusions.

This is less of a problem for Ōnodera, where there are more than one thousand tiles with inscribed names, including substantial numbers of common graphs. Kondō, who also studied the handwriting at this site, argues that the same graph is written in different ways across tiles, which suggests that, in general, most people inscribed their own tile.[99] Archaeologists have similarly claimed that other inscribed potsherds directed toward *kami* may have been written by those with little

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97 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 135–143.

98 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 224–228; also see Takeuchi Ryō 2020, 19–20.

99 Kondō Yasushi 2014, 143–145; also see Takeuchi Ryō 2020, 16–19.

to no literacy, a fact supported by mistakes and clumsy writing.[100] More generally, the scholar of ancient Japan Miyataki Kōji has proposed that people may have gathered at village halls in eastern Japan to participate in rituals and inscribed pots in their own hands.[101] Given this broader evidence and the fact that the clay roof tiles would have needed to be inscribed in a narrow window of time while they were still soft, it seems likely that some women may have inscribed their own names, just as the men did. This fellowship may likely have gathered together, and members ceremonially wrote their names on-site at the time when the tiles were first shaped.

Fig. 12: *Daihōkō butsu kegon kyō kan* 15 大方広仏華厳経 巻 15, copied by Shinshō; *Shōgozō kyōkan*, ed. Kunaichō Shōsōin Jimusho 2000, Disc 98, manuscript no. 1756; courtesy of the Imperial Household Agency.

To return to paper sources, it is also possible to speculate that women may have been able to write their own names, especially for elite patrons. In general, some elite women were clearly capable of writing. As mentioned above, Kōmyōshi's calligraphy is extant in the Shōsōin. There is also a sutra with extant copies in the Kyoto National Museum, Shōgozō, and private collections that seems to have been inscribed by a novice nun named Shinshō 真證 (*s.a.*) (Fig. 12).[102] One story from the

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100 Chiba-ken Shiryō Kenkyū Zaidan (ed.) 2004, 945.

101 Miyataki Kōji 2003, 130–131.

102 Nara Kokuritsu Hakubutsukan (ed.) 1983, pl. 51. There is some debate over whether she copied the text as part of repairs or simply transcribed it neatly, as the term 繕 that appears in the colophon can mean both 'to transcribe' and 'to repair'. See Jōdai Bunken wo Yomukai (ed.) 2016, 309–310, which reads it as repair but discusses the ambiguity. I have examined high resolution images of the Shōgozō version (Kunaichō Shōsōin Jimusho 2011, Disc 98, manuscript no. 1756) and while there is

monk Kyōkai's 景戒 (also Keikai; *s.a.*) *Records of the Numinous and Strange from Japan* (*Nihon ryōiki* 日本霊異記), a collection of tales completed in the early ninth century, mentions a provincial elite woman copying the *Lotus Sutra* in Awa Province 阿波国 (present-day Tokushima Prefecture) on the island of Shikoku.[103] While she is ridiculed for her poor writing abilities, the narrator assumes that a provincial woman could conceivably transcribe a text and would have surely been capable of writing her name. In fact, women would not have needed to be fully literate to be able to write some form of their names.[104] They could have simply copied a model or only known how to write a few graphs.[105] Altogether, it seems plausible that many elite women and perhaps others recorded their own names in colophons and on clay, though the evidence requires some speculation for both men and women alike.

6 Women's presence in the absence of women's names?

6.1 The gendered nature of poverty

What about figures of less exalted backgrounds? Is there evidence of them making inscriptions? What would have motivated them? Sources that speak explicitly to the religious lives of poor women are naturally difficult to find, just as they are for men. We cannot confirm the religious activities of non-elite women with complete confidence, but surely poor women existed and had at least some contact with Buddhism, given how ubiquitous the religion had become by the early ninth century.[106]

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some damage to the scroll, there is no obvious evidence that she repaired the manuscript and copied it. However, the beginning of the scroll is now missing. It is likely better to read the colophon as simply recording her transcription rather than repair, but further research is needed.

103 The full title is *Records of the Numinous and Strange from the Realm of Japan [Demonstrating] Retribution in This Life for Wholesome and Evil [Acts]* (*Nihon koku genpō zen'aku ryōiki* 日本国現報善悪霊異記). In this chapter, I have used the modern edition in Izumoji Osamu (ed.) 1996. There are two complete English translations: Nakamura 1973 and Watson 2013. For the story described here, see *Nihon ryōiki*, in Izumoji Osamu (ed.) 1996, 157–158; translated in Nakamura 1973, 248–249; Watson 2013, 162.

104 It is also worth stressing that both defining and assessing literacy is difficult for this time. See Lurie 2011, esp. 15–66 and 164–165.

105 For similar claims about women's writing based on manuscript evidence in Dunhuang, see Fu 2015, 128–135.

106 My book manuscript, *How Buddhism Spread in Japan, 650–850 CE*, charts how Buddhism entered villages throughout Japan by the early ninth century.

The question is how to recover their voices. An effort to do so requires working across and triangulating multiple types of sources: narratives, official documents, and inscribed excavated objects. Even with these diverse tools at our disposal, some speculation is necessary. This should not be surprising. The study of eighth- and ninth-century Japan always requires some imagination for the study of men and women alike. Complete certainty is a pleasure seldom enjoyed by ancient historians.

To uncover the religious lives and inscription practices of poor women, we should first turn to the world of fiction. Fictional sources can provide some insights into social history, particularly when read alongside the archaeological and documentary record and used with methodological care. We should remember that the stories are understood as fictional today, but they do not present themselves as such. Rather, the compilers of narratives called their collections 'records' (*ki* 記 or *roku* 録).[107] From a different perspective, Robert Campany has noted that religious narratives can be read as 'crystallizations' or 'artifacts' of 'social memory'.[108] Narratives emerged as 'platforms for religious thought', ones created through a collaborative practice between audience and authors.[109] As such they provide a window into both the ideas that storytellers had at their disposal, but also into the types of themes and practices that lay communities were attracted to and treated as plausible.

Records of the Numinous and Strange from Japan contains a number of stories of poor women miraculously obtaining wealth after making humble offerings to temples and Buddhist deities. In one story, a destitute woman managed to gather flowers, incense, and oil, and offer them to the temple Daianji 大安寺. She received rewards of four thousand coins for her actions, allowing her to achieve wealth and longevity.[110] In another tale, an impoverished mother struggling to raise nine children managed to secure regular offerings of flowers, incense, and oil; she was rewarded with 100,000 coins.[111] In yet another story, an orphan reduced to poverty

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[107] In particular, I am referencing Japan's two earliest collections of Buddhist tales the *Nihon ryōiki* and *Nihon kanreiroku* 日本感霊録. For a similar argument about how the *Nihon ryōiki* was patterned after historical sources, also see Kōno 2022, 145–146. This point has also been made in Campany 2015, xxiv–xxv for Chinese sources.

[108] Campany 2018, 27 and Campany 2005, 29. For 'artifacts', see Campany 2017, 15.

[109] Campany 2017, 15–16.

[110] *Nihon ryōiki*, in Izumoji Osamu (ed.) 1996, 104–106; translated in Nakamura 1973, 199–200; Watson 2013, 108–109.

[111] *Nihon ryōiki*, in Izumoji Osamu (ed.) 1996, 122–123; translated in Nakamura 1973, 215–216; Watson 2013, 126–127.

tied a cord to an image and offered flowers, incense, and lamps. She eventually regained her wealth.[112] Poverty in stories from this time seems to have been gendered, a point we will return to below.

It seems likely that commoners would have been aware of these stories. Mifune Takayuki has identified shared motifs and geography in these narratives to argue that these tales may have been circulated by preachers active on the outskirts of the Nara capital, an area where poor people gathered.[113] From other sources, we know that preachers in provincial villages told their audiences that humble offerings of rags or just a single coin would generate merit that would lead to riches in this life or the next.[114] The poor in the capital and in the provinces would have had opportunities to hear stories and teachings about how even the humblest of offerings could bring riches in return. A Buddhist version of the prosperity gospel would have been familiar to many poor people in Japan at this time.

It is perhaps unsurprising that these stories featured poor women. It was not simply a narrative device; women in Japan often occupied a socially precarious position and were especially susceptible to poverty. While much recent scholarship has challenged the idea of patrilineal inheritance and shown the importance of women as local leaders in the Nara Period, it is also clear that women faced economic disadvantages compared to men. Women lacked avenues open to men for securing wealth. Perhaps most importantly, they could not hold office, a rule that shut them out of opportunities to amass property that accompanied such positions.[115] As Ijūin Yōko explains, summarizing the work of Fukutō Sanae,

> women faced more difficulties in protecting their properties and actively participating in economic activities than men, who could use their official positions as leverage for maintaining their economic influence […] women received inheritance precisely because they faced challenges in acquiring and preserving new wealth.[116]

Welfare records of charity granaries (*gisō* 義倉) similarly point to the gendered nature of poverty. These storehouses were intended for emergency supplies, but provincial officials also had discretion and were empowered to use them for poor relief. In one of the better preserved but still highly fragmentary charity granary records from Awa Province 安房国 (present-day Chiba Prefecture), more than 70% of the

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112 *Nihon ryōiki,* in Izumoji Osamu (ed.) 1996, 113–115; translated in Nakamura 1973, 206–208; Watson 2013, 116–118.

113 Mifune Takayuki 2019, 122–126.

114 Tsukishima Hiroshi (ed.) 2001, 51 and 62.

115 Wakita 1984, 80.

116 Ijūin with Kawai 2017, 209.

recipients of aid were adult women and the remaining were children.[117] The strong presence of women seems to hold true in other extant documents from charitable granaries. Historian Funao Yoshimasa concludes that this trend is because a higher percentage of women faced social precarity and were therefore prioritized for receiving charity.[118] Judging from these granary records, representation in fiction, and the male-only path toward office, it seems likely that women more commonly faced poverty than men. Poverty was gendered.

6.2 Gender and prayers for wealth on clay pots

This conclusion about the gendered nature of poverty alters the way we read a large body of evidence: namely, prayers found in villages throughout Japan with auspicious phrases (*kisshōku [go]* 吉祥句[語]). These prayers typically included words like 'fortune' (*fuku* 福) or other single words or short phrases tied to blessings and prosperity. They have been found throughout Japan in eighth- and ninth-century sites. They seem to record simple wishes and aspirations for the outcomes of rituals. Not all are found at explicitly Buddhist sites, but many have been unearthed at provincial village temple remains. Amongst these, graphs associated with wealth are especially common and likely point to simple prayers for prosperity tied to offerings made in humble clay bows. By filling a simple clay pot with grain or burning oil in it, patrons could exchange their trifling donation for the dreams of riches in the future. A bit of oil was surely a small price to pay for hope.

The patrons did not hide their aspirations for wealth. The inscriptions are blunt. The following sample of inscribed prayers from a range of excavated pots points to the wealth of ways that people hoped to get rich quick through making a humble offering in a clay bowl: 'gain wealth and assets' (*zaifu ka* 財冨加), 'many profits' (*rita* 利多), 'great fortune' (*daikichi* 大吉), 'highest benefits' (*jōyaku* 上益), 'come wealth' (*furai* 冨来), 'superior blessings and prosperity' (*shōfukuei* 勝福栄), and 'abundant treasures' (*hōhō* 豊寳).[119] Prayers for wealth seem to have been one of the more common religious practices in rural villages throughout Japan. At the Mukaisakai 向境 site in Chiba Prefecture, for instance, sixteen bowls with 'wealth' (*tomi* 富・冨) have been found, which represents 15% of legibly inscribed objects

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117 Tōkyō Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo (ed.) 1901, vol. 1, 423–424; Funao Yoshimasa 2005, 112.

118 Funao Yoshimasa 2005, 114–116.

119 This is just a sample of terms that suggest prayers for wealth from searches in the *Zenkoku bokusho doki, kokusho doki, mojigawara ōdan kensaku dētabēsu* <https://bokusho-db.mind.meiji. ac.jp> (accessed on 14 November 2023). For a longer list, see Suda Tsutomu 2001, 60.

excavated at the site.[120] The site was a village in the Nara and Heian periods and judging from other pieces of pottery inscribed with 'temple' and 'three jewels' (the Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist community) found in large numbers, it seems that the village had a worship hall where these pots praying for wealth may have been offered to a Buddhist image (Fig. 13).

Fig. 13: Pottery inscribed with temple and three jewels from Mukaisakai, Yachiyo City Local History Museum; courtesy of Yachiyo City Local History Museum.

None of these pots reveal the gender of the donor. But we have no reason to assume that the patrons were male. If we are to engage in the dangerous business of speculation at all, we are perhaps better off assuming that at least half

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120 For a table of all of the inscribed potsherds, see Yachiyo-shi Iseki Chōsakai (eds) 2004, 314–321.

and maybe more of such inscriptions were written by women. After all, women commonly participated in Buddhist acts of patronage, including in fellowships with gender ratios of women equal to or surpassing men. As noted above, this is not to say that men never dominated fellowship groups; they sometimes did. Rather, it is to recognize that, at least on average, we should not assume that collective groups of donors lacked women. Moreover, women may have been more likely to suffer from extreme poverty, as explained above. They were precisely the people preachers targeted with rags-to-riches narratives and precisely the people who may have had the most to gain through prayer. Given these larger patterns, if we are going to speculate at all, it seems reasonable to conclude that these objects may be just as likely to have been produced by women as by men, if not more so.

7 Conclusion

These findings raise broader comparative questions about how we think about women and textual production. As Biblical scholar Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre has cautioned, textual silence on women should not be read as the absence of women. As she puts it, 'invisibility is still as much our problem as a problem of the data.'[121] This claim is certainly true for Japan. Based on the evidence presented above, there is no reason to assume the absence of women. We should, in general, assume their presence, especially amongst those praying for wealth.

The question is not whether or not women were present in Japanese Buddhist manuscript cultures, an inquiry whose answer is hopefully obvious by now. Rather we should ask how we imagine women based on the available evidence. The scholar of Rabbinic literature Sarit Kattan Gribetz has expanded on Johnson-DeBaufre's point in a recent podcast interview to emphasize the need to reflect on our assumptions and on the imaginative work of historical research:

> What we don't talk about as readily is that history writing is also an inherently creative act [...] It's an act of imagination [...] the first thing we have to do is to be upfront about how much creativity and imagination goes into the historical work that we do. So you asked about assumptions that we bring to the past and how those have the potential to

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121 Johnson-DeBaufre 2011, 92.

erase women. Another way of asking this question is, what do we allow ourselves to imagine about the past? And what do we assume is possible about the past? What do we assume must have been impossible?[122]

When we imagine the past, who do we imagine in it? Do we assume the patron is male if we have a seemingly genderless object, like an inscribed pot? Can we only do women's history when women are explicitly identified as such? Or can we develop methods that require we recognize that women were typically present? Women's history is not only turning to colophons to find names otherwise lost; it is also remembering that an ungendered text is not necessarily male. In some contexts, a seemingly genderless text was just as likely to have been sponsored by a woman as a man.

Women were active patrons of writing and producers of written objects in ancient Japan. This chapter started with highly visible elite women like Kōmyōshi. These women left a rich record on paper, one that rightly places women at the forefront of Buddhist patronage and writing in Japan. It was largely because of them that Buddhism was able to develop a textual footprint on the archipelago. There are far more extant scrolls sponsored by Kōmyōshi than there are for any other patron from this period. Still, these women seldom wrote works themselves; instead, they commissioned others to copy texts and compose prayers. The most important role of women in textual production in early Japan was not as a scribe or as an author but rather as a patron. These elite women have often been invisible in scholarly accounts, but they are decidedly visible in the historical record.

Women at court did not hold a monopoly over Buddhist textual production. A range of women from diverse backgrounds created texts, both by sponsoring manuscript transcription and by inscribing their names or prayers in clay. Some of these women's names have remarkably endured for more than 1,200 years. Ikue no Omi Iemichime and Harima no Kuni-no-Miyatsuko Aka toji are but two examples of women considered obscure today, who likely held prominent positions in provincial society. Other names are all around us, particularly if we turn to excavated sources. It should go without saying, that men often dominated particular institutions and venues, such as government offices. While patrons of sutra copying were often women, the scriptoria themselves were largely staffed with men, who transcribed the texts, proofread materials, assembled scrolls, and managed the day-to-day operations. In these cases, however, the men laboured in institutions funded primarily by women.

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122 Interview with Rebekah Haigh and Emily Chesley (hosts), 'Invisible Women and How They Make History', Episode 1, *Women Who Went Before: A Podcast*, <https://womenwhowentbefore.com/invisible-women/> (accessed on 14 November 2023).

Women were present in history more than we typically acknowledge. With time, they have become nameless. Their texts have risen from the ground, but we have failed to resurrect the women behind them, often because the inscriptions lack names. When we stop assuming that a lack of explicit gender is code for male, we can see women's religiosity may be all around us, often preserved on humble pieces of clay. Women are invisible, in part, because we have chosen to imagine them away.

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Wendi L. Adamek

Inscribing Women at an Archaeological Site in China

Abstract: In this paper I look at three types of representation at Baoshan (Henan) that foreground female figures in terms of their kinship roles. Contextualizing sections elaborate on Buddhist women of the Tang dynasty, Buddhist nuns, concepts of merit, and hierarchies in the Baoshan community. The three primary sources are (1) a passage from the *Mohemoye jing* 摩訶摩耶經 (*Mahāmāyā-sūtra*, Sūtra of the Buddha's Mother Mahāmāyā) that is carved on the south wall of the main devotional cave at Baoshan; (2) an episode from a canonical scripture represented at Baoshan that exalts the Buddha's mother Mahāmāyā; and (3) a mortuary inscription on Baoshan that was dedicated by a nun for her deceased father. Concluding remarks take up the question of female agency in this pre-modern context.

1 Introduction

The place now known as Baoshan 寶山 (Treasure Mountain) in Henan province (China) is a network of rock-cut caves, devotional and memorial inscriptions, reliquary niches with portrait-statues, and references to buildings and restorations. Notably, the memorial inscriptions on neighbouring Lanfengshan 嵐峰山 (Misty Peak Mountain) are the single largest extant *in situ* collection of records of medieval[1] Chinese Buddhist nuns. These records are carved inscriptions for deceased members of the community. The entire site, including both mountains, is now known as Baoshan.[2] Since the Tang dynasty it has often been referred to as Lingquansi 靈泉寺 (Ling's Spring / Numinous Spring Temple), the name of the main temple on Baoshan. The women who had mortuary inscriptions carved on Lanfengshan would have considered Lingquansi on Baoshan to be the centre of

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1 I am aware that there are some problematic connotations embedded in the term 'medieval', but I use it as a convenient shorthand for Nan-bei chao Sui Tang 南北朝隋唐 (Period of Division of Northern and Southern courts, Sui and Tang dynasties), roughly the fourth through the tenth centuries.

2 In the following notes, BS and LFS refer to Baoshan and Lanfengshan. BS and LFS niches are identified according to numbers given in the catalogue *Baoshan Lingquan si* 寶山靈泉寺 (Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo 1991).

their 'practicescape'.[3] In the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) the site was also sometimes called Wanfogou 萬佛溝 (Ten Thousand Buddhas Ravine), which seems to refer to the many mortuary niches with enshrined statues.

The site's most notable feature is the '*stūpa* grove' of mortuary niches (*talin* 塔林) that has spread across the two adjacent peaks over the centuries. This grove spread its roots around the two main cave-shrines on Baoshan and Lanfengshan, Dazhusheng 大住聖 (Great Abiding Holy Ones), and Daliusheng 大留聖 (Great Remaining Holy Ones). In addition to caves, devotional monuments, and ephemeral structures, Baoshan and Lanfengshan have seen the construction of almost two hundred individual mortuary niches dedicated by monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen to commemorate deceased teachers and family members. These niches are mid-relief carvings in the limestone outcroppings on the mountainsides. Most are in the shape of small *stūpas* (reliquary towers, also known as pagodas) and are likely to have once held reliquary containers for cremation ashes. Some of the niches have a square cavity carved below or beside the niche, and many of the memorial inscriptions refer to the mortuary construction as an 'ash-body *stūpa*' (*huishen ta* 灰身塔). Several of the inscriptions describe the disciples cremating the body and gathering the remains.

Buddhist paths connecting India in the fifth century BCE to Baoshan in the sixth century CE are rhizomatic, but I summarize some key nodes here. Early Buddhist discourses and treatises highlighted the binding effects of karma (intentional actions) that stem from reification of the aggregation of momentary psycho-physical functions as an independent permanent essence or self. Only focused, informed attention to the processes by which this delusion is sustained and final attainment of indescribable *nirvāṇa* could end the self-reinforcing cycles of karmic momentum. On the way to liberation, a practitioner's generous, selfless actions would generate self-reinforcing beneficial karmic effects, a growing treasury or field of 'merit' (Skt. *puṇya*). Around the beginning of the Common Era, Mahāyāna (Greater Vehicle) *sūtras* provided poetic evocations of the transformation of chains of delusion into the ornaments of timeless liberation and wisdom. Popular 'scriptures' (Skt. *sūtra*) celebrated cosmic manifestations and marvellous illusions as forms of 'skilful means' (Skt. *upāya*) deployed by the buddhas (awakened ones) and bodhisattvas (devotees on the path to buddhahood). Composers of apocryphal scriptures[4] and exegetical treatises elaborated on various schematizations of stages of the path.

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3 I centre my work on Baoshan on the term 'practicescapes'. I base this on Timothy Ingold's notion of 'taskscape', as I will discuss shortly.

4 There is much debate about using this term, but I find it a convenient shorthand for 'texts that claim to be translations of Indian Buddhist scriptures but bear marks of other provenance'. This

A practitioner at Baoshan would have been familiar with some version of this trajectory: arising of 'the mind of awakening' (Skt. *bodhicitta*) breaks through delusory self-identification and motivates the practitioner to take bodhisattva vows to attain buddhahood. Stage by stage, bodhisattvas purify themselves of the effects of past evil actions and develop salvific qualities and powers (Skt. *pāramitās*, perfections). Becoming buddhas, functioning as the nature of reality, they help catalyse awakening in fellow beings who are still caught in the web of self-created suffering.

Baoshan was developed as a place of Buddhist practice from the sixth century onwards. It was interactively constituted as a 'seat of awakening' (Skt. *bodhimaṇḍa*, Chin. *daochang* 道場).[5] *Bodhimaṇḍa* may refer to the ritually circumscribed performance of practices, the place in which they are performed, or a temple or monastery site. Emperor Yang 煬 (r. 604–617) of the Sui 隋 (581–618) is said to have decreed in 613 that all temples should be called *daochang*, and this designation is used in the Baoshan mortuary inscriptions.[6]

In this paper I look at three types of representation at the *bodhimaṇḍa* of Baoshan that foreground female figures in terms of their kinship roles. To contextualize, I include sections on Buddhist women in the Tang, a brief history of Buddhist nuns, Buddhist concepts of merit, and hierarchies in the Baoshan community. The three primary-source foci are as follows:

– The first anchor for discussion is a Chinese scripture that is likely an apocryphon composed in Central Asia or China. This is the *Mohemoye jing* 摩訶摩耶經 (Skt. *Mahāmāyā-sūtra*, Sūtra of the Buddha's Mother Mahāmāyā). A passage featuring Mahāmāyā's appeal to the Buddha was inscribed on the south wall of Baoshan's main devotional cave, Dazhusheng 大住聖 (Great Abiding Holy Ones).

– The second is a famous Mahāyāna canonical scripture that has an episode exalting the Buddha's mother Mahāmāyā. This scripture, the *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 (Skt. *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*), is devoted to the cosmic or universal Buddha Vairocana. Vairocana is the central image enshrined at the north wall of Dazhusheng cave. The *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* was a kind of tutelary sacred text for the monks and patrons who founded Baoshan. One way of interpreting the three main images in Dazhusheng cave is that they represent the three kinds of bodies of buddhas (Skt. *trikāya*). Vairocana could be seen as the truth-body

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category is distinct from texts composed in Chinese that claim scriptural status but are not attributed to a translator.

5 Japanese *dōjō*; currently used to designate martial arts training centres.

6 See Chou 1945, 309–311; Chen 2004, 101–107. For allusions to Baoshan as a *daochang*, see the inscriptions for Huixiu (547–646, LFS 26) and Sengshun (555–639, LFS 47) in Adamek 2021.

(*fashen* 法身, Skt. *dharmakāya*), Amitābha would be the bliss or reward-body (*baoshen* 報身, Skt. *saṃbhogakāya*), and Maitreya could represent the renewable promise of a response-body or transformation-body that manifests in the world to aid suffering beings (*yingshen* 應身 or *huashen* 化身, Skt. *Nirmāna-kāya*).[7] The view that buddha-bodies can be classified into these three types is stated in the *Daśabhūmikasūtra-śāstra*,[8] an exegetical text that was central to the doctrinal affiliation of the Baoshan founders.[9] I discuss the role of Mahāmāyā in relation to Vairocana in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*.

– The third piece is selected from among the many Baoshan/Lanfengshan mortuary niches dedicated to and by female practitioners. There are several small mortuary shrines and inscriptions dedicated by nuns for their deceased mothers. The longer example I discuss is an inscription dedicated by a nun for her deceased father. In 646 the nun Zhijue 智覺 dedicated a memorial for her father, the lay official Sun Baiyue 孫佰悅. The inscription is titled 'Gu da youpose Jinzhou Hongdong xianling Sun Baiyue huishen taming' 故大優婆塞晉州洪洞縣令孫佰悅灰身塔銘 (Ash-body *stūpa* inscription for late great *upāsaka*, the Hongdong District Magistrate in Jinzhou, Sun Baiyue).

2 Buddhist women in the Tang: Active voices

The lives of women in the Tang dynasty were undeniably bound by Confucian behavioural codes for daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law. As was the norm in premodern civilizations, prevailing cultural practices relegated most to anonymity.

However, there is always more to the picture. We have images of women painted on silk, on the walls of tombs and cave-temples, and sculpted in clay and stone. From tomb murals and grave goods, we see that aristocratic Tang women retained the styles of their nomadic ancestors. They wore trousers and boots to ride, went hunting with hawks, and even played polo. Elite women were literate, used make-up, and kept lapdogs and birds as pets. Nuns had busy social lives. There is a small but impressive extant corpus of poems written by Tang women.[10]

Nevertheless, even for these elite women there were limited options, and most involved cultivating the female virtues of humility, service, and compliance in

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7 See Li 1999, 34/3: 22–24.

8 See *Shidi jing lun* 十地經論 (= 地論) (*Daśabhūmikasūtra-śāstra*, a.k.a. *Daśabhūmikasūtropadeśa*, *Daśabhūmivyākhyāna*, Treatise on the Sūtra on the Ten Stages), *T*. 1522, 26:138b12–13.

9 For discussion of the complex doctrinal affiliations that intersect at Baoshan, see Adamek 2021.

10 See Idema and Grant (eds) 2004; Chang and Saussy (eds) 1999.

male-dominated households. Women who chose to renounce the household and become Buddhist nuns undoubtedly would have seen themselves as supporting rather than subverting mainstream cultural values and social functions. Yet in these supporting roles they were able to gather their resources – family alliances, votive donations, physical feats of discipline, and literary skills – to create niches of their own.[11] Peering into the mortuary shrines of Baoshan and Lanfengshan and examining the names, faces, and aspirations carved there gives us entry into a far richer world of practicing women than is generally imagined.

The Lanfengshan inscriptions at Baoshan constitute the single largest *in situ* collection of traces of medieval Chinese Buddhist nuns. Buddhist female devotees, both nuns and laywomen, were active participants in the rapid growth and sinification of Buddhism, and there are numerous Tang memorials for nuns and references to Buddhist women. Lanfengshan presents a rare window into a community of practicing women through a combination of artefacts and epigraphs in their original contexts. The Lanfengshan inscriptions are the products of considerable material and cultural resources devoted to the collective creation of a practicescape for women.

It is no accident that much of our information on the activities of Tang Buddhist women comes from the archaeological and epigraphical record. The soteriology of merit-transfer sanctioned Buddhist women to use their own resources to dedicate images and copy scriptures, but not to compile their own works. The sole medieval Chinese Buddhist record of the lives of nuns was compiled by a monk,[12] and there are no Tang hagiographic collections for nuns. Li Yuzhen and other scholars have identified and contextualized over one hundred individual Tang-era memorials dedicated to nuns, and Valentina Georgieva's work brings together material on nuns from inscriptions and miracle tales of the period of disunity, Sui and Tang.[13] In recent decades there has been a marked increase of valuable work on the lives of Buddhist women in the Tang and later periods.

However, there do not seem to be any other site-specific collections on the scale we find at Baoshan. Moreover, the creation of a space where individual nuns are visually represented as serious Buddhist practitioners appears to be unrivalled in the Chinese archaeological record. The women of Baoshan/Lanfengshan used pre-established iconographic, literary, and funerary practices to create a unique mortuary grove dedicated to perpetuating the reputations of women who devoted their

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11 See Hao 2010 on the family ties of Chinese clergy in records from Dunhuang.

12 This is the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of Nuns), *T*. 2063, 50, discussed below.

13 See Li Yuzhen 1989; Georgieva 2000.

lives to Buddhist practice. One can trace the histories of various elements, but the resulting meshwork of representations is their own.

As there are relatively few accounts of the aspirations of medieval religious women in Asian contexts, Lanfengshan should be recognized as an important world heritage site, but it has unfortunately been subject to depredations over the last century. Lanfengshan has eighty-nine extant or recently documented niches, including forty-two *in situ* inscriptions and five documented inscriptions not matched to any niches. Of the forty-seven inscriptions giving information about the deceased, thirty-four are for nuns, nine are for laywomen, three are for monks, and one is unclear. Most of the inscriptions for nuns identify them as belonging to particular 'convents'. The term *si* 寺 appended to the names of their residences denotes a Buddhist establishment and does not distinguish between monastic residences and devotional edifices. However, monastic codes stipulated that monks and nuns should live separately.

When we attempt to quantify the gendering of Baoshan's niches, we find that the inscriptions related to women make up 40% of the total Sui-Tang inscriptions. A large number of the total inscriptions are concentrated in the years 640 to 687. Of the sixty-three dated inscriptions from this period, thirty-seven (58%) are for and/or by nuns and laywomen. This body of inscriptions represents roughly a quarter of the total of 145 dated inscriptions from the Sui to the Ming dynasties.[14] With the exception of the sixth-century *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of Nuns), in other collections of Buddhist biographies and inscriptions the proportion of material on Buddhist women is much lower.[15] Let us now consider some background for the status of nuns (Skt. *bhikṣuṇī*, Chin. *biqiuni* 比丘尼) in Buddhism.[16]

3 A brief account of Buddhist nuns

The paradigmatic first Buddhist nun was the Buddha's aunt and foster mother, Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī. In *Ties that Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism*, Reiko Ohnuma argues that stories of Mahāprajāpatī in biographies of the Buddha point to the underlying ambivalence toward mother–son

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14 These figures are based on my on-site tally of the niches in comparison with the chart compiled in Ōuchi Fumio 1997.

15 The number of niches for women may have been higher, but there are many with worn, illegible inscriptions.

16 In the LFS inscriptions, the less-standard transliteration *bichuni* 苾芻尼 is sometimes used.

attachment that runs throughout Buddhist literature. The issue at stake is the renunciate's guilt at abandoning his mother along with all other social ties. Ohnuma says:

> In several passages, moreover, Mahāprajāpatī's long care of the bodhisattva and the grief she will experience on his renunciation are used by other characters to argue against the bodhi-sattva's decision to renounce. It is thus my contention that although the bodhisattva's guilt over abandoning his mother is never explicitly addressed or stated, it is nevertheless strongly suggested through the depiction of Mahāprajāpatī's great suffering.[17]

Moreover, Ohnuma proposes that there is an implicit comparison between Mahāmāyā as the 'good mother' who exits the scene early, by dying soon after the Buddha was born, and her sister Mahāprajāpatī who grieves when the Buddha leaves home and whose very existence constitutes a debt.[18]

Mahāprajāpatī is the protagonist of the story of the founding of the Buddhist order of nuns, an account found in the Theravāda *vinaya* and canonical variants that probably stem from a period well after the functional existence of the order. On behalf of herself and a group of other women (mostly Śākyan women abandoned by men who became renunciates to follow their kinsman Śākyamuni) Mahāprajāpatī begs the Buddha to ordain them as female renunciates, *bhikṣuṇī*. The Buddha is said to have refused, but then to have yielded to his cousin Ānanda's repeated interventions and allowed the nuns' order to be formed. However, he is also said to have stipulated eight special rules (Skt. *gurudharmas*) to formalize the nuns' subordinate status vis-à-vis monks and even male novices. This meant that the sets of rules that the ordained fortnightly vow to uphold (Skt. *prātimokṣa*) were different for monks and nuns. There were almost twice as many rules that nuns had to follow, and many of these maintained the ritual and institutional imbalance between the two communities.[19]

Participation of women in the Buddhist community (Skt. *saṃgha*) became a source of tension. One may chart an increase of misogynist themes in Buddhist literature over time. Scholars have attributed this to various causes: psychological issues, institutional growth and conservatism, and economic pressures that spurred competition.[20] Daniel Boucher usefully summarizes Alan Sponberg's thesis of four Buddhist 'voices' with regard to women:

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17 Ohnuma 2012, 89.

18 Ohnuma 2012, 86–94 and 112–133.

19 See Heirman 2001; Heirman 2010; Heirman 2011; Ohnuma 2012, 94–112.

20 See Wilson 1996; Falk 1980; Sponberg 1992.

> He sees essentially four major attitudes expressed: beginning with soteriological inclusiveness (nirvāṇa/arhatship available to all), a somewhat later institutional androcentrism developed that privileged male authority, and this view coexisted with a more negative ascetic misogyny that projected the psychological distress of celibacy upon women, now seen as objectified desire. Lastly, soteriological androgyny developed in the much later Vajrayāna tradition that positively revalorized the feminine in dramatic fashion.[21]

Boucher argues that this multiplicity of voices is more helpfully viewed as a reflection of ongoing soteriological and institutional frictions rather than a temporal progression.[22]

The status and legitimacy of the nuns' order was always a locus of ambivalence. According to various versions of the monastic codes (Skt. *Vinaya*), the requirements for a nun's ordination are more stringent than for monks. An assembly of senior monks may ordain new monks, but a nun's ordination requires both monks and nuns. As related in the *Biqiuni zhuan*, the earliest Chinese work on Buddhist nuns, this created problems for the first female aspirants to ordination in China.

Compilation of the *Biqiuni zhuan* is attributed (possibly erroneously) to the monk Baochang 寶唱 in the early sixth century.[23] The first biography in the collection recounts the difficulties encountered by the nun Zhu Jingjian 竺淨檢 (*c.* 292–361). It is said that early in the fourth century Jingjian received the ten basic precepts required of an aspirant to ordination. She lived as a nun with an assembly of followers in a temple she established in Chang'an. Her biography claims that in 357 a translation of the *Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya*[24] rules for nuns was completed, and the monk Tanmojieduo 曇摩羯多 (Dharmagupta)[25] set up an ordination platform in order to confer full precepts on Jingjian and her followers. However, the Chinese monk Daochang 道昌 objected that without a pre-existing assembly of ten properly ordained nuns in attendance, the ceremony would not be legitimate. His objections were overruled and Jingjian and three companions became the first Chinese Buddhist nuns.[26]

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21 Boucher 2008, 51, citing Sponberg 1992.

22 Boucher 2008, 51–52.

23 *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (Biographies of Nuns), *T.* 2063, 50; Tsai (tr.) 1994. On contestation of the authorship of the *Biqiuni zhuan*, see de Rauw 2005.

24 *Mohosengqi lü* 摩訶僧祇律 (*Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya*), tr. *c.* 416–418, translation ascribed to Faxian and Buddhabhadra, *T.* 1425, 22.

25 This may be the same person as Tanmojueduo 曇摩崛多, known to have been active in the Later Qin (384–417).

26 Tsai (tr.) 1994, 17–19.

In several of the *Biqiuni zhuan* biographies[27] it is further stated that in the fifth century a group of eight fully ordained nuns from Śrī Lānka made it to China, but this did not fulfil the requirement for a quorum of ten nuns. More Sinhalese nuns were invited, and in 432 or 433 a second group of eleven arrived, led by the nun Tiesaluo 鐵薩羅 (Tessara or Dewasara). With the Indian monk Saṅghavarman officiating, an ordination ceremony for nuns was held with the proper complement of senior nuns in attendance, thereby creating a legitimate Chinese *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*. Controversy over the legitimacy of this early establishment of a Chinese nuns' *saṃgha* has grown more heated in recent decades, due to worldwide efforts to re-establish the *bhikṣuṇī* communities of Southern Buddhism.[28]

At the same time, it should not be overlooked that throughout the Buddhist world, the *saṃgha*'s day-to-day existence has owed much to the support of pious laywomen. In India, lay devotional practice and support of the *saṃgha* were seen as the proper sphere of women's practice, a distinction related to the brāhmaṇical meaning of Dharma as social duty. Women who renounced householder life were considered to have transgressed against Dharma, unlike male renunciates.

In China, Confucian cultural norms dictated that sons and their wives were supposed to care for parents, support the family, and produce heirs, and this created resistance to Buddhist monasticism. Female renunciates encountered considerable obstacles. Even after female ordination became more widespread, many nuns remained within their natal households. However, Chinese nuns' communities were successfully established, often with the support of elite women. Convents managed to survive and flourish in spite of their institutional subordination to monks.

The activities of medieval Buddhist nuns become more visible in connection with urban centres or especially important Buddhist sites. We hear about nuns' involvement in the court life of the Southern dynasties in the *Biqiuni zhuan,* we find references to numerous convents in sources on the northern capitals of Luoyang and Chang'an,[29] we see inscriptions dedicated by nuns at the large cave complex at Longmen,[30] and we have nuns' prayers preserved among the Dunhuang documents.[31] Thus, the survival of a large body of material on nuns at a relatively small mountain site like Baoshan is rendered more visible in contrast.

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27 Tsai (tr.) 1994, 37–38, 53–55, 62–64, 69–71, 85–86. See also Heirman 2008.

28 See Heirman 2011.

29 See Li Yuzhen 1989; Wang (tr.) 1984; Li Jianchao (ed.) 1996.

30 McNair 2007, 56–59 and 133–140.

31 Huang Zheng and Wu Wei (eds) 1995.

What does this mean for 'gender studies'? When addressing issues of gender in traditional cultures, shifting focus to relational agencies may help to avoid reductive oppositions. Inspired by the work of Dorothy Ko and Jessey Choo, I incline toward the view that it is more fruitful to elucidate the ways that both masculine and feminine agency was invested in mastery of social practice, rather than comparing the scope for self-expressive individualism.[32] The latter is an exercise in which premodern women will always appear at a disadvantage, and valorisation of female challenge of gender norms is often an etic imposition.[33] We should recognize that laying claim to a supporting role in an active community was a significant expression of agency. I discuss this 'agency of relations' further in my conclusion.

Among the relational roles and resources deployed at Lanfengshan, we find a few unusual features and even some aspects that were vulnerable to imperial censure. However, for the most part we see conformity to well-established Buddhist programs and practices. Through translation and interpretation these nuns may emerge from the mountainside as individuals, but it is important to keep in mind that they departed from it as members of an active *saṃgha* community.

One can only imagine what it must have meant to a Buddhist nun to belong to a place that was defined by the symmetry of a separate but comparable mountain of women's relics, a growing mortuary grove fed by a cluster of convents. As with memorials for elite married women, the virtues recorded in the nuns' inscriptions were understood to redound to the credit of the male clan, the four-fold *saṃgha* headed by monks. Yet these clustered and layered records, whether long, brief, or erased by time and vandalism, have the potency of a collective gendered field of merit.

4 Merit

It is difficult to grasp these activities without delving into the concept of 'merit' (Chin. *gongde* 功德, Skt. *puṇya*). Generating merit has always been a crucial Buddhist devotional activity. Offerings to the Buddha and *saṃgha* gain merit for the devotee, which is thought to offset the negative effects of past actions and help create favourable future conditions in this life and the next.

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32 See Ko 1994; Ko 2007; Choo 2009.
33 See Faure 1998 and 2003 and also discussion of Bernard Faure in Adamek 2021, 309–310.

In traditional Buddhism, the most meritorious act was to become a monk, and the highest fulfilment of good acts in the past was to be reborn in conditions enabling ordination and then attainment of final liberation from rebirth. In Mahāyāna contexts, working on the perfection of merit-generating generosity (Skt. *dāna*) was one of the preparatory practices of the bodhisattva path. For laypeople, the most important way to gain merit and cultivate generosity was support of the community of monks and nuns. This support took many forms, including donating facilities and supplies, sponsoring vegetarian feasts and memorial services, and providing the means for family members to become monks and nuns. Faith in the mutually reinforcing effects of spiritual and material enrichment furthered the activities that render Baoshan's practicescape visible to us now.

Close ties between *dānapati* (lay, ordained, individual and collective donors) and ordained *saṃgha* members invested with ritual functions have been indispensable for the development of Buddhism. Negotiation of human bonds have generated unique cultural adaptations of the Buddhist teachings of non-attachment through many centuries and countries. Human ties, with all the obligations and potential abuses they entail, have frequently been (and continue to be) the target of criticism and calls for reform from Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike.

At the heart of this powerful and contested co-dependence is the problem of the personal. Fundamental Buddhist teachings of not-self and non-attachment, and later Mahāyāna teachings of the emptiness of gift, giver, and recipient, were conveyed through scriptural settings in which the tension between personal ties and liberation were supposed to be resolved in favour of liberation. It was recognized that monks' and nuns' dependence on gifts for survival could create personal relationships with the *dānapati*, but these debts were claimed to be annulled by merit, a universal and impersonal currency.

The notion of transferring this credit or currency to another being is also crucial, but a little trickier to navigate. The idea of 'transferring' beneficial karmic effect raises ontological problems in a Buddhist context, because there is no substance or essence to transfer or do the transferring. Yet the brāhmaṇical sacrificial principle of the efficacy of acts of dedication provided means to direct the flow of beneficial intention toward designated recipients.[34] 'Merit-transfer' is sometimes thought of as a Chinese invention. However, Gregory Schopen, working with early Buddhist inscriptions and Vinaya passages, demonstrated that merit-dedication for

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34 James Egge (2002) argues that the Pāli scriptures contain two distinct rhetorical patterns regarding gift-giving. He sees these two patterns grounded in theories of *yañña* (sacrifice) and theories of karma (volitional action), respectively. He demonstrates that these discourses were antithetical enough to require later exegetical effort to establish the ascendancy of karmic soteriology.

the benefit of deceased family members by laypeople, monks, and nuns was also a flourishing aspect of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism.[35]

Chinese Buddhists engaged in various textual and ritual processes that were designed to reconcile the tension between devotional faith in the provisional power of merit and exegetical and contemplative analysis of its absolute lack of inherent essence. In this ongoing work they deployed Mahāyāna texts that promoted the merit of venerating the Three Treasures[36] in terms of the doctrine of interpenetration of provisional and absolute aspects of reality.

According to the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, noted above as the primary scriptural icon for the founders of Baoshan, every minute particle (*weichen* 微塵) in the innumerable worlds infinitely interpenetrates with every other, and

> In each particle the buddhas of the Three Times appear according to their inclinations; while their essential nature neither comes nor goes, by the power of their vows they pervade the worlds.[37]

At the same time, anything is possible, and thus delusion is possible:

> Because of [universal] laws as given, in the oceans of worlds innumerable [beings] become spoiled as the eons change; because defiled beings live in them, the oceans of worlds become defiled as the eons change.[38]

In a process whose causes are not addressed in the *Avataṃsaka*, beings entertain delusions that become habitual, and this is reflected in the illusory manifestation of defiled fields or worlds.[39] Buddhas and bodhisattvas perceive the lack of reality of these phenomena as well as their provisional functioning, and work skilfully with the latter in order to aid deluded beings.

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35 Schopen 1997, 56–71.

36 The Three Treasures are the buddhas, the Dharma (teachings/truth), and the ordained *saṃgha* as their representatives. Throughout, I capitalize 'Dharma' to refer to the Buddha's teachings of the law or truth, in order to distinguish this from *dharmas*, the constituents of reality. 'The Buddha' is capitalized to refer to Śākyamuni, but buddhas as a class are not capitalized.

37 Cleary (tr.) 1993, 201, with minor modifications; *T.* 279, 10: 39a6–7: 一一塵中三世佛, 隨其所樂 悉令見, 體性無來亦無去, 以願力故遍世間. The entire verse is *T.* 279, 10: 38c16–39a7. This chapter, the *Shijie chengjiu* 世界成就 (Formation of the Worlds) from Sikṣānanda's translation of the *Avataṃsaka,* was the inspiration for the Chinese Huayan school formulation of 'Indra's net' as a vast net of jewels, each one reflected in every other and reflecting every other. See Cook 1981, 2.

38 *T.* 279, 10: 38a26–27. 法如是故, 世界海無量成壞劫轉變; 染污眾生住故, 世界海成染污劫轉變.

39 The *Aggañña-sutta* (On Knowledge of Beginnings, *DN* III, 27, 80–98) has a fascinating theory of origins and devolution; see Gethin 2008, 116–128.

In this view of reality, the marvellous appearances of cosmic buddhas as well as their icons, the images crafted and dedicated in order to gain merit, are equally illusions. Yet all buddha-forms are manifestations of vows to save beings and thus have the power of merit. Devotion to buddhas and bodhisattvas and their images is said to elicit a response, moving the salvific figure to deploy the power of merit through various skilful means.

The framing claim for contemplative analysis of the nature of reality and devotion to the buddhas is the same: both kinds of work are meant to lead to realization of the emptiness of reifications. For example, in the *Guan wuliangshou fo jing* 觀無量壽佛經 (Sūtra on Contemplating the Buddha of Infinite Life) the Buddha first gives the protagonist Queen Vaidehī step-by-step instructions for building up a vivid and concrete visualization of the Pure Land of Sukhāvatī. He then gives instructions for perceiving Amitābha Buddha, who created Sukhāvatī out of his merit as a place of practice for the faithful. The Buddha tells Queen Vaidehī:

> All buddha-tathāgatas are *dharmadhātu-kāya* and may everywhere enter into what the minds of beings conceive. Therefore, when your minds conceive buddha, it is precisely the mind that is those thirty-two [major] marks and eighty subsidiary signs [of a buddha]. This mind makes buddhas and this mind is buddha. The ocean of true universal knowledge of all the buddhas is generated from what [your] minds conceive.[40]

Dharmadhātu-kāya, the dharma-realm-body or 'suchness', is the inseparability of conditioned conceptualizations and ultimate truth. The provisional characteristics of images and merit-fields refers to their absolute lack of characteristics, and vice versa. This interpenetration and recursivity is what makes 'merit-transfer' possible, and desirable. The power of the intent to liberate beings from delusion is inseparable from the realization of the lack of independent, permanent essence or qualities.

The merit-field is considered the provisional or 'skilful means' aspect of the *dharmadhātu-kāya*, powered by the vows of buddhas and bodhisattvas to save beings. Making a pious donation and then dedicating the merit for the benefit of loved ones, the donor compounds individual merit into inexhaustible merit by appealing to the mediation of salvific figures. The mirroring of true nature and intention between buddha and devotee is claimed to activate wisdom and compassion; merit-practice compounds the mutual intention to benefit others into a treasury or field of virtues and blessings. Without form or essence, merit thus acts as a kind of universal *logos* (ground, principle and medium of communication) among beings at the same time that it functions as a universal currency. Let us turn now to the merit-field at Baoshan.

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40 *T*. 365, 12: 343a19–22.

5 The *Mahāmāyā-sūtra* passage at Baoshan

The *Mahāmāyā-sūtra* is said to have been translated by the monk Tanjing 曇景, active during the southern Xiao Qi 蕭齊 dynasty (479–502). However, it may be an apocryphon composed in Central Asia or China.[41] It includes a brief account of the Buddha's prophecy that the power of his teachings will eventually decline.[42] In Dazhusheng cave, the *Mahāmāyā* selection centres on individual liberation while its companion selection from the *Candragarbha-sūtra* centres on the decline of the teachings. These two motifs are complementary. Dazhusheng and other devotional sites in the region during this period supported rituals of contemplative repentance and visualizations that are claimed to be refuges for the practitioner in the age of decline.[43]

The *Mahāmāyā* selection is from the first part of the *sūtra*, wherein the Buddha ascends to Daoli Tian 忉利天 (Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, Trāyastriṃśa) for three months to preach for his mother Mahāmāyā. In the overall narrative arc of the *Mahāmāyā*, the Buddha's ascent to see his mother in the first part is complemented in the second part by her descent to earth see him when she hears of his 'death'.

In *Surviving Nirvana: Death of the Buddha in Chinese Visual Culture*, Sonya Lee presents the rich imagery associated with Śākyamuni's apparent death and mastery over death. She traces *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* motifs surrounding Śākyamuni's illusory passing as well as various other media used to stage the Buddha's performative passing. Lee weaves together images of Śākyamuni reclining on his deathbed, relic-worship, images of reliquaries, and scenes from the second part of the *Mahāmāyā-sūtra*. In the latter, the Buddha is shown miraculously sitting up in his coffin to reassure his mother when she descends from Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to see him. Lee suggests that the *Mahāmāyā* could be seen as a kind of *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* with Chinese characteristics, foregrounding filial piety.[44]

In the passage carved at Baoshan, Mahāmāyā is the main speaker. We see her receiving her son's prophesy that she will attain the first of the stages leading to final *nirvāṇa*, that of *śrotāpanna*, stream-winner.[45] Though the prediction is thus couched in

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41 See discussions in Nattier 1991; Lee 2010.

42 *Mohemoye jing* 摩訶摩耶經 (*Mahāmāyā-sūtra*, Sūtra of the Buddha's Mother Mahāmāyā), *T*. 383, 12: 1013b14–1024a20; Nattier 1991, 168–170. See also Huang Zheng 2007.

43 Dazhusheng cave features repentance images and ritual modelled on the *Jueding pini jing* 決定毘尼經 (*Vinayaviniścaya-Upāliparipṛcchā-sūtra*, Sūtra of the Inquiry of Upāli Regarding Determination of the Vinaya). See Adamek 2021, 81–121 for contextualization of medieval Chinese repentance practices.

44 Lee 2010, 94–118.

45 In early Buddhist teachings, this is the first of a four-stage path to liberation: (1) a stream-entrant (*srotāpanna*) will become an arhat within seven more human or lower-heaven lives in the realm of

terms of a pre-Mahāyāna path, it is presented in the manner of a *bodhicitta*-like moment that initiates and encompasses fulfilment of the path. This is followed by the assembly's prayer for the liberation of all beings. The passage centres on Mahāmāyā's soliloquy addressed to her own mind, specifically the function of volitional conceptualizations (*xinyi* 心意, *manas* or *citta-manas*) that entail karmic residue or momentum.

Fig. 1: *Yuezang fen jing* and *Mohemoye jing* passages on south inner wall of Dazhusheng cave. Scriptural passages west of entrance; photo: W. Adamek.

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desire (*kamaloka*); (2) a once-returner (*sakṛidāgāmīn*) will become an arhat within one more birth in the realm of desire; (3) a non-returner (*anāgāmīn*) cannot be reborn in the realm of desire. If the level of arhat is not attained within this life, the non-returner will be reborn in the highest pure-form heavens; (4) the able, noble one (arhat) has no desire or karmic residue, and no rebirth.

Translation of the inscription (Fig. 1):

Mohemoye jing 摩訶摩耶經 (*Mahāmāyā-sūtra*, Sūtra of the Buddha's Mother Mahāmāyā)[46]
At that time the World-Honoured One saw from afar that his mother had come and she was paying homage in her heart. Her body shook like the agitation of the four great seas stirred by the Kings of Mount Sumeru.[47] When the Tathāgata had seen his mother thus, he used the Brahma-voice[48] to say to her: 'What your body is going through is entirely caught up in sorrow and joy. You should cultivate *nirvāṇa* and forever transcend sorrow and joy'.
When Mahāmāyā heard the Buddha's words, she joined her palms and bowed her head and contemplated this wholeheartedly. Kneeling before the Buddha she prostrated herself to the ground. She concentrated her energy in correct mindfulness (*zhuanjing zhengnian* 專精正念), and all entanglements subsided.
Then she spoke verses of praise to the Buddha:
> For countless *kalpas* you have been drinking my milk.
> You have thus transcended birth, old age and death, attaining the peerless Way.
> You should repay my kindness in raising you by cutting off the root of my three poisons.
> I take refuge in the Great Hero, the unstinting benevolent one.
> I take refuge in the Master Tamer, the highest unsurpassable one.
> I take refuge in the Teacher of Gods and Men, forever parted from the bonds of ignorance and lust.
> Morning and night in each of the three times of day the recollection/meditation (*nianxiang* 念想) is not cut off.
> I prostrate and make obeisance to the supreme Great Dharma King.
> Now in your field of blessings I want to grow the seedlings of merit.
> I pray only that you bestow your mercy and speedily cause me to achieve the wondrous fruit.
> Having long had this great purpose I birthed in the palace of a great king
> a huge body the colour of the finest gold whose radiance illuminated the ten directions,
> with face completely round and pure like the full moon of autumn.

Then the World-Honoured One said to his mother: 'I hear well, I hear well [what you have said], and I have thought carefully about it. Beginning, middle, and end it is good, its meaning is profound and far-reaching. Its wording is skilful, simple and un-muddled. It is complete and pure, and has the mark of noble conduct'.
When Mahāmāyā had heard these words, the Buddha due to his supramundane powers recognized her destiny. Because of the confluence of good roots and pure practice, [Mahāmāyā] would break the ties of eighty million burning [defilements] and achieve the fruit of the

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46 This passage corresponds to *T.* 383, 12: 1005b16–1006a25. The Baoshan text transcription from Li Yumin 1998, 41–42, checked *in situ* by the author in 2005, and the full annotated translation is found in Adamek 2021, 66–70 and 401–402.
47 Mount Sumeru is the *axis mundi* of Buddhist cosmology, surrounded by four great continents and (usually) eight seas. This line probably refers to a passage about the stirring of the four seas in the *Guanfo sanmei hai jing* 觀佛三昧海經 (Sūtra on the Ocean-Like Samādhi of Contemplating the Buddha), *T.* 643, 15: 647a28–b1. This 'visualization scripture' was an inspiration for the Baoshan practitioners. It is likely to be a Central Asian apocryphon, see Yamabe 1999.
48 *Fanyin* 梵音, a beautiful, powerful voice, one of the thirty-two marks of a buddha.

stream-winner. At this she raised her joined palms and said to the Buddha: '[From] the prison of birth and death, the confirmation of escape!' When the great assembly had the opportunity to hear these words, with one voice they said: 'We pray that all beings attain liberation, just as Mahāmāyā has done right now!'

Then Mahāmāyā said to the Buddha: 'It is like a fierce fire heating hot iron – if one touches it, one's body and mind [experience] burning pain. Life and death in the world are also like this, what comes and goes are all accumulations of suffering. The basis of the sufferings of the ordinary masses all stem from their volitional conceptualizations (*xinyi* 心意). Following desires impetuously, they deceive the many beings. They revolve through the Five Paths and suffer the harsh winds [of karma]. It is like a play'.[49]

Then in front of the Buddha, Mahāmāyā castigated her own volitional conceptualizations, saying: 'Why do you always do what is unbeneficial? Wandering in the realm of the six senses you do not settle, chaotic imaginings drag you along without ever ceasing. What can be discriminated[50] is all inauspicious. Why do you delude me and then allow [delusions] to collect there? It is like someone constantly engaged in cultivating the land – though that great land has never been increased or decreased, his plough is damaged day after day. Being in the sea of birth and death is also like this. Those who constantly lose their lives are immeasurable, yet my consciousness never increases or decreases'.

'You [volitional conceptualizations] can cause me to become a *cakravartin* king, [ruling] all under the Four Heavens, complete with the seven treasures [of kingship]. Then in an instant you cause me to regress back to a frog. In an instant you cause me to become a poor and humble person, running east and west begging for clothing and food. In an instant you cause me to become a gentleman, accumulating riches of many millions, with a name heard far and wide. In an instant you cause me to [live] in a heavenly palace, with sweet dew as my food and drink, indulging myself with the five desires. In an instant you cause me to be stuck in hell, drinking molten copper and swallowing balls of hot iron. Just from my past lives as an ox, [one could] pile up the skins as high as Mount Sumeru. Still within life and death, not having attained liberation, one revolves in an instant through countless names. Some are called masters, some are called servants, some are called *cakravartin* kings, some are called emperors, some are called *devas*, *nāgas*, *yakṣas*, *gandharvas*, *asuras*, *garuḍas*, *kinnaras*, and *mahoragas*.[51] From humans to non-humans, some are called animals, some are called hungry ghosts, some are called hell-beings. Beings have many kinds of designations like these'.

[Section omitted here]

'You stupid volitional conceptualizations, since long ago you have pulled me along, going and coming everywhere, and I have always submitted, never disobeyed. Today, I wish to concentrate on hearing the Dharma, [so] do not turn back to vexations or become obstructions. You yourselves also ought to be disgusted and want to transcend all sufferings, speedily seek *nirvāṇa*, and quickly obtain peace and joy'.

[Final section omitted]

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49 *Paiju* 拍鞠 'clapping and bowing'.

50 *Yuanlü xin* 緣慮心 = *citta*, the cogitating, discriminatory mind in association with objects, based on false reification/projection of subject-object discrimination.

51 These are the eight classes of supernatural beings from the *Lotus Sutra*.

Though this passage does not reinforce the 'decline' theme introduced by the companion *Candragarbha* inscription, it provides significant motivation for repentance practice. It graphically describes the consequences of the incessant flow of self-obsessed volitional thought: that which is conditioned and produces further conditioning. It evokes the wide range of sufferings to which the karma-bound are subject. Most importantly, it places the responsibility for suffering squarely on the sufferer's own shoulders, in her own head.

The audience is shown that the true purpose of repentance is not the Sisyphean task of scrubbing away the karmic residue of endlessly arising attachments and transgressions. Rather, attention is drawn to self-wilful constructions that are the source of continual reinforcement and reproduction of afflictive patterns that bind all beings to delusion. The *Candragarbha* and *Mahāmāyā* thus provide scriptural support for the two themes that the Baoshan community yoked together: disappearance of Śākyamuni's pure Dharma and repentance practice that revealed the true nature of the devotee as buddha-nature. Repentance rituals were undertaken to transform afflictive self-delusion, which Mahāmāyā describes so poignantly, into direct realization of *dharmadhātu*. Lingyu 靈裕 (518–605), one of the Baoshan founders, described this process in potent poetic images, praising sincere focussed effort as a catalyst for spontaneous mutual response between buddhas and one's own buddha-nature.[52]

6 Mahāmāyā in the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*: Engendering the dharma-realm

In Dazhusheng cave a human-sized three-dimensional sculpture of Vairocana Buddha on the north wall complements the engraved *Mahāmāyā-sūtra* selection on the south wall. In the beloved thirty-ninth chapter of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, the *Rufajie* 入法界 (Entry into *Dharmadhātu*, also known as the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, Supreme Array Scripture)[53] there are two sections devoted to Māyā giving birth to Vairocana's emanation as Śākyamuni, the Buddha of this age in this world.

These two sections present birth-centred perspectives on the *sūtra*'s pervasive theme of the unobstructed interpenetration of infinite realms/abodes/bodies as the *dharmadhātu*. As discussed briefly in the context of merit practices, '*dharmadhātu*'

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52 See Adamek 2021, 83–87.
53 See Osto 2009 for a detailed discussion of the Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan etymology of the title, and this translation.

connotes the co-inherence of transcendent realms and the conditions of mundane phenomenal existence, the manifestation of the truth (Dharma) by enlightened beings in those realms, and their true non-dual nature as emptiness/interdependence, the absolute lack of ontologically determinate nature.[54] Douglas Osto comments on the significance of *dharmadhātu*:

> As a locus that is immeasurable, infinite, boundless and unlimited, it is always present, yet always more than what is present. As an indestructible, single, uninterrupted, pure unity that is the same in all worlds, it functions as the 'ground' of all the multiplicity of realms and worlds. It represents both the ultimate nature of reality behind and beyond all illusory phenomena, and the ultimate goal of the religious quest. As such, the *dharmadhātu* represents the unifying principle behind both the worldview and narrative of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra.* Not only is the *dharmadhātu* represented by buildings in the narrative, but also by bodies.[55]

Rufajie, 'entry into *dharmadhātu*', is presented as a devotional quest that culminates in the devotee joining the company of his exalted spiritual guides. In the *Avataṃsaka* in general and the *Gaṇḍavyūha* section in particular, the soteriological goal is to achieve buddhahood and a dharma-body that corresponds in nature with *dharmadhātu.* This body is pure, adamantine, and infinitely prolific in generating salvific forms.

The framing narrative of the *Gaṇḍavyūha* is the quest of the youth Sudhana, who is sent forth on a pilgrimage by Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of wisdom. Sudhana visits fifty-three spiritual guides or 'good friends' (*kalyāṇamitra*) and hears narratives about their past-life conditions and vows. He receives teachings corresponding with the preparatory practices and successive stages of the bodhisattva path.

Sudhana's path culminates in three crowning encounters, seeing Maitreya, Samantabhadra, and Vairocana. Sudhana arrives at the doorway of 'the great tower of the chamber of adornments of Vairocana' and is invited inside by Maitreya, the future Buddha of this world. He experiences unimpeded inter-reflecting visions of himself and Maitreya throughout time and space. He understands that both the visions and their vanishing are the nature of *dharmadhātu*. He then returns to Mañjuśrī, the initiator of the pilgrimage, who confirms his accomplishment and ushers him into the presence of Samantabhadra, the bodhisattva of practice and well-being, seated at the feet of Vairocana. Samantabhadra is presented as the paradigmatic bodhisattva whose practices and vows form the body of the scripture itself. He lays his right hand on Sudhana's head, and Sudhana's gradual identification with all Samantabhadra's practices in all the worlds unfolds. Samantabhadra utters

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54 *Dharmadhātu* is a designation for reality, not a place, and thus it is not usually capitalized.
55 Osto 2009, 286.

vows of eternal devotion to the buddhas and the practice of saving beings. Vairocana affirms this and the chapter comes to a close.[56]

Gender representation is unusually balanced among the fifty-three 'good friends' that Sudhana meets along the way. As Osto notes, approximately half the text is devoted to his encounters with female teachers, all presented in a positive light:

> Of the fifty-three spiritual guides Sudhana encounters, twenty-one are female. Among these are ten goddesses, the daughter of a god, a queen, a princess, a nun, a courtesan, a girl, Māyā (the mother of the Buddha) and Gopā (the wife of the Buddha).[57]

The sections that concern us here are Sudhana's visits to Sutejomaṇḍalaratiśrī, the goddess of Lumbini Grove, and Lady Māyā, respectively the thirty-ninth and forty-first guides he sees. Sutejomaṇḍalaratiśrī describes the visions and wisdom she received through witnessing the miracles that occurred when Lady Māyā gave birth to Vairocana as Śākyamuni. Subsequently, Māyā herself recounts her cosmic buddha-birthing experience to the young male pilgrim.

Osto suggests a provenance for the *Gaṇḍavyūha* in third-century southern India, and argues that Buddhist patronage by wealthy aristocratic women of the Ikṣvāku dynasty may have contributed to the uncharacteristically positive view of women's bodies and characters that pervades the text. He contrasts extremely negative images of women's bodies found in the Gāndhārī manuscript of the *Anavatapta-gāthā* (Songs of Lake Anavatapta, *c.* first century) with the *Gaṇḍavyūha*'s sumptuously detailed portrayal of the physical and personal charms of Gopā, the devoted wife of the Buddha through many lifetimes.[58] Osto focuses on the appeal of this love story, the longest single section of the text. For our purposes, the adjacent positive portrayals of Māyā giving birth to Vairocana's emanation of Śākyamuni are equally significant.

When Sudhana pays homage to the goddess Sutejomaṇḍalaratiśrī, she first gives him an extensive account of the ten kinds of birth of bodhisattvas, the ten

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56 For an English translation of the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, see Cleary (tr.) 1993, 1135–1518. Thomas Cleary's translation is based on the Tang translation of the *Huayan jing* by Śikṣānanda 實叉難陀 (652–710), *T.* 279, 10. Osto also refers to the Śikṣānanda translation in his discussions, but he does not focus on the Mahāmāyā section. Cleary's translation of Śikṣānanda's translation is very helpful and I consulted his translations throughout. However, for this section I use *T.* 278, 9, the earlier translation by Buddhabhadra 佛陀跋陀羅 (359–429), as the primary source because it would have been known to the Baoshan practitioners. See the bibliography for a list of the Chinese translations of the *Huayan jing*, and see Hamar 2007 for discussion of the different versions.

57 Osto 2006, 214.

58 Osto 2006.

omens preceding the birth of Vairocana as Śākyamuni, multidimensional visions of the past practices of the Buddha that emanated from Māyā's body as she was about to give birth, and then describes the birth itself:

> When Lady Māyā gave birth to the bodhisattva, it was like the bright pure sun manifesting in the void, like the light of thunder-and-lightning, like clouds arising from a mountain, like a torch in the darkness. At that time the bodhisattva, although he appeared to be born, at the same time understood completely that all *dharmas* are like lightning and dreams, not coming, not going, not born, not perishing.[59]

Sutejomaṇḍalaratiśrī reveals that this vision was given to her because of her devoted service as the wet-nurse of a buddha born countless eons before. She then sends Sudhana to visit the Buddha's wife Gopā. After telling her own story, Gopā sends him to visit Lady Māyā herself. Before he attains Māyā's presence, helpful minor goddesses teach Sudhana how to purify and maintain his pure mind and bestow on him further powers of supernatural vision. Finally, the 'Queen Mother of the Dharma Realm'[60] appears, and he sees extensive visions of her innumerable manifestations in accord with the capacities of beings, culminating in her manifestations as the mother of bodhisatt-vas and buddhas. Responding to Sudhana's request, Māyā describes her physical experience of the miracles of Śākyamuni's gestation and birth, relates the past-life service that made her into the mother of buddhas, and reveals that she was and will be the mother of all buddhas in their final existences.[61]

These miraculous and multidimensional birth-visions present a marked contrast to another well-known strand of Buddhist discourse that illustrates the polluted nature of the body through images of the foulness of the female body. This literature links gestation and birthing processes with post-mortem decomposition.[62] In all accounts of the Buddha's birth, miracles attend the birthing; the most celebrated image is Māyā holding onto a tree while the Buddha is born from her side. This avoids the pollution associated with descent through the birth-canal. The *Gaṇḍavyūha* also avoids this site of ambivalence, but Māyā's womb becomes a multiverse. Sutejomaṇḍalaratiśrī describes seeing the Buddha emerging from Māyā's abdomen, as quoted above, 'like lightning and dreams, not coming, not going, not born, not perishing'.

Māyā's protean manifestations are repeatedly compared to magical illusions or dreams. This quality of her nature and her name is a motif running throughout the

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59 *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra,* Flower Ornament Sūtra), *T.* 278, 9: 753b16–b19.

60 This felicitous phrase is Osto's (2006, 217).

61 *Huayan Jing* 華嚴經 (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra,* Flower Ornament Sūtra), *T.* 278, 9: 761c17–765a8.

62 See Wilson 1996. This is related to the 'docetic Buddhology' discussed in Radich 2015.

literature about the Buddha's birth. Reiko Ohnuma, quoting a passage claiming that giving birth to the Buddha is painless because his body is made of mind, comments:

> Although it is the bodhisattva, rather than Māyā, who is here described as being 'made of mind' (Skt. *manomaya*), this ghostly quality seems equally true of Māyā herself. As Obeyesekere has put it, 'She who begets an illusion must herself be an illusion' – a suggestion further reinforced by Māyā's very name. The term *māyā* has a range of meanings running from 'illusion' to 'magical creation' to 'deceptive appearance' and might suggest that Māyā herself is just an illusion. This meaning of the term is invoked in connection with Māyā in the *Lalitavistara*, which states that she was given the name Māyā (or Māyādevī) because 'she seemed like an image created through magic' and because 'she ravishes the mind like a magical creation'. The erasure of Māyā's physical body evident throughout the entire pregnancy process is thereby completed in her name.[63]

In the previous section on the *Mahāmāyā-sūtra* passage at Dazhusheng cave, we see Māyā recognizing her own volitional constructs and attachments as the cause of the myriad kinds of karma-bound births she has undergone. In the *Gaṇḍavyūha*, in contrast, Māyā's complete realization is the source of her many spontaneously arising salvific manifestations. Her innumerable forms are like dreams or reflections that arise in response to the *bodhicitta* and vows of the many beings, to whom she appears like a wish-fulfilling jewel. Her bodies are pure response:[64]

> At that time, Sudhana saw Lady Māyā, in response to the many beings, accordingly manifested innumerable varieties of the physical bodies of beings. Some saw the body of a superlative Paranirmitavaśavartin *devaloka* princess, on down to a superlative Caturmaharājakayika *devaloka* princess. Some saw the body of a superlative Nāga princess, on down to the body of a superlative human princess.[65]

These female forms represent the gamut of fortunate female births in the realm of desire, the *kāmadhātu*. Correspondingly, Vairocana's salient characteristic as lord of the *dharmadhātu* is his unobstructed manifestation in all realms. In the *Ava-*

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63 Ohnuma 2012, 76. The *Lalitavistara* is a fourth-century Mahāyāna hagiography of the Buddha, telling of his descent from Tuṣita Heaven and his rebirth as Śākyamuni. The Chinese version that could have been known to the Baoshan community is the *Puyao jing* 普曜經 (*Lalitavistara-sūtra*, Scripture of the Unfolding of the Divine Play [of the Buddha]), 8 fascicles, translated in 308 by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護, *T.* 186, 3.

64 *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, Flower Ornament Sūtra), *T.* 278, 9: 762c27–763b5.

65 *Huayan jing* 華嚴經 (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, Flower Ornament Sūtra), *T.* 278, 9: 763b5–9. Paranirmitavaśavartin is the sixth and Caturmaharājakayika the first of the six god-realms (Skt. *devaloka*) of the realm of desire (Skt. *kāmadhātu*) above Mount Sumeru. Paranirmitavaśavartin is the abode of Māra the destroyer, Caturmaharājakayika is the abode of the *deva* kings of the four directions.

taṃsaka-sūtra both Māyā and Vairocana represent the infinite variety of the *dharmadhātu*, but Māyā's protean forms reflect its illusory karmic aspect, while Vairocana functions as all-pervasive Dharma, the nature of reality.

At Dazhusheng cave, these contrastive and complementary ways of encompassing all births are represented in both text and image. Tiny figures representing the five *gatis* or rebirth-destinies (god, human, animal, hungry ghost, and hell-dweller) are engraved on the robe of the main Vairocana image on the north wall, signifying the *dharmadhātu* encompassing all phenomenal existence.[66] And as we saw, many rebirth destinies are vividly described in the *Mahāmāyā-sūtra* passage on the south wall.

Fig. 2: Vairocana image on north wall of Dazhusheng cave. Attendant bodhisattva (proper right) and monk (proper left). Heads of images are twentieth-century replacement reproductions. Photo: W. Adamek.

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66 Alternatively, a six-*gati* scheme includes the 'demi-gods' (Skt. *asuras*).

7 A Buddhist daughter and her father

Let us now turn to specific prayers for liberation from rebirth as inscribed by the nun Zhijue 智覺 for her father. Technically, in a Buddhist context nuns 'outrank' their parents because their vocation generates merit, which can be ritually transferred to benefit all beings, the emperor, and their families. Several of the laywomen memorialized on Lanfengshan are identified as mothers of the nuns who dedicated the niches. These laywomen are portrayed as slender but round-faced, wearing high-waisted dresses and coifed hair, resembling the idealized women seen in the figurines and murals from Tang tombs. They kneel behind low tables in Chinese-roofed niches; these housings are generally smaller and less elaborate but have an intimate proximity to those of clerics.[67]

Chinese family relations, famously, centre on filial piety (*xiao* 孝), the prime Confucian virtue. *Xiao* has been the subject of perhaps the most sustained and intensive commentary on values in any living culture. Praised as the key to Chinese familial and social cohesion, it has also been criticized as an invidious instrument of hierarchical social control and gender inequity.[68] In the core Confucian text, the *Lunyu* 論語 (Analects), *xiao* is presented as an essential bulwark against social breakdown. It is also traditionally presented as the basis of learning what love is. Discourse on *xiao* is normatively centred on the behaviour expected of sons and daughters-in-law in caring for the son's parents. In the Tang we see the beginnings of a long and complex trajectory of deploying Buddhist texts and creating apocryphal scriptures dedicated to spiritual care of mothers, represented as both caring and sinful or polluting.[69]

Unusually, in the Baoshan mortuary inscription for the layman Sun Baiyue 孫佰悅 (BS 83), we see a Buddhist nun defying the mortuary norms of Confucian filial piety in order to express the bond between herself and her father in Buddhist terms. Zhijue's memorial for her father is both an expression of filial piety and an expression of the spiritual superiority of Buddhist aspirational practice. To unpack Zhijue's complex gesture, let us examine Dharma roles and relations as inscribed in the Baoshan/Lanfengshan niches.

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67 BS 82, 83, 119, 120; LFS 41, 48, 55, 56, 75, 81.
68 See, for example, Jiang 2021.
69 See Cole 1998.

7.1 Dharma kinship and mortuary commemoration

Baoshan's mortuary niches were generous gifts, built to dedicate and compound the merit generated for and by the deceased. They are specialized hybrids. They incorporate evolving Chinese practices of filial piety and genealogical record-keeping. Their varied architecture-image-text combinations provide semiotic traces of the community that produced them. Reading their writing, we discover keys to the hierarchies and Dharma/kinship relationships in which the deceased were enshrined. Distinctions in Baoshan's representations of relationships reflect normative views of appropriate practices for the four-fold *saṃgha* (monks, nun, laymen, laywomen). It is likely that gradations of practice expressed in the images and titles would have influenced the aspirations of those who maintained and visited the mortuary grove.

The field of representations of writing collectivized in the Baoshan-Lanfengshan *stūpas* could also be considered in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's sense of *habitus*, where continual re-enactments and alterations of a logic of practice, both learned and naturalized, distinguish the functions and privileges of the members of a given group.[70] The practicing deceased are represented in terms of gender and status distinctions linked to particular contemplative-devotional acts. A host of details, including dress and architectural forms, reinforce and nuance information about the status of the deceased within their agency of relations/field of merit. They also model ritual placement of particular bodily dispositions in the reproduction of a devotional-social environment.

Starting from the highest tier (Treatise Masters, *lunshi* 論師) and moving down through the ranks to the lowest (laywomen), we are able to trace connections between inscriptional tropes and the activities represented in Baoshan's niches.

'Treatise Master' was a prestigious rank, and at Baoshan it is reserved for Huixiu 慧休 (547–646) (LFS 26) and one other master (BS 65). A handful of inscriptions for other eminent monks (but no nuns) also refer to scriptural commentaries written by the deceased. Participation in the elite commentarial tradition demanded years of study as well as social support from established masters within the monastic network. Baoshan inscriptions that include references to authorship of commentaries also supply credentials, citing periods of study with masters who were known for expertise in a particular scripture or category of texts, like the Vinaya.

This mirrors long-standing Chinese elite practice: reference to the formative influences and works written by the deceased are standard features of Chinese entombed epitaphs (*muzhi ming* 暮誌銘). We also see mirroring of elite practice in

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70 See Bourdieu 1984 and 1990.

Baoshan's architectural forms, as some of the *stūpa*-niches include adaptations of imperial motifs. For example, shallow-relief tortoise-borne (*bixi* 贔屭) memorial tablets flanked by twin dragons are rendered Buddhist by the addition of a small crowning buddha-image (as in BS 26–28).[71] This style of memorial may have been reserved for monks with aristocratic pedigrees, but unfortunately the inscriptions are too worn for identification.

The most common title given to both monks and nuns at Baoshan/Lanfengshan is 'Dharma Master' (*fashi* 法師), a respected rank connoting scriptural expertise. Inscriptions for both monks and nuns refer to scriptures they had mastered, a process that is likely to have involved recitation, memorization, and copying. If the deceased had given lectures on a particular scripture, this was also recorded. Scripture-copying and recitation shared a core feature with vows and repentance – they could be practiced as rituals of karmic purification.

Moving on to the next rung of the hierarchy, 'Dhyāna Master' (*chanshi* 禪師) denotes specialization in contemplative disciplines. Intensive meditation was certainly part of this culture, but it would be difficult to compartmentalize the techniques used. Visualization, buddha-name chanting, repentance/recollection, vows, making texts and images, and self-regulatory discipline (including fasting) all had contemplative dimensions and were praised for their transformative efficacy. Most of the Baoshan monks are shown in a seated posture that could represent meditation, but only one (BS 77) is designated as a Dhyāna Master. Four of the nuns (LFS 36, 37, 42, 47) are designated as Dhyāna Masters. As I discuss in my book, this suggests that contemplative-somatic discipline was an area in which women could win acknowledgement for their accomplishments.

As we descend the *saṃgha* edifice, the laity are the supporting lower level. Iconographic distinctions between clergy and laity are more marked than between monks and nuns. Laypersons are portrayed in niches that are generally smaller and less elaborate, but they are usually close to the niches of clerics.[72] Images of deceased laity are almost always in niches with Chinese-style roofs (*wukan* 屋龕) rather than *stūpa* domes.[73] They wear lay clothing rather than robes and have hats and coifed hair rather than shaved heads. Some laymen, laywomen, and nuns are shown with rosaries, indicating buddha-name recitation. They are likely to be symbolic of repentance practice. One niche for a layman (BS 119) names the scriptures he recited and the number of repetitions, and also indicates recitations made on his

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71 See Adamek 2021, 385–554 for details.

72 BS 82, 83, 119, 120; LFS 41, 48, 55, 56, 75, 81.

73 See Wu Hung 2002 regarding possible influences for house-shaped mortuary structures in the Northern dynasties.

behalf by his sons after his death. Some laywomen are depicted with joined palms, which may represent confession and repentance before buddha-images, or refuge in the Three Treasures.

Although occupying the lowest rung of the fourfold *saṃgha*, there is a touching personal intimacy conveyed in some of the inscriptions and placements of laywomen. Many of the laywomen portrayed are identified as the mothers of nuns, and their afterlife housings may be closely adjacent to those of their high-status Dharma daughters. In one case, an unidentified cleric and laywomen companionably share a niche seated side-by-side, and this could be a monk or nun and their mother.

These hierarchies and relationships conveyed through representations of levels of scriptural mastery and the practices of the deceased are altitudinal markings on the topographical map of Baoshan's merit-field. This map included extreme heights of bodhisattvic practice that few would reach. At the same time, distinctions signal all-inclusive membership in the *saṃgha* of the necropolis. All are rendered as practicing bodies in the field of merit and the agency of relations, each according to their capacity.

7.2 The memorial for Sun Baiyue

Though donors do not usually identify themselves in terms their Dharma rank, I surmise that the nun Zhijue was probably a 'Dharma Master' (*fashi*), the high designation given to erudite nuns. I venture this because the literary quality of her inscription is evident, and it also has a personal quality, conveying the impression that she wrote it herself. Zhijue's memorial for her father, the official Sun Baiyue, was dedicated in 646 and is titled 'Gu da youpose Jinzhou Hongdong xianling Sun Baiyue huishen taming' 故大優婆塞晉州洪洞縣令孫佰悅灰身塔銘 (Ash-body *stūpa* inscription for late great Upāsaka, the Hongdong District Magistrate in Jinzhou, Sun Baiyue).[74]

故大優婆塞晉州洪洞縣令孫佰悅灰身塔銘
優婆塞姓孫字佰悅相州堯城人也世衣纓苗裔無／墜身居薄［=簿?］官情達苦空每厭塵勞心
希彼岸雖處居／家不願三界見有妻子常忻梵行悅去隋朝身故未／經大殯悅有出家女尼字
智覺住聖道寺念父生育／之恩又憶出家解脫之路不重俗家遷夯意慕大聖／泥洹今以大唐
貞觀廿年十月十五日起塔於寶山／之谷冀居［優］婆塞之類同沾釋氏之流今故勒石當使／

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74 Facing south. 101.5 cm. Inscription is proper left of niche, in between BS 82 and BS 83. Finely carved *stūpa*, seated figure in lay robes and hat with rosary, in 2005 partially buried. *BSLQS* drawing p. 178, photo p. 360, fig. 157. Transcription and Japanese translation in Ōuchi Fumio 1997, 315–316.

劫盡年終表心無墜善哉善哉乃為銘曰 / 哲人厭世不貴俗榮苦空非有隨緣受生身世磨滅 /
未薾雄英高墳曠壟唯矚荒荊且乖［=乘?］俗類同被如行 / 俱知不善唯願明明

The Upāsaka's surname was Sun, his courtesy name was Baiyue. He was from Yao 堯 city in
Xiangzhou 相州. For generations his family wore the tassel (of office), and the descendants
did not lose their standing. He had the position of a record-keeping official. He yearned to
reach the emptiness of suffering, always detested worldly vexations, and in his heart hoped
for the other shore. Although his place was in the household, he was reluctant to mix with the
Triple-World.[75] He had to have a wife and children, but he often enjoyed practicing chastity.
Yue died during the Sui, but [his body] had not yet undergone burial. Yue had a daughter who
was a renunciate, a nun named Zhijue, who lived in Shengdao 聖道 temple. She remembered
her father's kindness in giving her life and raising her. She also kept in mind the renunciate's
path of liberation. She did not give weight to her lay family relocating the tomb, she admired
[instead] the *nirvāṇa* of the Great Holy One (the Buddha).[76] Now on the fifteenth day of the
tenth month of the twentieth year of the Zhenguan era of the Great Tang (646), she raised this
stūpa in a valley of Baoshan.
With hope that residing with *[u]pāsakas* he is moistened in the same stream as the Śākya clan,
therefore she had the stone carved. Let it be that [even] when the *kalpa* is exhausted and years
come to an end, it will display his mind without having gone to ruin. Excellent, excellent!
Hence she made this eulogy saying:

> The Sage detests the world, he does not value common glory.
> Suffering and emptiness have no being, according to karmic conditions one receives birth;
> One's life is obliterated without having achieved any greatness.
> The tall tumulus and spacious tomb gaze only at a wasteland of brambles.
> He is different from the common kind, and shares the same cover with those of like conduct;
> They all know what is not good, desiring only to brighten the bright.

An educated member of the aristocracy, Zhijue almost certainly wrote the me-
morial herself, including the epitaph verses. The relative scarcity of surviving
Tang compositions by women is likely due to lack of access to the circulation
networks of literati culture rather than lack of skill. Zhijue's composition relies
on tropes, but it is no more cliched than other Baoshan epitaphs for monks that
ended up in official historical and literary records. Moreover, the story it tells is
intriguing.

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75 This is a general Buddhist designation for all the realms of existence, the realms of desire, form,
and formlessness.
76 In other words, she disregarded the family's desire for the traditional practice of burial reloca-
tion and carried out cremation instead.

Fig. 3: BS 83. Partially buried mortuary *stūpa* for District Magistrate Sun Baiyue 孫佰悅; photo: W. Adamek.

Zhijue has commemorated the fact that she defied her family's wishes to have her father housed in the family tomb. Instead, on the strength of their shared Buddhist faith, she had him cremated and enshrined his ashes in a memorial *stūpa*. This defiance was not a light matter – from the point of view of a Confucian family, not only did she deprive him of the proper housing and offerings that constituted her family's claim on his afterlife benevolence, she destroyed his body. Entombment was an expression of filial piety, honouring the belief that bodies should be kept whole in order to express reverence to parents for the gift of life. Instead, enshrining his ashes in the kind of reliquary niche that was commonly used for monks, Zhijue enshrines his Buddhist faith and desire for a pure life.

Zhijue's devotion to her father and his vocation as a serious lay practitioner caused her to somehow deploy her Buddhist status to contravene social norms. She used her literary and material resources to create a lasting record of her admiration for his Buddhist life. She immortalizes her father's lifelong desire for renunciation. Had it been fulfilled, it would have precluded her own birth and opportunity for renunciation. It seems likely that her own vocation was modelled on his example. She, the one who was ordained and therefore nominally superior in the Buddhist

hierarchy, argued on her father's behalf that committed lay practice was equal in value to that of monastics. At the same time, Zhijue's explicit defence of a layman's right to receive a burial fit for a monk could also reflect the Lanfengshan nuns' implicit collective statement that female Buddhist masters were as worthy of post-mortem veneration as their brethren. Both gestures signify that one should venerate the practice rather than the position.

8 Conclusion: The agency of relations

> Anonymity runs in their blood. The desire to be veiled still possesses them. They are not even now as concerned about the health of their fame as men are, and, speaking generally, will pass a tombstone or a signpost without feeling an irresistible desire to cut their names on it [...]
>
> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

These readings of the tombstones and signposts carved at Baoshan are drawn from my recent book *Practicescapes and the Buddhists of Baoshan*. 'Practicescapes' in the title is a coinage based on Timothy Ingold's 'taskscape'. In *The Perception of the Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, Skill*, he writes:

> It is to the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking, that I refer by the concept of taskscape. Just as the landscape is an array of related features, so – by analogy – the taskscape is an array of related activities.[77]

I explored Baoshan as an interlocking of related activities pertaining to livelihood, dwelling, and skill. Crucially, however, Buddhist 'practicescapes' entail *escape* from worldly ways of living and ultimately from the cycle of birth and death itself. In the activities inscribed at Baoshan we see bodily cultivation of the techniques of transcendence of the body, the sculpting of a landscape into a necropolis through an ensemble of specialized skills, and maintenance of a dwelling intentionally removed from the ordinary world.

Through immersion in the Baoshan materials for many years, it became for me a practicescape of relationality. Relating to and with its remnants of sacred constructions, works, powers, techniques, and disciplines meant shifting my focus away from the agency of actors who made their objects/objectives and focussing

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77 Ingold 2000, 195. Oddly, I did not encounter the archaeologist Christopher Tilley's work on the 'phenomenology of landscape' until after my project was completed. Tilley is working primarily with Mesolithic and Neolithic remnants, but there are many resonances; see Tilley 1994, 22–26.

instead on the agency of relations, including our own ways of relating in our own worlds. By 'agency of relations' I do not mean simply the power of collective action, but rather engagement in the ways that constructions – textual, visual, ritual and reflexive – emerge out of processes of intention and action and in turn have efficacy within these processes.

This practice was inspired by Bruno Latour's ANT (actor-network theory) and Ingold's SPIDER (skilled practice involving developmentally embodied responsiveness). Latour proposed in *Reassembling the Social* that we need to recognize the ways that our classifications and objectifications are projections from processes and perspectives that are more like an ant's than a bird's.[78] In response to ANT, which Latour helped pioneer, in *Being Alive* Ingold stages a playful dialogue between ANT and SPIDER. In this dialogue, ANT is confident that the inclusiveness of his new theory, not separating the social world of nature from the material world of nature, makes his network comparable to the spider's web. SPIDER protests that they are not the same. She argues:

> The lines of my web are not at all like those of your network. In your world there are just bits and pieces of diverse kinds that are brought together or assembled so as to make things happen. Every 'relation' in the network, then, is a connection between one thing and another. As such, the relation has no material presence. For the materiality of the world, in your view, is fully comprehended in the things connected. The lines of my web, to the contrary, are themselves spun from materials exuded from my own body, and are laid down as I move about. You could even say that they are an extension of my very being as it trails into the environment – they comprise, if you will, my 'wideware'. They are the lines along which I live, and conduct my perception and action in the world.[79]

In this SPIDER-like manner, as I seek to trace lines along which the inhabitants of Baoshan lived, what emerges cannot be separated from how I 'conduct my perception and action in the world'. The implied SPIDERs in these webs of texts and images are lay and ordained practitioners, who took vows of various kinds and worked on 'skilled practice involving developmentally embodied responsiveness'. My practice in this work is also responsive, and the webs drawn are neither 'mine' nor 'theirs'. Study of texts in relation to images in relation to a current project (like finding traces of women through epigraphy) requires this web-work of thinking about how we are thinking while we bring forth the practices embodied. The web may be orderly, but it is best to acknowledge that it is more art or contemplative practice than science, even if 'things' are quantified.

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78 Latour 2005, 176.

79 Ingold 2011, 91.

Shifting focus to the efficacy of networks and webware entails a broad definition of agency as the capacity to generate effects and be affected within a given field of conditions – to produce and thereby be produced. The provisional condition of acting as a self-reflective agent is itself an effect of the agency of interrelation.

My other primary inspiration for attempting to illustrate the 'agency of relations' through archaeological and epigraphic work was the foundational Buddhist teaching that the experience of the agency of a 'self' is an effect of the momentum of aggregated processes rather than the property of a thing-in-itself or immutable essence. Furthermore, experience of 'objects' is considered a dependent functional correlate of the continuum of aggregated sensory-perceptual processes. Though co-poietic effects of this nature have recently been celebrated as 'new materiality', I suggest that this is new wine in old bottles, or new bottles for an ancient vineyard. In my book I delve further into emic Chinese Buddhist theories about how the co-constitutive relations of subject-object experience works.

Thanks to recent efflorescence of work on images, donor inscriptions, and mortuary inscriptions, the 'skilled practices involving developmentally embodied responsiveness' of pre-modern Chinese women are becoming ever more visible to us. Their relational agencies emerge in practices as diverse as leading rebellions to embroidering with their own hair.[80] Dorothy Ko has challenged the image of the 'victimized feudal woman' by looking at women's literary lives in the seventeenth century.[81] Women of the seventh century left fewer words, but they managed to cut their names in stone nonetheless. The women who practiced at Baoshan used devotional images, scriptural inspirations, complex ritual-contemplative practices, mortuary constructions, Buddhist discipline, and literati training to imprint their personalities and collective purpose on the side of a mountain. In this relational purpose, signs of gendered agency are not lacking.

The agency of relations that I have woven here may not assert a gendered dissent in words, but the contextual practicescape does. This is a rare instance where one can say with confidence that these engraved images and voices are marked within a gendered place. In 'niches of their own', the nuns of the Baoshan community revealed many glimpses of their practice in the inscriptions and representations they crafted and commissioned. They are commemorated for denying physicality in fasting and meditation, calling on the buddhas and repenting deeds they cannot remember, meditating until their bodies turn to stone, ceaselessly reciting and copying scripture, and bleakly contemplating the vicissitudes of rebirth. Through figures like Mahāmāyā, they could conceive of their bodies and minds as

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80 See Hughes 2021 and Li 2022, respectively.

81 Ko 1994.

both generating delusion and birthing buddhas – their own true nature. Like the nun Zhijue, they enshrined their Dharma and blood relations with prayers that they be enfolded in the eternal field of merit, constituting a perpetual intra-active devotional agency.

But wasn't all this marvellous effort expended in the desire to escape the condition of the body in general and the female body in particular? Yes, but perhaps we should not dismiss their pursuits and fears as relics of the past too readily. These traces reveal the tension between the 'power of denial'[82] in the drive for self-transcendence, and the unstable subjectivity that this desire to rework the self produces. Taking oneself as one's medium is a seductive and dangerous practice, one that tempts penitents and poets, men and women, and medievals and moderns alike.

Fig. 4: LFS 38–42. Niches for nuns and laywoman; photo: W. Adamek. For stylistic counterparts at neighbouring site, see Tsiang, ed. 2010.

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82 See Faure 2003.

Conventions and transcription process

The text for the Baoshan inscriptions I translate was produced by having the inscriptions from *BSLQS* converted into a digital format and then making extensive corrections to each inscription by hand, *in situ*. This was necessary because the simplified-character versions of the inscriptions in *BSLQS* are often faulty and incomplete. *In situ* transcriptions were made in July 2005 with the invaluable help of Shen Ruiwen 沈睿文, professor of Chinese archaeology at Peking University, and his wife Wang Jing 王静, associate professor of medieval urban history at Renmin University.

Photographs were taken in 2005 by Frederick M. Smith of the University of Iowa and myself. I also consulted photographs of rubbings from the online database of the Jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo 人文科学研究所 (Humanistic Science Research Institute) of Kyoto University (http://kanji.zinbun.kyoto-u.ac.jp/db-machine/imgsrv/takuhon/). Information on the niches' orientations and height in centimetres was taken from the fold-out charts in *BSLQS* (pp. 168 ff.).

All Baoshan inscriptions are identified by Dazhusheng passage title, or Baoshan (BS) number, or Lanfengshan (LFS) number, and are found catalogued, translated in full, and annotated in my book *Practicescapes and the Buddhists of Baoshan*.[83]

Abbreviations

BS = Baoshan.

BSLQS = Baoshan Lingquan si 寶山靈泉寺 (Lingquan Temple at Baoshan), ed. Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo 河南省古代建築保護研究所 (Henan Research Institute for the Preservation of Ancient Architecture), Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin, 1991.

DN = Dīgha Nikāya (Long Discourses), see Walshe (tr.) 1995.

LFS = Lanfengshan.

T. = Taishō shinshū daizōkyō 太正新修大蔵経 (Taishō Era Revised Tripiṭaka), ed. Takakusu Junjiro Junjirō 高楠順次郎, Tokyo: Daizō shuppan kai, 1922–1933.

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83 Adamek 2021.

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Guanfo sanmei hai jing 觀佛三昧海經 (Sūtra on the Ocean-Like Samādhi of Contemplating the Buddha); it is likely to be a Central Asian apocryphon, translation ascribed to Buddhabhadra 佛陀跋陀羅 (359–429), *T.* 643, 15.

Guan wuliangshou fo jing 觀無量壽佛經 (Sūtra on Contemplating the Buddha of Infinite Life), it is likely to be a Central Asian apocryphon, translation ascribed to Kālayaśas 彊良耶舍 (383–442), *T.* 365, 12.

Huayan jing 華嚴經 (*Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, Flower Ornament Sūtra), 60 *juan* version, translated *c.* 418–421, ascribed to Buddhabhadra, *T.* 278, 9; 80 *juan* version, translated *c.* 695–699, ascribed to Śikṣānanda 實叉難陀 (652–710), *T.* 279, 10; 40 *juan* version, translated *c.* 798, ascribed to Prajñā 般若, *T.* 293, 10; see Hamar 2007.

Jueding pini jing 決定毘尼經 (*Vinayaviniścaya-Upāliparipṛcchā-sūtra*, Sūtra of the Inquiry of Upāli Regarding Determination of the Vinaya), translation ascribed to Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 (*c.* 265–313), but possibly early fifth century, *T.* 325, 12.

Mohemoye jing 摩訶摩耶經 (*Mahāmāyā-sūtra*, Sūtra of the Buddha's Mother Mahāmāyā), translation ascribed to Tanjing 曇景 (479–502), possible apocryphon, *T.* 383, 12.

Mohosengqi lü 摩訶僧祇律 (*Mahāsaṃghika Vinaya*), translated *c.* 416–418, ascribed to Faxian and Buddhabhadra, *T.* 1425, 22.

Puyao jing 普曜經 (*Lalitavistara-sūtra*, Scripture of the Unfolding of the Divine Play [of the Buddha]), translated in 308 by Dharmarakṣa, *T.* 186, 3.

Shidi jing lun 十地經論 (= 地論) (*Daśabhūmikasūtra-śāstra*, a.k.a. *Daśabhūmikasūtropadeśa*, *Daśabhūmivyākhyāna*, Treatise on the Sūtra on the Ten Stages), attributed to Vasubandhu, *c.* fourth–fifth century, translation ascribed to Ratnamati 勒那摩提 (active early sixth century), Bodhiruci 菩提流支 (d. 527) et al., *T.* 1522, 26.

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Cécile Michel

Cuneiform Manuscript Culture and Gender Studies

Abstract: Early studies on women in cuneiform manuscript culture were influenced by historical preconceptions based on the place of women in the classical world or Islam and reinforced by historiographical myths, such as sacred prostitution and a pseudo 'women's language'. The term 'gender' entered Assyriologist discourse in the early 1990s. The idea was to understand why women often appeared in subordinate positions compared to men, why they were less present in texts and iconography, and how Mesopotamian society attributed roles to each sex. Cuneiform texts document women unevenly, depending on the period, place and context considered. Women are visible through their own writings in specific milieus of the early second millennium BCE.

1 Introduction

The history of ancient Mesopotamia and neighbouring regions over more than three millennia is documented by a considerable mass of cuneiform texts of a very varied nature. Cuneiform writing, which used different systems (logographic, syllabic, alphabetic), was adopted by populations speaking a dozen different languages. Their output includes practical texts (such as letters and contracts), royal inscriptions, literary and scholarly texts and school exercises. Probably a million cuneiform texts have been unearthed to date, covering a very wide range of subjects. Assyriologists[1] have been in the phase of deciphering texts for over a hundred and seventy years because of the sheer volume of cuneiform clay tablets and inscriptions discovered, and the complexity of understanding cuneiform texts. Historiographical studies started only a few decades ago, as well as the introduction of concepts and models to interpret the data offered by the texts.

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1 The term Assyriology includes more widely 'all scholarly fields related to the study of the ancient Near East in the time of the cuneiform cultures, from the fourth millennium BCE to the first century CE [...] philological disciplines [...], the history of the ancient Near East, and the archaeology and art history of the respective regions and periods', website of the International Association for Assyriology: <https://iaassyriology.com/> (accessed on 8 March 2023).

In order to gain a better understanding of the development of women and gender studies in Assyriology, it is useful, first of all, to outline the different stages of the feminist and post-feminist movement in which the concept of gender was created, adopted by historians and developed. Scholars who have worked on cuneiform manuscripts since the mid-twentieth century took on the long journey from the history of woman to gender studies. Early studies on women were greatly influenced by historical preconceptions rooted in Classical Antiquity, on the one hand, and Orientalism, on the other, sometimes giving rise to some historiographical myths, such as the idea of sacred prostitution in Babylon or the existence of a Sumerian women's language.

The term 'gender' was adopted by Assyriologists in the early 1990s, and the number of studies dedicated to the topic of gender have grown exponentially since 2000, especially with the creation of regular conferences dedicated to 'Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East' (GeMANE) in 2014. A diversity of methodologies and approaches have been applied to the cuneiform written artefacts, especially to those in which women are visible. The authors of cuneiform texts are generally anonymous, but texts have been attributed to men by default, because the male's voice clearly dominates in the cuneiform texts.[2] The history of ancient Mesopotamia is, therefore, primarily a history of men. However, this assumption needs to be put into perspective. Not only are women present in different contexts and environments, especially in early second millennium manuscripts, but recent studies have also shown that some women were literate. Thus, a history of women is possible in a gender perspective based on texts written by men, but also by women.

Furthermore, it seems impossible to hold a unitary discourse on the diverse civilisations that developed in Mesopotamia over three millennia and expressed themselves in different languages (Sumerian and Akkadian first), and many different factors need to be considered, such as time, place, context, ethnicity, legal status and social rank.

2 History of women and gender in manuscript cultures

The development of the feminist and post-feminist movement in the social sciences and humanities is currently perceived as three overlapping waves.[3] When trying to establish women's studies in the academic world during the 1960s and 1970s, scholars looked for women in primary sources in order to make invisible women visible

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2 Asher-Greve 2002, 19.

3 van de Mieroop 1999, 138–160.

and include them in history. The publication in 1965 of the *Histoire mondiale de la femme* under the direction of Pierre Grimal was an important turning point.[4] In the introduction, this historian wrote:

> Et l'une des plus importantes 'émancipations' de la femme serait peut-être que l'histoire reconnût et mesurât son rôle réel dans le devenir humain [...] En définitive, c'était un certain idéal de la vie féminine qui commandait et servait de garant à la discipline établie par les hommes.[5]

The term 'gender' had already been used in 1968 by the American psychoanalyst Robert Stoller in his book *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity*.[6] 'Gender' can be defined as the construction of a social and cultural identity superimposed on the biological data of sex. It represents the identity built by the social environment of individuals and refers to the non-biological differences between women and men, in contrast to sex. Furthermore, according to Ann Oakley, author of *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972), 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are not natural or self-evident categories but the results of mechanisms of construction and social reproduction, which are variable in time and space.

It was only in the 1980s that the word 'gender' was used by historians working on written artefacts. Françoise Thébaud explained in her book *Écrire l'histoire des femmes et du genre* published in 1998 that being a man or a woman, or considered as such, does not have the same meaning at all times and in all cultures.[7] This analytical perspective is applied by historians to ancient written artefacts in order to understand how a given society attributes roles to each sex. Ancient written artefacts mainly convey a standardised discourse influenced by the ideology of the dominant groups, gender being one way of signifying power relationships. Since the great majority of ancient texts are written from a male elite perspective, historians have looked for the realities of women's existence, even though this might be challenging when sources are very unbalanced.

Two journals were founded in 1989: *Journal of Women's History* and *Gender & History*, which suggested looking at texts differently as they reflect the ideology of the dominant groups (male) and promoting studies on the history of femininity and

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4 Grimal (ed.) 1965.

5 Grimal (ed.) 1965, 8: 'And one of the most important "emancipations" of the woman would be perhaps that the history recognized and measured her real role in the human becoming [...] In short, it was a certain ideal of the feminine life that commanded and served as a guarantee to the discipline established by the men'.

6 Stoller 1968.

7 Thébaud 1998.

masculinity and of gender relations. The post-feminist trends have questioned this binary male/female structure as well as the motivations and presuppositions of the scientific process itself since the late 1980s. In 1990, the philosopher Judith Butler proposed in the book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* considering gender not as a static characteristic but as a socially constructed performance, which implies that one has to perform and reaffirm his or her role as a male or a female.[8] Butler is the reference for the queer movement, which considers that the traditional opposition of sex versus gender is a purely political construction.

The focus is no longer centred on an androcentric approach but on differences, whatever they may be: social, ethnical, political, cultural or gender-related reasons. The black feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw created the concept of intersectionality in 1989: a qualitative analytical framework built to understand how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. This concept was adopted by feminists at the very beginning of the twenty-first century and has only grown in the last twenty years. Today, it includes many aspects of social identity, such as race, gender, sex, sexuality, class, ability, nationality, citizenship, religion, and body type. The historians who have adopted this methodology investigate the way in which the difference has been culturally invested by societies in ancient written artefacts.

Even though the 'gender' concept has been criticised, Joan Scott wrote that, as representing only one of the constitutive elements of social relationships, it remains 'a useful category of analysis because it requires us to historicise the ways sex and sexual difference have been conceived'.[9] Indeed, gender does not reduce to some known quantity of masculine or feminine. The interpretation that we give to these terms needs to be deduced from the manuscripts we analyse.

However, the use of such concepts may be misunderstood by the wider public of some countries. When American historians, for example, seeking for models which could help one to understand the ancient texts use the expression 'gender theories', scholars in France prefer to speak of 'gender studies' because 'gender theories' has been used for this last decade by the Vatican and right-wing French politicians, detractors of the concept of gender.[10] Such a phenomenon is not limited to France, as the philosopher Judith Butler noted in a contribution in *The Guardian* in 2021 in which she addressed the backlash to gender studies in a global perspective:

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8 Butler 1990.

9 Scott 2010.

10 Michel forthcoming.

The anti-gender ideology movement crosses borders, linking organizations in Latin America, Europe, Africa, and east Asia. The opposition to 'gender' is voiced by governments as diverse as Macron's France and Duda's Poland, circulating in right-wing parties in Italy [...], most infamously at the European University in Budapest in 2017 before it relocated to Vienna.[11]

3 Gender studies applied to the cuneiform manuscript culture

The discipline gathering historians working on cuneiform written culture has long been dominated by men, perhaps because a significant proportion of scholars from the early generations came to the study of cuneiform texts through biblical studies. According to Marc van de Mieroop, Assyriology has also gone through three waves, from the history of women to the construction of gender.[12] Looking for women's contributions to history and the focus on 'the woman' (singular) in the cuneiform written artefacts goes back to the 6th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale (RAI), which took place in Paris in 1956, on the following theme: 'La Femme dans l'Ancien Orient'.[13] Less than a decade later, Jean Bottéro gathered data on the topic for the first volume of *Histoire mondiale de la femme* edited by Pierre Grimal.[14]

Despite the fact that historians had already adopted the word 'gender' in 1980, French Assyriologists were still looking for 'the woman' (in the singular) in ancient clay manuscripts. Two workshops were organised by Edmond Levy in Strasbourg, whose proceedings were published in 1983 in the volume *La Femme dans les sociétés antiques*.[15] During the first workshop Jean-Marie Durand and Jean Margueron presented a paper on the harem in the Mari palace.[16] The anachronistic use of that term was not without creating major problems.[17] A second Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale,

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11 Butler 2021. Gender studies are no longer a priority in the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) since the beginning of 2022. For the situation in Denmark and Japan, see Brisch and Karahashi 2023b.

12 van de Mieroop 1999, 137–158; see also Bahrani 2001, 7–27; Lion 2007.

13 6th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Paris, 27–30 June 1956, 'La Femme dans l'Ancien Orient'. No proceedings have been published. Summaries were published in *Revue d'Assyriologie*, 50 (1956), 220–221 (anonymous); *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, 13 (1956), 178–179 by Paul Garelli and Louis Le Breton; and *Orientalia*, Nova Series, 25 (1956), 411–414 by Alfred Pohl. The following lectures have appeared as revised short articles: Falkenstein 1958; von Soden 1958.

14 Bottéro 1965.

15 Levy (ed.) 1983.

16 A written version was published the same year: Durand and Margueron 1980.

17 Westenholz 1990, 513–516.

the 33rd RAI, took place again in Paris in July 1986 on the same subject as the one held thirty years earlier: 'La Femme dans le Proche-Orient antique'.[18] The studies in the proceedings' volume focused on not only women and queens, but also other groups of women, such as Sippar priestesses and female workforces in large institutions. When linked to the private sphere, publications focused on family contracts, legal documents, and law codes to assess the place of women in the family and society. Most of the twenty-four papers aimed at making women visible and to accumulate data. The singular of the title was contradicted by the variety of sources used and the topic treated. This volume was severely criticised by some reviewers who reproached the editors and authors for ignoring feminist studies.[19]

During the second wave, scholars tried to understand why women often appear in subordinated positions compared to men, why they were less present in texts and iconography, and how Mesopotamian society attributed roles to each sex. The notion of gender was introduced in cuneiform studies on the American continent in the 1990s, and only a decade later in Europe. The late adoption of 'gender' by historians working on cuneiform text is due to different factors. Firstly, ancient Near Eastern studies are 'young' if compared to classics, as Assyriologists are still in the state of deciphering new texts, and, thus, are one step behind in historiographical research. Secondly, and linked to the latter, ancient Near Eastern studies are often forgotten in handbooks dealing with Antiquity, perceived as too far in terms of both chronology and geography. Fifteen years after the RAI in Paris dedicated to 'the woman', the 47th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale took place in Helsinki and Tartu in July 2001 on the topic 'Sex and Gender in the Ancient Near East' and the proceedings with the same title were published in 2002.[20] The evolution of the contribution titles is very significant as well as the size of the two-volume book, not including five papers of a session dedicated to masculinity published elsewhere. Theoretical debates were taken into account by some authors who tried to test their validity for written cuneiform artefacts. Several contributions were dedicated to the body and its representation or feminine and masculine sexuality. The same year, Zainab Bahrani (2001) published *Women of Babylon*, a fundamental book for a gender approach of ancient Near Eastern history, art history and archaeology.

A journal dedicated to gender in Classical Antiquity, Egypt and the ancient Near East was launched during the same period: *NIN: Journal of Gender Studies in Antiquity.* NIN means 'sister' and 'queen' in Sumerian, but it is present in both gods and

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18 A summary was published in *Akkadica*, 50 (1986), 22–26 and the proceedings in Durand (ed.) 1987.

19 Westenholz 1990.

20 Parpola and Whiting (eds) 2002.

goddesses' names.[21] The title of the journal was, thus, chosen to show that gender attribution is variable and represents a cultural phenomenon. The first of the four issues published was dedicated to Inanna/Ishtar, goddess of war and love, a violent deity, associated to the world of war reserved to men, and, simultaneously, the essence of femininity as built by men, without children, dangerous and transgressive.[22]

Initiatives gathering scholars carrying research on women and gender in Assyriology during several RAIs led to the creation of the series of workshops dedicated to 'Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East' in 2014.[23] The proceedings of these workshops mix approaches that belong to the different waves of feminism and post-feminism. Conversely, Marten Stol claimed his interest in collecting facts in his comprehensive study on *Women in the Ancient Near East*, explaining that 'theorizing should not precede facts', and, thus, inscribed himself in the first 'wave', which consists of making women visible.[24] Published the same year, a collective volume dedicated to *Women in antiquity* includes fourteen chapters on Mesopotamia and Anatolia, showing various approaches to women and gender more connected to the second and third 'wave'.[25]

Several observations can be made from recent works published on the topic of gender in ancient Near Eastern written artefacts. There are still rare studies devoted to men and masculinities; however, by default, many studies are mostly devoted to men, although this is not specified in their titles. Additionally, Butler's approach has not been much used by Assyriologists, with the idea that it is not well adapted for the study of ancient societies.[26] However, Niek Veldhuis has suggested investigating it in cuneiform texts

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21 It is, for example, used in the following names: the goddess Ninlil and the important warrior gods, Ninurta and Ningirsu.

22 Bahrani 2001, 141–160.

23 The GeMANE workshops were initiated by Agnès Garcia-Ventura from Barcelona and Saana Svärd from Helsinki. The three first workshops are published (Budin et al. (eds) 2018; Svärd and Garcia-Ventura (eds) 2018; de Graef et al. 2022), while the fourth and fifth ones will form one volume which is already in press.

24 Stol 2016, 4.

25 Budin and MacIntosh Turfa (eds) 2016. An important place was deliberately devoted to Mesopotamia and Egypt in this book in reaction, according to the editors, to the small place traditionally given to these civilizations in general works. Indeed, as an example, *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, edited by James and Dillon (2012), includes only a small chapter on 'Women in Ancient Mesopotamia', by Amy R. Gansell (2012), which is limited to royal tombs in archaeology.

26 Except Bahrani 2001, 19–23. She is among the first to apply post-feminist theories to the study of ancient Near Eastern visual art (Bahrani 2001, 121–140).

what types of behaviour are 'construed' as 'masculine' or 'feminine', and we may acknowledge the agency of the ancient actors who may have moved along that spectrum. [...] Gender as performance may [...] provide less-static identifications of the people, professions, or practices we are studying.[27]

Depending on the country and the research tradition, the study of ancient texts may or may not involve theoretical approaches. Saana Svärd and Agnès Garcia-Ventura pointed out in the introduction to the first GeMANE volume proceedings the importance of not forcing 'theory on primary sources. Instead, a nuanced understanding and balanced application of theoretical and methodological approaches will enable scholars to identify how Assyriological knowledge of the past is produced'.[28] This also raises a more general question linked to the objectivity of the historian studying cuneiform sources. We are not objective. Our approach to ancient written artefacts varies according to the traditions implemented. We ask specific questions regarding cuneiform texts based on systems of representations in our own culture. As noted by Agnès Garcia-Ventura, invoking the notion of 'situated knowledges' developed by Donna Haraway, it is important to be aware and explicit about our subjectivity, especially in manuscript studies dealing with antiquity.[29]

4 Historiographical myths in Assyriology: prostitutes and women's language

Despite the introduction of the notion of gender in cuneiform studies for a quarter of a century, a few studies on women are still influenced by historical preconceptions built during the past centuries on the place of women in the classical world or Islam. In addition to the idea that women were always economically dependent on men, the choice of vocabulary, for example, reflects these assumptions, such as the designation of the palace female population from the third millennium BCE on by the word 'harem' or the use of the word 'veil' to refer to any textile covering the

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27 Veldhuis 2018, 452–453.
28 Svärd and Garcia-Ventura (eds) 2018, 9. See the review of this volume by Michel 2021. Garcia-Ventura (2018, 190) also notes that: 'the extremely theoretical nature of these proposals can help us to deconstruct certain preconceptions and to construct new theoretical frameworks'.
29 Haraway 1988; Garcia-Ventura 2018, 188. Agnès Garcia-Ventura is developing a project on historiographical myths and gender stereotypes which has inspired the following paragraphs on 'women's language'.

woman's head.[30] The use of certain terms rather than others may have an important impact on cuneiform studies as they condition the way we think. Both 'harem' and 'veil' offer a vision of Mesopotamian women that borrows characters from the Islamic world. Some historiographical myths, sometimes inspired by Orientalism, still survive in certain publications.

4.1 Prostitution in Babylonian temples

Such features are eventually borrowed from ancient Greece through its historians. Thus, the role of women in ancient Babylonian temples has been regarded as prostitution because of the description given by Herodotus in the fifth century BCE:

> The foulest Babylonian custom is that which compels every woman of the land to sit in the temple of Aphrodite and have intercourse with some stranger once in her life [...] there is a great multitude of women coming and going; passages marked by line run every way through the crowd, by which the men pass and make their choice. Once a woman has taken her place there, she does not go away to her home before some stranger has cast money into her lap, and had intercourse with her outside the temple [...] After their intercourse, having discharged her sacred duty to the goddess, she goes away to her home; and thereafter there is no bribe however great that will get her.[31]

Taking Herodotus's story for real, in the twentieth century, Assyriologists translated many different Sumerian and Akkadian terms as 'female prostitute'.[32] However, a better understanding of the roles of women working for the temple can only be achieved by taking into account the social and historical contexts of the cuneiform texts analysed.[33] Today, several of these terms have been reassessed and are translated differently.

This idea of sacred prostitution, as well as the use of the word 'harem' to refer to the female population of ancient palaces, derive from an Orientalist approach to ancient Near Eastern sources.[34] Mesopotamian statuettes showing a highly visible pubic triangle, in contrast to Greek statuary, contributed to the hyper-sexualisation of the 'Orient' in the imaginary of Western cultures (see Fig. 1).

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30 For a critique of the use of these words, see Westenholz 1990, 513–516; van de Mieroop 1999, 147–155. More specifically on 'harem', see Garcia-Ventura 2017a.

31 Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 199, Godley (tr.) 1920.

32 See Brisch and Karahashi 2023b, 1–2, for an impact of this historiographical myth on modern studies of sex work.

33 Brisch 2021.

34 Assante 2006.

Fig. 1: Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827; © Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN – Grand Palais / Chipault – Soligny; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delacroix_-_La_Mort_de_Sardanapale_ (1827).jpg>.

One wonders why this imaginary is still resistant today, despite a much better knowledge of the primary sources and criticisms of 'Orientalist' discourse.

4.2 The idea of a 'women's language'

Another historiographical myth, still relayed in some Assyriological publications, is the idea of a 'women's language'.[35] Its origin derives from a wrong interpretation of the word 'Emesal'.[36] This term is applied to a variant of Sumerian (eme-gi₇). Dozens

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35 See, for example, the announcement of a course in 2021 at the Institut des langues rares in 2020–2021, <https://ilara.hypotheses.org/formations/cours-de-lilara/proche-orient-ancien/emesal> (accessed on 9 March 2021).

36 Garcia-Ventura 2017b.

of thousands of cuneiform tablets written in Sumerian have been unearthed; they date from the second half of the fourth millennium BCE to the first century CE. However, Sumerian was only spoken during the fourth and third millennia. Regarding texts in Emesal, these are attested only since the beginning of the second millennium BCE, when Sumerian was already a dead language, but studied by the apprentice scribes. The word Emesal is composed by two Sumerian words or signs which have been translated in the early years as 'language' (eme) and 'woman' (sal), an etymology that gave rise from the end of the nineteenth century on to the translation of the expression as 'women's language', a translation much debated until today.

The texts written in this dialect are very heterogeneous, however, some Assyriologists noted that they regularly concern women in funerary contexts and gala priests, which led several scholars to see there a 'non-normative sexual identification or activity'.[37] Following a remark by Agnès Garcia-Ventura, an interpretation linking language and gender has created the existence of a 'genderlect' in ancient Mesopotamia with the wrong idea that Emesal is linked to women, and Emegi or 'standard Sumerian' almost always to men, thus, reproducing the culturally constructed binary opposition between women and particular, on the one hand, and men and general, on the other.[38] This division has contributed to the creation of two distinct spheres of unequal sizes within society, one reserved for men and the other for women.[39]

The second element, 'sal' can be interpreted differently, as it means also 'thin' and the word Emesal could then be translated as 'thin tongue'.[40] There is no consensus nowadays on what Emesal was exactly, and the use of this language has been reassessed recently. Piotr Michalowski, looking at the context in which Emesal was used and the nature of the texts written in Emesal, noted:

> The main source of our knowledge of Emesal is a voluminous set of ritual prayers, often referred to as laments, that were sung or chanted by cultic practitioners designated as gala […] The principal function of these prayers was the appeasement of divine anger in the regular temple cult and at critical social liminal moments, sung in daily, periodic, and episodic ceremonies.[41]

Furthermore, Emesal is associated with the direct speech of certain goddesses and their messengers in literary texts, although these same goddesses spoke Emegi in other contexts. By contrast, there are no traces of the use of Emesal in Mesopotamian

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[37] Veldhuis 2018, 451.

[38] Garcia-Ventura 2017b, 153–156.

[39] Crawford 2014, 24.

[40] Stol 2016, 56.

[41] Michalowski 2023, 225–226.

women's writing. This led Michalowski to suggest that Emesal can best be described as an emotional language, used in certain situations that evoke strong emotions.[42]

Assyriologists have tried to make women visible in cuneiform sources for the last half century or more, and Agnès Garcia-Ventura has suggested that this has 'reinforced' certain negative preconceptions:

> After engendering, I propose the second step of ungendering, understood as a way of avoiding the preconceptions that abound in our studies as well as in other fields of research [... post-feminist theories] are among the prisms we have at our disposal, prisms that allow us to see a variety of colours that were previously invisible.[43]

5 Data from cuneiform written artefacts

The reinterpretations of the words previously translated as 'prostitute' or of the Emesal language are based on an in-depth study of the cuneiform manuscripts and their social and chronological context. Indeed, Assyriologists have a great number of texts at their disposal, which are distributed unevenly in time and space, and the place of women in these texts varies a lot.[44] Third and early second millennia palace and large domain archives document the elite women and their servants. Thousands of women were involved in the production of everyday goods in large institutions, where they were often supervised by male overseers.[45] Some of the large estates were managed by women of the royal family. Letters and administrative texts found in the Mari palace, for example, highlight the powers and duties of the queen and the spying activities of the king's daughters married to vassal rulers. For the first millennium, women from the royal family are documented by stelae and funerary inscriptions.

Most heroes in the literary texts are males, but women may have important second roles, such as Ninsun, the heroes' mother, Šiduri, the innkeeper, and Šamhat, the prostitute in the *Gilgameš Epic*.[46]

Women are more or less visible in the early second millennium private archives, which include letters, contracts and other legal documents. They are, for example, quite rare in the many Old Babylonian contracts concerning land and real estate, presumably because they were often economically dependent on men. As

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42 Michalowski 2023, 243–249.

43 Garcia-Ventura 2018, 197–198.

44 Michel 2015a.

45 Lion and Michel 2016b, 3.

46 Harris 2001.

they received their share of the inheritance in their dowry when they got married, they are mostly absent in inheritance divisions, and, consequently, the family trees reconstructed by scholars include very few women.[47] By contrast, the better attested women in this period lived in environments where they had the capacity and freedom to act on their own. This is the case, for example, of the priestesses consecrated to the god Šamaš in the city of Sippar who remained single; they inherited from their fathers and appear as landowners.[48] The women of Aššur, who had to manage their household alone waiting for the return of their husbands who were absent for long-distance trade, are also visible.

Archives from the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, found at Nuzi, in the Transtigris area, and at Emar, on the Euphrates River, contain legal documents highlighting the place of girls in their family. A man who had only daughters could adopt them as sons in his will so that they could have a share of the inheritance. As a result, they received part of his property, including his fields and houses.[49] Such a possibility tends to show that the ancient Mesopotamians were making a difference between biological sex and social gender.

6 Women and writing

All the data used to consider the place of women in ancient Mesopotamian society are provided by cuneiform texts that have mainly been written by men. However, women are also present in these written artefacts, for example, receiving or sending letters, initiating contracts or sealing a document with their seal. Moreover, the world's oldest known author is a woman: the moon god priestess Enheduana, daughter of King Sargon of Akkad, represented on an inscribed alabaster disk together with priests (see Fig. 2). She lived in the city of Ur during the twenty-third century BCE, and left hymns to Inanna in which she addressed the goddess sometimes in the first person. She also left temple hymns known by copies of the late third millennium.[50] Although she is so famous that a crater on the planet Mercury has been named Enheduana in her honour in 2015, it is still debated whether she is the real author of these hymns or if someone wrote them for her.[51]

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47 Lion 2018a, 234.

48 De Graef (eds) 2016, with previous literature.

49 Lion 2009a.

50 She was at the center of an important exhibition at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York in 2021–2022, see Babcock, Bahrani and Tamur 2021.

51 Wagensonner 2020; Konstantopoulos 2021.

Fig. 2: Disk of Enheduana showing the priestess with priests in a ritual scene. Alabaster, twenty-fourth century BCE, Larsa; Penn Museum (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology) in Philadelphia; Limestone/Calcite; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Disk_of_Enheduanna_(2).jpg>.

This debate stems from the fact that the great majority of the scribes attested in cuneiform manuscripts are men. However, female scribes existed, and according to contexts and periods, some women were literate just like men. Indeed, even if the number of people with access to a written culture was relatively small in comparison to the general population, it was not necessarily limited to professional scribes.

The earliest attestation of a female scribe dates to the Old Akkadian Period (twenty-fourth century BCE) and she worked for the Ekur temple in Nippur.[52] During

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52 Lion 2011.

the late third millennium, some of the dozens of thousands of administrative texts of the Third Dynasty of Ur mention scribes receiving food rations distributed by the institutions for which they worked, female scribes are exceptional. However, four statuettes, dating to this period, show seated women holding a tablet on their laps (see Fig. 3). The tablets are divided into lines and columns in which text was written, presumably of an administrative nature. The women's hands are joined in a gesture of prayer; thus, following Claudia Suter, they might represent high priestesses.[53]

Fig. 3: Alabaster statuette of a seated female with a tablet on her lap. Tello, Ur III (twenty-first century BCE); Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum, VA 04854 (acquired 1913); © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Vorderasiatisches Museum; photo: Olaf M. Teßmer; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Statuette_of_a_seated_sumerian_goddess_or_adorant_03.jpg>.

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53 Suter 2007, 334–335. For a similar statuette in the Louvre (AO 40) <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010119593> (accessed on 11 June 2023).

6.1 Female scribes in early second millennium texts

The education of scribes is well-known for the early second millennium thanks to the many school texts found at Nippur, a religious and cultural centre of Mesopotamia. These texts allowed the reconstruction of the curriculum used to learn Sumerian and mathematics. The great majority of school exercises are anonymous, however, in some instances, they could be signed by the student. Four school tablets of unknown provenance have been identified as being written by 'the hand of a female scribe'.[54] One of these corresponds to a list of syllables and belong to the first exercises of the cursus. Two others have Sumerian word lists, learned a little later, and the last tablet is the copy of a literary composition which was part of the advanced level of education. This suggests that girls could follow the same cursus as boys, and, thus, could write the same types of texts once they had completed their education.[55]

For whom did these women scribes practice their art? As a rule, female scribes are better known in specific milieus where men were few. This is especially the case during the first centuries of the second millennium BCE within the female population of the palace and the communities of consecrated women. Several female scribes occur in the royal archives of Mari, in Syria on the middle Euphrates, dating for the great majority to King Zimrī-Lîm (1775–1761 BCE). A large number of women were living in the palace, including the king's wives, concubines and daughters, as well as the many female slaves in charge of the maintenance of the house, water supply and cooking.[56] These women received regular allowances of oil and food as part of their retribution. In all, there are nine female scribes mentioned among the five hundred women belonging to the servile staff.[57] Among these, three female scribes are known by their names, and worked in pairs for the palace kitchen. They are the authors of the hundreds of tablets recording the daily expenditures of the storerooms for the king's meal.[58] Female scribes are also found among the female personnel given as a dowry by the king to his daughters when they married a vassal king. Living in a foreign country, the king's daughters acted as spies for their father, sending him many letters to keep him informed.[59]

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54 Lion 2009b.
55 Brigitte Lion (2011, 100) has suggested that some of these women would have learnt from their father; at least one of the female Sippar scribes is known as the daughter of a scribe.
56 Ziegler 1999.
57 Lion 2011, 99.
58 Ziegler 2016, § 17–23.
59 Durand 2000, 422–479.

Women scribes are also present in private contexts, working, for example, for consecrated women (*nadītum*). This is particularly well illustrated in the city of Sippar, some fifty kilometres north of Babylon, where some girls belonging to rich families were consecrated to the Sun God Šamaš, the main deity of the city.[60] These women were not allowed to marry and give birth to children, and in order to be economically independent, they received a dowry including an estate, from their parents. They used writing in order to manage this estate and communicate with their family, often through the services of scribes. The many contracts belonging to these consecrated women, purchase of lands or slaves, leasing or court proceedings, regularly include a list of witnesses, which often ends with the name of the scribe who wrote the legal text. Many of these scribes were men, but some twenty of them were female scribes.[61] The texts they wrote involved not only consecrated women but also men.

6.2 Literate women in early second millennium private archives

Within this religious society, some of the consecrated women from wealthy families might have had direct access to writing, being educated in a similar way to boys. One of the best examples is provided by a dispute deed also found in Sippar and dating to the late nineteenth or early eighteenth centuries BCE.[62] A consecrated woman named Amat-Šamaš adopted another consecrated woman in order to be able to pass on all her property. After the death of Amat-Samaš, two men, presumably of her family, sued the heiress, and declared: 'In no case did Amat-Samaš give you property, nor did she write a tablet for you. It was you who, after her death, (wrote) it.' Since the heiress was accused of forging a document, it must be assumed that she was literate, able to write a will or an adoption contract, and even knew specific legal formulae in Sumerian. Moreover, the witnesses interviewed, both male and female, declared that Amat-Šamaš herself wrote the adoption contract, which was also her own testament. Whether both of these consecrated women learned to read and to write at home with their parents or with a master is unknown.

Learning from one's parents how to read and write was presumably the case among the Assyrians of the nineteenth century BCE according to their archives found in central Anatolia on the site of Kültepe, the ancient city of Kaneš. These

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60 Harris 1975.

61 Lion 2009b.

62 Text CT 2, 47, discussed by Lion 2018b, who noted that the verb used in this text, *šaṭārum*, means literally 'to write'.

merchants settled in Kaneš, a thousand kilometres away from their hometown, for trade, and left there some twenty-three thousand cuneiform tablets. They originated from the city of Aššur, on the west bank of the Tigris River in northern Iraq, where, in a first stage, their wives and children were living. This cuneiform corpus has been widely exploited for its rich data on trade and markets with important financial innovations, and the activities and lives of several important male merchants have been the subject of detailed studies. However, some Assyrian women, residing in Aššur and known from the letters they sent to Kaneš, are particularly visible.

About nine thousand letters written in the Old Assyrian dialect have been unearthed at Kültepe to date. They represent the epistolary exchanges between the merchants of Kaneš and, on the one hand, their families and colleagues who remained in Aššur, and, on the other hand, their correspondents settled in other Anatolian towns. The great majority of the letters have men as senders and recipients and deal with commercial and financial matters. Letters addressed or received by women, however, represent some 20% of those published, and half of these were sent mainly by women who remained alone at Aššur while their husbands were away, or those who were single, consecrated to a deity.[63] These women were at the head of their households and wrote to their husbands, brothers or sons in Anatolia concerning both commercial and domestic matters (see Fig. 4). They used writing as a communication tool and their letters show a certain expression of feelings and manifestations of emotions, less present in men's letters:

> Urgent! When you hear this letter, come, look to Aššur, your god, and your home hearth, and let me see you in person while I am still alive! Misery has entered our minds.[64]

Sensitive to their family members' reputation, women give the men real lessons in morality dictated not only by a deep attachment to the worship of deities but also by the desire to offer the best possible image to their neighbours:

> You hear that people are behaving badly, one tries to gobble up the other! Be an honourable man, break your obligations, and come here! Consecrate our young daughter to the god Aššur.[65]

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63 Michel 2020, 27–29; Michel 2023.
64 Michel 2020, 216–218, no. 129.
65 Michel 2020, 239–240, no. 147.

Fig. 4: Old Assyrian letter sent by two women to their brother; Louvre, AO 7054; Photo: Cécile Michel.

The Old Assyrian letters used a relatively limited syllabary containing, at most, some 150 signs, including a limited number of logograms. There were professional scribes taking part in the daily administration of the trade bureau. These scribes are to be distinguished from the educated traders, capable of writing their letters and contracts themselves. Indeed, personal letters were often written directly by their authors, whose mobility would explain the absence of recourse to the services of scribes.[66] Women were able, in the absence of their husbands, to extract documents from their archives, and some of them could write and count as well.[67] One can distinguish between letters written quickly and carelessly by men and women who learned by doing, and those with a very beautiful and regular handwriting, written by those who had followed a real school curriculum. Palaeographical analyses to identify writers' hands confirm that many men and women were literate. In some families, children learned from their father, while in others, they learned

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[66] Michel 2008.

[67] Michel 2015b; Michel 2020, 333–338.

from someone outside the family.[68] As well as the consecrated women who were single, the women of Aššur found themselves alone, separated from their husbands for long periods and in need of exchanging information with them in a written form.

These women were fuelling the international trade with their textile production and earned their own money. They were using part of their revenues to manage their house and the remainder was invested in trade and financial transactions. They had their own capital, separate from that of their husbands, and were excellent accountants. At least one document, an account, is explicitly said to have been written by a woman.[69] These women, who participated in the economic life and benefited from the profits generated by trade, are particularly visible in the written documentation they have produced.

7 Conclusion

In *Women of Aššur and Kaneš: Texts from the Archives of Assyrian Merchants* (2020), a book dedicated to these women, studying their place in society and their activities in comparison to those of men, I specified in the introduction that:

> The purpose of the present book is to make their voices heard. But women do not exist without men, and vice versa; thus, this study about women is conducted from the perspective of gender: when applicable, I compare the place of women in the society and their activities with that of men, trying to emancipate myself from any preconceptions about gender division. For example, the following questions are raised: Who kept marriage contracts, husband or wife? Is there a great difference between men's and women's testaments, between men's and women's loans? What kind of mutual representations exist between men and women in business? And so on. This work thus inscribes itself in the first two feminist waves, and it provides unique textual material for more theoretical studies.[70]

Researchers working on ancient manuscript cultures only have fragmentary data linked to specific social groups. Even if, regarding cuneiform written artefacts, we deal in general with direct sources, these do not cover all social categories equally; data on poor people, for example, are usually scarce. The various examples presented above show that some women from different milieus were literate and could enjoy a certain autonomy. Some of them had activities that were not limited to the

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68 Beyer 2021.

69 Michel 2020, 335 and n. 70.

70 Michel 2020, 5–6.

domestic sphere; they contributed to public life, but their contribution remains less visible in the ancient texts than that of men.

Tracing the identity of the authors of ancient texts is essential for writing their history, whether they were men or women. The denial by some Assyriologists to recognise the great priestess Enheduana as the first author in world history makes her the very first victim of the 'Matilda effect'. Inspired by a passage in Matthew's Gospel about giving to the rich and taking from the poor, the sociologist Robert Merton showed that the institutional reputation acquired by scientists determines the importance attached to their work and the funding available to them.[71] The historian of sciences Margaret Rossiter, building on this idea, noticed the recurrent minimisation of the contribution of women to scientific research. She called this phenomenon the 'Matilda effect' in reference to the American feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage (1826–1898), who had noticed that men were often appropriating women's ideas.[72]

Since women are less present than men in cuneiform sources, it can be tempting to attribute literary and scholarly texts to men. Nevertheless, some women were literate, as were some men, and training seems to have been the same for men and women. When studying ancient written artefacts, it is necessary to understand why the texts were written, by whom they were initiated and written, and for what reason they were kept.

Acknowledgements

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71 Merton 1968.

72 Rossiter 1993.

Abbreviations

GeMANE = 'Gender, Methodology and the Ancient Near East' (every two years workshops).
RAI = Rencontre Assyriologique International (annual congress of Assyriology).

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Leah Mascia

Female Monastics and Devotees in Late Antique and Byzantine Egypt: Papyrological, Epigraphic, and Archaeological Sources

Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the problem of women's literacy in late antique and Byzantine Egypt through the integration of papyrological, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence. The article will begin by examining the role of women in Christian Egyptian society and addressing the issues associated with the attribution of women's authorship to documentary papyri. After this overview, three case studies will be discussed with the aim of highlighting the important evidence that graffiti found in specific archaeological contexts provide for understanding the role of female writers in shaping the manuscript culture of Christian Egypt.

1 Introduction

Egypt provides essential information for reconstructing the early stages of Christianity. Thanks to the surviving papyrological[1] and archaeological[2] evidence, we have a broad overview of the multifaceted history of the Christian communities inhabiting its cities and villages. Yet our knowledge of the diffusion of literacy among women (and men) in the late antique and Byzantine society remains limited, and the attribution of written evidence to female writers is complicated by many factors, as will be discussed in this paper. The degrees of scholastic education and writing proficiency among women in this historical period remain at the centre of contemporary scholarly debate.[3] The ambiguous evidence provided by the papyrological documentation,

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1 For a general introduction to the history of the Christian society of late antique Egypt and the evidence provided by papyrological sources, see Bagnall 1996. An overview of Christian literary sources from late antique Egypt based on textual evidence from Oxyrhynchus can be found in Blumell and Wayment (eds) 2015.
2 On the archaeology of Christian Egypt and, in particular, monasticism, see Walters 1974; Gabra and Vivian (eds) 2002; for an introduction to monasticism in Egypt from Late Antiquity to modern times, see Buzi 2014. For an overview of Christian textual and archaeological evidence throughout the Egyptian lands, see Gabra and Takla (eds) 2008; 2013; 2015; 2017; 2020.
3 On female literacy in late antique and Byzantine Egypt, see Sheridan 1998; Bagnall and Cribiore 2006; Sheridan Moss 2012; Salmenkivi 2017.

however, can be supplemented by new archaeological discoveries[4] and the re-examination of written materials in their context.[5] In this sense, a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective can allow for a deeper understanding of the place of women in the written culture of Christian Egypt. Through the lens of the contextualised epigraphic material and its integration with the surviving papyrological documentation, this paper aims to discuss the role of female monastics and devotees as readers and writers, thus demonstrating their contributions to shaping the manuscript society of late antique and Byzantine Egypt.

Before examining the issues surrounding the attribution of written evidence to female writers, it is necessary to introduce the sources available for reconstructing the place of female devotees and monastics in Christian Egyptian society.

The earliest papyrological sources attesting the existence of women of Christian faith in Egypt date from the late third to the early fourth centuries CE, when prayers began to appear in the greeting formulae of private letters.[6] These documents seem to attest to various women – on some occasions possibly even the writers of these letters[7] – affiliated with the Christian religion.[8] From the early fourth century CE, documentary papyri record the exchange of biblical manuscripts between women,[9] and,

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[4] In particular, see Davis 2020a and 2020b. The evidence provided by the discoveries of the archaeological mission of the Universität Tübingen and the team of the Yale Monastic Archaeology Project (YMAP) is discussed below in Section 3.

[5] See, for instance, Westerfeld 2017 for a re-examination of the Coptic graffiti at the temple of Seti I in Abydos that were recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century.

[6] A first extensive collection of early Christian letters may be found in Naldini 1968, though the identification of many of them remains controversial. On letters written by or mentioning women in Egypt between the Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods, see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006. A recent study on the Christian letters discovered at Oxyrhynchus, many of which were written (or at least sent) by women, may be found in Blumell 2012.

[7] Among the earliest evidence, we might cite P.Berl.Zill. 12 (third to fourth century CE) probably from the nomos Arsinoites. In the letter, a certain Athanasia greets her mother. According to Roger Bagnall and Raffaella Cribiore, 'the overall impression is of a private individual with an "evolving hand"'; see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 391. While the religious faith of the writer seems to be indicated by, among other things, the reference to *kyrios theos*, 'Lord God', in the prayer, this element does not necessarily identify this letter as Christian (Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 391). For the interpretation of this document as a Christian letter, see Naldini 1968, 147–149.

[8] For instance, a message (P.Oxy. VIII 1161, fourth century CE) written by a sick woman seems to provide sufficient evidence for identifying the religious affiliation of the sender: '(to our God) and gracious saviour and to his beloved Son, that they all may succour our body, soul, and spirit'. For the *editio princeps* of this letter, see Hunt (ed.) 1911, 265–266.

[9] An Oxyrhynchite letter (P.Oxy. LXIII 4365, fourth century CE) records the exchange of books between two women, one of whom is addressed as 'lady sister'; the message concerns a codex containing sacred scriptures: 'To my dearest lady sister, greetings in the Lord. Lend the Ezra, since I

later on, the commissioning of personal copies of liturgical texts.[10] In several documents, women attest to their own literacy and high level of education.

Women are often seen to have had leading roles in the society of late antique and Byzantine Egypt; for instance, as landladies engaging in various economic activities.[11] Papyri and epigraphic documents record the existence of women of Christian affiliation actively participating in the organisation of religious festivals,[12] involved in the financial maintenance and upkeep of religious institutions through the donation of funds, properties,[13] artistic works,[14] and manuscripts.[15]

Documentary papyri from as early as the late third century CE testify to the existence of female monastics, namely in the form of communities hosting women who

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lent you the little Genesis. Farewell in God from us'. For a discussion and translation of this text see Blumell 2012, 169–171. While the term 'little Genesis' has often been considered as a reference to the small format of the manuscript, it also might identify the written artefact as an apocryphal book known as *The Book of Jubilees* or *Leptogenesis* (Lesser Genesis) (Blumell 2012, 170); on this literary composition, see Segal 2007.

10   As in O.Mon.Epiph. 386 (sixth to eighth century CE), where two women – probably monastics, according to Terry G. Wilfong – ask a priest to write a section of an ecclesiastical canon for them; for a discussion of this text, see Wilfong 2002, 108. On the issue behind the identification of the two women as nuns, see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 252.

11   For a general introduction on the role of women in late antique Egyptian society, see Bagnall 1996, 92–99. For an introduction to female landowners in the village of Jeme, see Wilfong 2002 and Zakher 2018. An overview of the evidence provided by the city of Oxyrhynchus may be found in Bagnall 1996 and Luijendijk 2008.

12   As in a letter from Klematia to Papnouthis from Oxyrhynchus (P.Oxy. XLVIII 3406, mid-fourth century CE); a translation of the text may be found in Rowlandson (ed.) 1998, 244. For a re-examination of the letter – which stands out for its high number of errors or corrections (fifteen on sixty words) and the unevenness of the writing hand, which could indicate its private authorship – see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 213–214.

13   For instance, in a donation contract (P.KRU 106, 734 CE) from the village of Jeme, a woman named Anna, mother of Johannes, affirms the donation of a property (i.e. her memorial) to the monastery of Paul of Kulol; see Wilfong 2002, 85–86.

14   See Wilber 1940, 98 and Wilfong 2002, 95–98 on the donation of a pictorial cycle dedicated to the figure of St Menas in a church in Jeme by a woman named Elizabeth and her daughter. Similar evidence is, for instance, provided by the paintings and associated inscriptions discovered in the religious institutions of Christian Nubia; see Yvanez and Wozniak 2019, 25. For the discussion of a probable case of a female donor recorded in the monastery on the so-called Kom H area in Dongola, see Łajtar and van Gerven Oei 2018, 78.

15   As probably witnessed by the colophon written by a certain Felabia in a manuscript found among the ruins of the monastery of the Archangel Michael in the Fayyum (CC 0437 = CLM 239); for a brief discussion of this testimony, see below, Section 2.

have chosen a communal religious life.[16] According to literary sources, the federation created by Pachomius (*c.* 292–346 CE) included a 'separate female community as part of his male monastic system'.[17] The *Libellus Precum* of Marcellinus and Faustinus (*c.* 383 CE) mentions the existence, during the episcopate of Theodorus in Oxyrhynchus, of 'sacred virgins, whose monasteries the city itself venerated for the worth of their sanctity'.[18] Less than a century later, Palladius's *Historia Lausiaca* (*c.* 420 CE)[19] provides various evidence for the presence of female clergy in the city of Antinoupolis. According to the Arabic *Life of Shenoute*,[20] in the fifth century CE, the monastic federation under the control of the White Monastery in Sohag counted 2,200 monks and 1,800 nuns.[21] Similar numbers are provided by the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*,[22] written at the turn of the fifth century CE, which describes fourth-century Oxyrhynchus as notable for the number of monasteries erected inside and outside its city walls; the local bishop recording the presence of 10,000 monks and 20,000 nuns within the city.[23] These numbers are likely an overestimation, however, and the picture offered by literary texts probably does not reflect the concrete reality of late antique Egypt.

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16 A letter of recommendation (P.Oxy. XXXVI 2785, third to fourth century CE) sent by the presbyters of Herakleopolis to Sotas, bishop of Oxyrhynchus, records the arrival of several individuals in the city; among them was Taion, a female church member. For a discussion of this document, see Luijendijk 2008, 94. Another early reference to female monastics might be preserved in P.Oxy. XII 1592 (third to fourth century CE). According to Benjamin R. Overcash, the presence of quotations from the Psalms and New Testament suggests that the sender and perhaps also the writer of this message, a woman, was familiar with Christian literary texts and 'perhaps had experience in copying them'. The recipient of the message is addressed as '(Lord) Father', which may indicate that the individual was a superior member of the local ecclesiastic hierarchy to whom she belonged; see Overcash 2018. On the identification of the sender as the writer of the message, her possible identification as a copyist of literary manuscripts, and her use of the word 'father', see also Luijendijk 2008, 74–78. Somewhat later in date is another Oxyrhynchite document, namely a division of properties among a group of people (PSI VI 698, 392 CE), recording the lands 'on the south (?) a public street, to the east the property of the nun Annis'. For a discussion of this document, see Luijendijk 2015, 60–61.
17 Krawiec 2002, 123.
18 Marcellinus and Faustinus, *Libellus Precum*, 99, ed. Günther 1895, 35. For a discussion and translation of this passage, see Overcash 2018, 203, n. 34; and Luijendijk 2015, 57.
19 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, 58–59, ed. Clarke 1918, 163–166.
20 For this passage, see the edition and translation *Vie arabe de Schnoudi*, ed. Amélineau 1888, 331.
21 For a discussion of the reliability of these numbers, see Leipoldt 1903, 93; Wipszycka 2005, 294–299; Krawiec 2002, 3, n. 3; López 2013, 49.
22 *Historia monachorum in Aegypto*, Chap. 5, § 1–2 and § 5–6, ed. Festugière 1961, 41–43. For a French translation of the text, see Festugière (ed.) 1964.
23 For a discussion of this passage and the number of monastics present in the city as witnessed by this literary source, see Wipszycka 2005, 265–266.

On the other hand, as already mentioned, documentary sources provide more reliable information, testifying to the presence of female monastics in the Christian communities of major centres and small villages across the Egyptian lands.[24] Already in the fourth century, they often appear as the senders – and occasionally writers[25] – of letters; they use the Coptic language alongside Greek, apparently even more frequently than men, especially when engaging in private matters.[26] As discussed later in this contribution, their names and prayers are also witnessed by numerous graffiti found in various religious complexes, necropolises, and domestic spaces, providing some insight into life inside the earliest monastic communities and attesting female monastics congregations otherwise unknown from other sources.[27] Female names accompanied by honorific titles (i.e. ⲁⲙⲁ) or technical terms (i.e. ϣⲏⲙ[28] ⳮⲣⲙⲛⲏⲓ[29]), which are commonly considered a sign of affiliation with a religious community, are also recorded in other typologies of written artefacts. Aside from the wealth of evidence offered, for instance, by stone inscriptions,[30] ceramic containers of various shapes and sizes, as well as lamps, sometimes bore the name of a female owner, or rather of a female devotee addressing her prayers to God. For instance, two lamps of uncertain chronology, one of which was

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24 For an introduction to female monasticism in late antique and Byzantine Egypt, see Schroeder 2014 and Giorda and Berardi 2020. For an overview of the status and role of women in the religious community of the White Monastery federation, see Krawiec 2002. For a discussion of the evidence that Coptic sources provide for the study of women and gender in Late Antiquity, based in particular on the results of Rebecca Krawiec's study of the female monastics associated with the White Monastery, see Behlmer 2004.

25 As the sender of the aforementioned P.Oxy. XII 1592 (third–fourth centuries CE) probably was.

26 For instance, several of the earliest Oxyrhynchite Coptic letters (fourth to fifth centuries CE), as noted by Sarah Clackson, seem to have been written by women. Many of them identify themselves as female monastics writing to their relatives or other members of nearby religious organisations. I am grateful to Cat Warsi for allowing me to study the personal notes of Sarah Clackson at the Griffith Institute at Oxford. For a brief introduction to the Oxyrhynchite Coptic documentary, literary and para-literary documentation, see Clackson 2007.

27 Possible references are also preserved in the papyrological documentation.

28 The term, literally translated as 'the little' or 'the younger', was probably used to indicate female monastics of novice status; on the use of ϣⲏⲙ, see Krawiec 2002, 164, n. 10 and Westerfeld 2017, 201.

29 In a monastic context, this is interpreted as a term for 'steward'; see Westerfeld 2017, 201.

30 Stelae preserving funerary or commemorative inscriptions certainly remain an important source for the identification of female monastics. For an overview of – for instance – the evidence for the use of the title *amma* in Greek inscriptions from Christian Egypt, see Lefebvre (ed.) 1907, 20–21, 24, 31, 91, 145–146, 157, nos 86, 94, 106, 149, 495, 750, 751, 806.

allegedly discovered at Oxyrhynchus, preserve the name of a certain ᴀᴍᴀ Christina,[31] though it remains unclear whether she is to be identified as a female monastic (as suggested by the honorific title ᴀᴍᴀ) or a local saint.

What remains challenging is to observe the many nuances of the lifestyle chosen by female monastics, which – especially in the earliest centuries after the Christianisation of Egypt – did not exclusively imply communal life in established religious organisations. For instance, the role and status of the women recorded as 'domestic virgins' in the documentary evidence is uncertain. In literary sources, the term indicates women practising a kind of monasticism distinct from the canonical form of coenobitism known from later sources. *The Gnomai of the Council of Nicaea* (mid- or late fourth century CE) describes in detail the modest life devoted to the study of sacred scriptures that female monastics were asked to conduct.[32] These 'domestic virgins' apparently did not reside in a monastic community, but rather in private properties,[33] which has led Alistair C. Stewart to the tentative identification of the women described in the *Gnomai* as 'individual urban ascetics'.[34] Most information on these female monastics derives from the city of Oxyrhynchus, where testimonies of the presence of 'domestic virgins' have been extensively studied by Anne Marie Luijendijk.[35] Possible evidence for the existence of female ascetics in Oxyrhynchus might already be preserved in two letters (P.Oxy. XIV 1774 and SB VIII 9746) from this city, written by a certain Didyme and 'the sisters' around 340 CE.[36]

Literary sources seem to testify to the presence of numerous women choosing a life of asceticism far from the mundane world. The *Life of Shenoute* records that under the rule of Shenoute, who controlled a large federation of female and male monastic congregations, there was a federate community of male and female hermits living alone in the desert.[37] Among the Christian women mentioned by the *Historia Lausiaca*

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31 Lefebvre (ed.) 1907, 145–146, nos 750 and 751. For further discussion of this written artefact, see Piedrafita 2008, 135.

32 *Gnomai*, Chap. 6, § 2–17, ed. Stewart 2015, 46–55.

33 Cf. the aforementioned Oxyrhynchite division of properties (PSI VI 698) recording the ownership of a certain 'nun Annis'. According to several scholars, the document seems most likely to have identified this property as her own residence, thus suggesting that Annis did not share a communal life with other nuns; see Luijendijk 2015, 60–61.

34 Stewart (ed.) 2015, 18.

35 Luijendijk 2015. For further discussion of the female monastics of Oxyrhynchus and evidence for the life of women in this city during the Late Antique Period, see Luijendijk 2008 and 2022.

36 On this possible interpretation, see Luijendijk 2015, 59–60. For a similar interpretation attempting to recognise possible references to an Oxyrhynchite ascetic community of both women and men in these documents, see Elm 1994, 243–244.

37 Blanke 2017, 207.

(*c.* 420 CE),[38] who distinguished themselves for their sanctity in the city of Antinoupolis, an ascetic woman is remembered for having paid a visit to the sanctuary of St Colluthos before her death.[39]

Fig. 1: Funerary stela of 'the virgin Sophia'; from the area of the site of the ancient Edfu; unknown date; reprinted from Henne 1925, 19, pl. 20.

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38 Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca,* 60, ed. Clarke 1918, 166.

39 On this episode, see Hidding 2020, 69, n. 266.

Beyond the scattered references of literary and documentary texts to the lifestyle of female monastics living alone in the desert, a few testimonies are provided by epigraphic sources. For instance, a funerary stela identified in the area surrounding ancient Edfu commemorates a certain 'virgin Sophia' (Fig. 1).[40] As remarked by Caroline T. Schroeder 'with no mention of a *topos* or *monastērion*, it is possible that Sophia practised as a solitary or lived in a looser lavra, but we cannot discern much with certainty'.[41] A graffito found in a tomb passage in the monastery of St Epiphanius seems to have been written by a certain Anna, who probably mentions the monastic habit (*schema*); according to Schroeder, the content of the text suggests her possible identification as an ascetic.[42]

Many female monastics owned properties and also managed economic activities,[43] despite the prohibitions attested not only by literary compositions but also by documentary texts.[44] One contract (P.Oxy. XLIV 3203, 400 CE) states that the 'apotactic nuns' Aurelia Theodora and Aurelia Tauris, daughters of Silvanus, leased part of their house, in particular 'one ground-floor room, namely a hall, together with the one cellar in the basement, with all appurtenances',[45] to a certain Aurelius Jose. This document seems to testify that the two sisters supported themselves by renting part of their property. As remarked by Luijendijk, the use of the term 'apotactic'[46] in this context is particularly important, since among the papyrological sources published

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40 The stela was found reused in the foundation of a domestic complex, specifically in the so-called 'chambre h', during investigations conducted by the Institut français d'archéologie orientale in the early 1920s. See Henne 1925, 19, pl. 20. A re-edition may be found in SB V 7550 (uncertain date); see Kießling (ed.) 1955, 32.

41 Schroeder 2014, 9.

42 P.Mon.Epiph. 646 (uncertain date); see Crum and White 1926, 141, 327. On this graffito and its interpretation, see Schroeder 2014, 9.

43 For a brief discussion of the evidence for female monastics as property owners in literary and documentary sources, see, for instance, Stewart (ed.) 2015, 18.

44 As suggested by the letter P.Neph. 18 (fourth century CE), belonging to the so-called Archive of Nepheros, probably coming from the village of Phathor in the nomos Herakleopolites. Nepheros was a priest and likely also superior of the Hathor monastery during the middle of the fourth century CE. The letter, which deals with business matters, was delivered by a woman named Taouak to Eudaimon and Apia. Taouak states that she is a woman and cannot make purchases – probably of wheat, from the context of the letter – on her own. As noted by Raffaella Cribiore and Roger Bagnall, 'no legal or social prohibition' existed preventing women from taking part in economic activities. Therefore, this statement could indicate that Taouak was a female monastic not allowed to engage in 'worldly business transactions'; see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 207–208. For the *editio princeps* of the text, see Kramer and Shelton (eds) 1987, 85–88.

45 For the *editio princeps* of the text, see Bowman et al. (eds) 1976, 182–184.

46 The word 'apotactic', which is attested in the original Greek document, is rendered as 'anchorite' in the English translation; see Bowman et al. (eds) 1976, 182–183.

thus far, this is the only document in which it is found in association with women.[47] 'In Pachomian literature', the term identifies 'a follower of Jesus [...] who radically renounced the world, including family and possessions'.[48] The Oxyrhynchite contract evidently stresses how official designations did not often correspond to the actual social and economic conditions of either the monks or nuns inhabiting the Egyptian lands, especially in the first centuries after the Christianisation of the country.

2 How to identify female writers in Christian Egypt: The issues behind authorship interpretation

The attribution of written evidence to female writers is complicated by innumerable factors, ranging from the absence of clear information on the educational settings of late antique and Byzantine Egypt[49] to the enduringly widespread practice, even among literate individuals, of relying on professional scribes.[50]

Overall, the written sources discussed here attest to different degrees of literacy: some women (and men) were likely able to write no more than their name, whereas others were capable of composing short prayers, mottos, and self-identification formulae. While this range of abilities encompasses most of the authors who have left traces in the written documentation of Christian Egypt, the evidence also points to the existence of a number of proficient female writers, some of whom could be defined as scribes. In this sense, it is important to clarify what the term 'scribe' implies when applied to women in this context. When occasionally applied to female authors of letters, documents, and votive graffiti, the term is not used in the sense of a professional scribe with a full-time occupation; on the contrary, it

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47 For a discussion of this document and the use of the term 'apotactic' in this context, see Luijendijk 2015, 58, 61–62.

48 Luijendijk 2015, 62.

49 On education in monastic contexts and among lay people in late antique and Byzantine Egypt and beyond, see Derda, Markiewicz and Wipszycka 2007; Bucking 2012; Gemeinhardt, Van Hoof and Van Nuffelen (eds) 2016; Larsen and Rubenson 2018; Schroeder 2019.

50 The papyrological documentation provides essential information on public and private scribes and their central role in Greco-Roman and late antique society, which certainly went beyond the borders of the Egyptian lands. For an introduction to the social function of scribes in Egypt between the Roman and the Byzantine periods, see Bucking 2007; Ast 2015; Yuen-Collingridge 2021. On the role of scribes in the production of letters in Roman Egypt, see Halla-aho 2017. For an overview of the sources on Byzantine grammarians, see Robins 1993.

identifies women whose level of education allowed them to write on behalf of themselves and occasionally others. Still, as discussed later in this paper, various testimony suggests that some of these women, especially those living in religious congregations, could also be professional scribes in the proper sense, being trained to copy literary works.

An important step in the study of women as writers in ancient Egyptian society was made by Raffaella Cribiore and Roger Bagnall in the early 2000s.[51] Through the lens of the surviving epistolary documentation, they have extensively discussed the advantages and pitfalls of studying private letters to understand the diffusion of literacy among women in Egypt between the Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods.[52] Indeed, the epistolary documentation allows us to get closer to a significant part of the ancient female population, since it is among the largest categories in the corpus of surviving texts written on papyrus. Beyond a doubt, letters provide an essential perspective on this ancient society, and in particular, the way women experienced life in ancient Egypt. As already noted, women, especially those belonging to higher social classes, certainly often had quite a relevant role in contemporary society; they inherited and were part of the urban real estate market and leased lands, money, and commodities.[53] For instance, various women seemed to occupy a prominent economic and social role in the village of Jeme, as testified by over sixty Coptic letters dating to the seventh century CE.[54] A third of these letters record activities associated with female figures, several of which were likely written by the women themselves.[55]

Not surprisingly, various letters associated with religious activities and institutions record the names of many female monastics who,[56] at least in some cases,

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[51] Bagnall and Cribiore 2006. The following discussion owes much to the arguments proposed by these authors regarding the possible criteria for identifying female writers in the Roman and Byzantine papyrological documentation.

[52] On women's literacy in ancient Egypt, though focusing on the earliest historical phases, see also Ayad 2022, 10–15.

[53] They clearly also held an essential role in domestic spaces and were frequently involved in manufacturing activities associated with the textile industry. For the role of women in textile production, see Wilfong 2002, 143; Franzmann 2007. For an introduction to the textile industry of Greco-Roman and late antique Egypt, see van Minnen 1986; Bagnall 1996, 82–83.

[54] For an in-depth study of women in late antique Jeme, see Wilfong 2002.

[55] Wilfong 2002, 108.

[56] Such as a Coptic letter (P.Pisentius 28, 590–632 CE) from two women, likely nuns, referring to the investiture of new female monastics: 'If you want us to bind the young women (in monastic habit), may your fatherly lordship command us and we will bind them until the festival of the cross'. For a discussion of this letter and the translation of the original text passage, see Wilfong 2002, 40, 108.

seem to have personally written these letters, as suggested, among others, by the self-identifications present in the texts.[57]

The papyrological documentation offers various cases of women who assert their literacy, like Aurelia Charite of Hermopolis, who remarks on her high level of education in self-identification formulae present in several documents (Fig. 2).[58] However, she was probably not the author of the entire text, but only of this specific formula.

As noted by Bagnall, speaking about one of these documents:

> she wrote not the body of the text but the subscription, as she did in several other surviving documents as well. The hand is clear, the letters well-formed, but is not the practiced cursive of someone who writes every day. Charite no doubt had to deal with a large volume of business – leases, receipts, accounts, and letters – and found it more practical to have her business agents write most of these.[59]

In the corpus of fourth-century documents found at Karanis, Aurelia Serenilla appears as an important figure in a family owning numerous lands in the nomos Arsinoites; at least one receipt seems to have been written in her own hand.[60] Serenilla was among those wealthy women probably accustomed to reading and writing on a regular basis, who often but not always relied on the services of professional scribes.

These examples help us to understand with greater clarity the issues in determining the degree of not only women's, but also men's literacy in late antique and Byzantine Egypt; even those who were able to read and write, whatever their proficiency was, often relied on public or private scribes. Therefore, in a society in which literate individuals largely entrusted professional scribes to write even their private letters, it is difficult to determine how often women, for instance, wrote their documents themselves. As seen in the case of Aurelia Charite, frequently even 'practised' writers limited their actual intervention in the text to the writing of greetings and signatures in a document prepared by others from dictation.

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57 As in O.Vind.Copt. 258 (sixth to eighth centuries CE), a Coptic letter with the closing formula '[From] your sinful servant woman'; see the re-edition in Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 312.

58 For instance, P.Charite 8 (348 CE); see the edition in Worp (ed.) 1980, 31–32.

59 Bagnall 1996, 247.

60 The document, P.Cair.Isid. 112 (300 CE), has been described by Arthur Boak as 'A well-practised cursive with the letters written at times regularly and distinctly and at others in a crowded and hasty manner' (Boak 1934, 15); for a rediscussion of this document, its possible attribution to Aurelia Serenilla, and Boak's edition of the text, see Bagnall 1996, 93, n. 313.
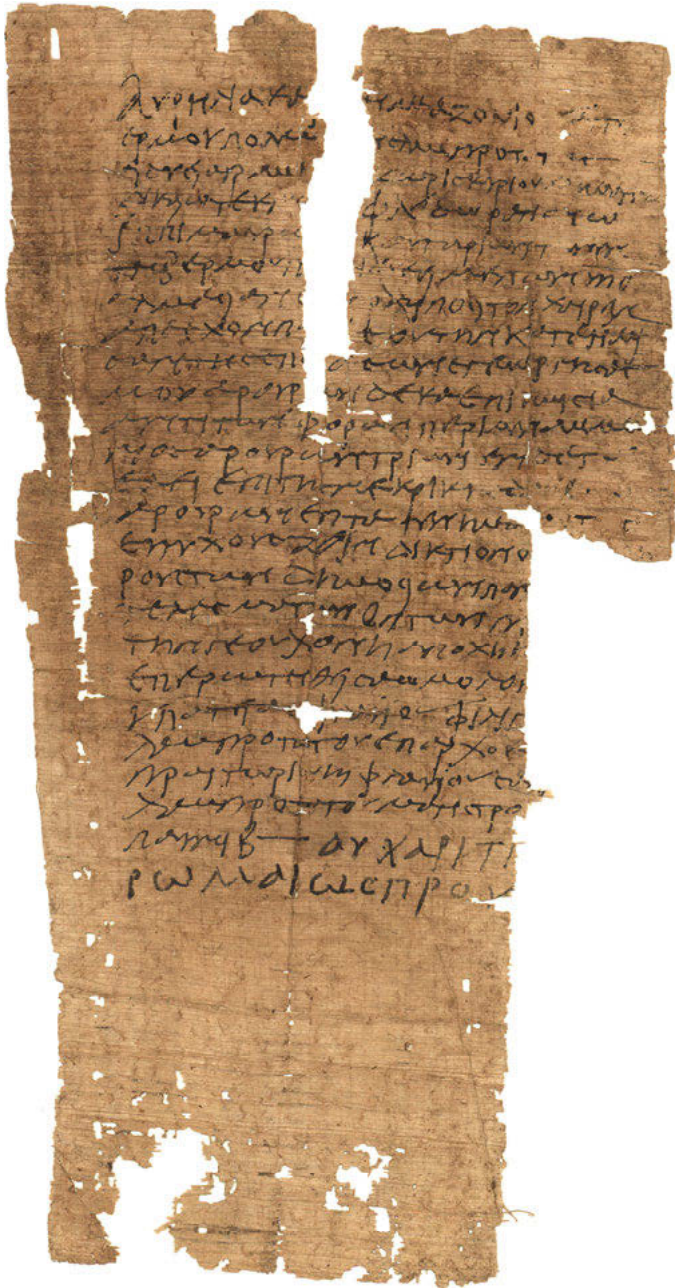
Fig. 2: P.Charite 8 = P.Vindob. G 2097; the last two lines preserve Aurelia Charite's signature, probably written in her own hand; 348 CE; Hermopolis. © Austrian National Library, Collection of Papyri.

Nonetheless, the close observation and analysis of handwriting might already help us in distinguishing between autographs and dictated letters and therefore to identify male and female individuals writing in a private context. We might assume then that the key element in identifying possible women writers is the examination of writing hands.[61] In principle, a less polished hand – a text with spelling mistakes, uncertainties in the *ductus*, or repetitions – might be an indication that the document had been written outside of a professional setting; therefore, especially in the case of epistolary documentation, why not by the actual sender of the letter? However, also in this case, different scenarios may be possible; perhaps a woman had simply relied on a family member who was not a particularly trained writer.

Furthermore, the unevenness of writing hands cannot be taken as a universal criterion for identifying private – in this case female – writers, since, as graffiti in particular can show us, various women stand out for their writing skills in the surviving evidence. Several cases in which we can identify a female writer with a certain degree of certainty show us how women, especially those living in religious settings, could be excellent scribes, often familiar with formulaic expressions and abbreviation systems like professional scribes. On several occasions, they also appear to write on behalf of other women and men.[62] While the examination of the handwriting alone is not sufficient evidence, it is the combination with the analysis of other texts' peculiarities that might help us in identifying the sender as the writer of the document with some confidence. The oral character of the language can be another significant element in distinguishing between letters written by professional scribes and by private writers:[63] for instance, the presence of uncommon formulaic expressions instead of those generally used in professional contexts, as well as the identification of elements in

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61 On the examination of writing hands as a means of identifying female scribes, see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 41–55.

62 Like Tsie, who seems to have frequently acted as a scribe on behalf of other people; her letters are preserved among the Coptic ostraca from TT 29, dating from the eighth century CE. For a discussion of Tsie's handwriting and an edition of these texts, see Boud'hors and Heurtel (eds) 2010, 15, 247–249, 251, 253–257, 260–263, 267–268, 271–275, 278, 281–283, 285–288, 306. A similar role seems to have been assumed, at least occasionally, by Metredora the Little, who is the author of at least one graffito recorded in the temple of Seti I at Abydos.

63 As discussed by Bagnall and Cribiore, 'It is [...] possible, in reading the letters, to distinguish fairly readily between those written in a polished style and those of an essentially oral character', Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 7. However, as noted by the authors, it cannot be excluded that the scribe had simply copied the client's message via dictation. On the evidence for orality in the papyrological documentation from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, see Evans 2004 and Jay 2019.

the text that imply an intimate dialogue between the sender and the recipient of the message.[64]

Another important factor is represented by the linguistic choice, namely the use of Coptic – the last stage of the Egyptian language – instead of Greek. Despite the few Greek letters securely attributed to women after the fourth century CE, a number of Coptic texts, many of which are quite early in date, can be confidently linked to female writers.[65] As noted by various scholars, this phenomenon seems to suggest that the Coptic language was often selected as a vehicle for more private and spontaneous messages.[66] The complex formulaic style that distinguished the contemporary Greek documentation often betrays the involvement of specialists, while the Coptic letters suddenly appearing in the papyrological documentation from the fourth century CE often feature a rapid and colloquial style.[67]

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64 Which is unlikely to have implied the involvement of a third individual in the composition of the text. For instance, the widespread practice of relying on professional scribes has been often claimed as the reason for the lack of open expressions of emotion (especially love) in the thousands of letters on papyrus discovered so far. On the subject of emotions in Egyptian epistolary documentation, see Clarysse 2017. For a comprehensive study of love and erotic letters, including the Greco-Roman and late antique papyrological documentation, see Drago and Hodkinson 2023.

65 Several are indeed the Coptic letters found in Jeme, likely written by women, who were clearly often well-trained readers and writers. In the above-mentioned O.Mon.Epiph. 386, Tatre and Katharon request that Moses sends them part of the *kanon* (probably here a reference to sacred scriptures). As noted by Terry G. Wilfong, Tatre states that she is writing 'in her own hand', probably to convey to the sender that she was able to read the literary texts she was requesting. For a discussion of this text, see Wilfong 2002, 76.

66 For an extensive discussion of this subject, see the introduction in Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 53–54. Studies on the same topic, which unfortunately remain largely unpublished, were carried out by Sarah Clackson in the early 2000s. Her personal notes, based on her research on the Coptic Oxyrhynchus papyri and now kept at the Griffith Institute in Oxford, point to the large diffusion of the practice of writing private letters in Coptic among women already in the fourth century CE. I am grateful to Cat Warsi for allowing me to examine these documents at the Griffith Institute Archives in September 2018.

67 For instance, P.Kell.Copt. 50 (*c.* 355 CE), a Coptic letter from Kellis, stands out for its oral style. The identification of the sender as the writer of the message seems plausible; see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 222–223.

Figs 3a–b: O.Frange 353 and 354 ('Sousanna writes to the monk Frange'); TT 29; first half of the eighth century CE; © Université libre de Bruxelles.

As noted by Bagnall and Cribiore:

> A notable feature of the women's letters written in Coptic is the relative expertise of their hands and the rare occurrence of unskilled handwriting among them. [...] Even though the vast majority of these letters are penned by accomplished hands, there is considerable difference in the degree of expertise that they exhibit. It is possible to distinguish roughly three groups: the professional, cursive hands and the few literary ones on papyrus; the proficient but not completely even hands of some of the ostraca; and the few irregular hands, which are nevertheless fast and capable and appear on various materials.[68]

It is indeed also the choice of material support that might occasionally cause the apparent unevenness of a handwriting, and perhaps many of these documents were actually written by competent writers.[69] Indeed, quite strikingly, most of the more reliable evidence for female writers in late antique and Byzantine

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68 Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 53.
69 On the nature of the material support as a probable cause of handwriting unevenness, see Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 53.

Egypt has been transmitted by ostraca (Figs 3a–b) and graffiti.[70] Quite interestingly, the Coptic letters found in the village of Kellis[71] (modern Ismant el-Kharab) in the Dakhla Oasis have revealed five documents from women,[72] some of which were likely also written by them (Fig. 4),[73] while the Greek letters so far known are only written by men. These Coptic letters date to the third quarter of the fourth century CE, which can be ascertained thanks to the dated Greek documents found in the same archaeological contexts. These are among the earliest Coptic letters so far known to have been found outside a monastic setting. Still, many of the women identified as authors of Coptic private documents were likely female monastics. That literacy was to some extent 'required' among female monastics can be assumed by reading Moses of Abydos's exhortation to the women belonging to his monastic federation, where it is stated that they should

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70 See, for instance, the documents written by Tsie and Sousanna, belonging to the aforementioned 'Dossier de Frangé' from TT 29 (first half of the eighth century CE), in Boud'hors and Heurtel (eds) 2010. In particular, among the many letters (O.Frange 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358) attributed to Sousanna, several preserve an opening formula in which she states, 'It is Sousanna who writes […]'. Sousanna's handwriting is described by the editors – in relation to the writing hand of Tsie, another prolific female writer whose documents are preserved in the same archive – as 'certes plus appliquée qu'exercée, mais de qualité nettement supérieure'; see Boud'hors and Heurtel (eds) 2010, 15, 242–243.

71 Many of these letters were discovered during the archaeological investigations of the Dakhleh Oasis Project team, which were carried out since the 1980s in a series of large domestic complexes. House 3, abandoned in the late fourth century CE, was particularly rich in written evidence. Seventeen documents in Coptic and five in Greek came to light in various areas of the building (rooms 6, 8, 9, 10 and 11), most of which relate to aspects of textile production. Three of these documents are written on wooden boards (P.Kell.Copt. 46, 47 and 48). Many are private letters, several of which can be confidently associated with a local Manichaean community. For an introduction to this discovery, see Bowen 2015.

72 For instance, P.Kell.Copt. 42 (c. 355–380 CE) is a letter sent by a mother and sister to a man named Paulos. The message is written on both sides of a wooden board. The hand might belong to an experienced writer, but it remains uncertain who was the actual writer of the letter, considering the peculiar religious character of several expressions. However, it seems unlikely that the author was a professional scribe. See the re-edition in Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 219. P.Kell.Copt. 11 records a letter sent from a mother named Tsemnouthes to her son (first half of the fourth century CE); the letter communicates the imposition of new taxes on the family. The letter is mainly written in Coptic, but the address, the first lines, and the ending salutation formula are in Greek. See the re-edition and comments in Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 218.

73 Among the letters attributed to female writers living in Kellis, one outstanding example is P.Kell.Copt. 43 (c. 355 CE). This bilingual epistle was probably partly written by a woman named Tehat. While on the basis of several elements we might tentatively attribute the Coptic section to Tehat, she was likely not the writer of the Greek part, which may nonetheless have been dictated by her; see the re-edition in Bagnall and Cribiore 2006, 220–221.

'read the Scriptures day and night'.[74] A colophon identified in a large-format service book intended for public readings and containing the *Passio Theodori Anatholii* (CC 0437 = CLM 239)[75] could provide direct testimony of female monastics acting as copyists.[76] The colophon preserved on the last page of this parchment codex, copied sometime after the year 867 CE in Touton, the ancient Fayyumic city of Tebtynis, identifies a certain ⲀⲘⲀ Felabia, spiritual daughter of ⲀⲠⲀ Kyrillos, as the donor of the manuscript to the church of the Holy Archangel at Phantoou for the release of her soul. Felabia was most likely a nun affiliated with the monastery of St Michael or one of the many congregations depending on this religious organisation, as suggested by the list of religious authorities to whom she addresses her prayers.[77] While we can state that she was certainly the donor of the manuscript, and probably also the writer of the colophon, it is unclear whether she can also be identified as the copyist of the manuscript. Her possible authorship is indeed suggested by the expression 'pray on behalf of the God-loving sister who took care of it'.[78]

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74 See Westerfeld 2017, 200, n. 44. Further evidence is provided by the *Gnomai*, where the education of female monastics (i.e. virgins) is stressed on several occasions: 'Their first concern is to rise at dawn and to take up a book and read [...] The first two hours are set aside for reading, as is the time from the ninth hour on' (*Gnomai*, Chap. 6, § 5, ed. Stewart 2015, 48–49).

75 van Lantschoot 1929, 74–76; Depuydt 1993, 282–284, no. 144.

76 Further testimony of women's involvement in book production is preserved in two letters. In P.Mon.Epiph. 374 (fifth to sixth century CE), Epiphanius writes to Patermouthius, 'regarding my book. Be so kind and agree with my mother that she may write it; take yours and bring it away in your hand and bring it up to me'. As discussed by Chrysi Kotsifou, while the editors of the text interpret this passage as a reference to an account book, nothing in the text excludes the reference to women's involvement in the production of a Christian literary text. Further evidence is offered by P.Köln. inv. 10213 (fifth to sixth centuries CE), which seems to preserve evidence of women's involvement in various stages of manuscript production, among which the illumination of codices. For the translation of these textual passages, further discussion on these documents and their significance for reconstructing the role of women in the manuscript culture of late antique Egypt, see Kotsifou 2007.

77 This manuscript – part of a set of twenty codices with dated colophons, from 823 to 914 CE – contains significant evidence on the organisation and personnel of the monastery of St Michael and its relations with other Christian congregations. For further information on this manuscript, see <https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/manuscripts/239> (accessed on 21 May 2023).

78 For a description and translation of the colophon, see the relevant entry in PATHs: <https://atlas.paths-erc.eu/colophons/55> (accessed on 21 May 2023).
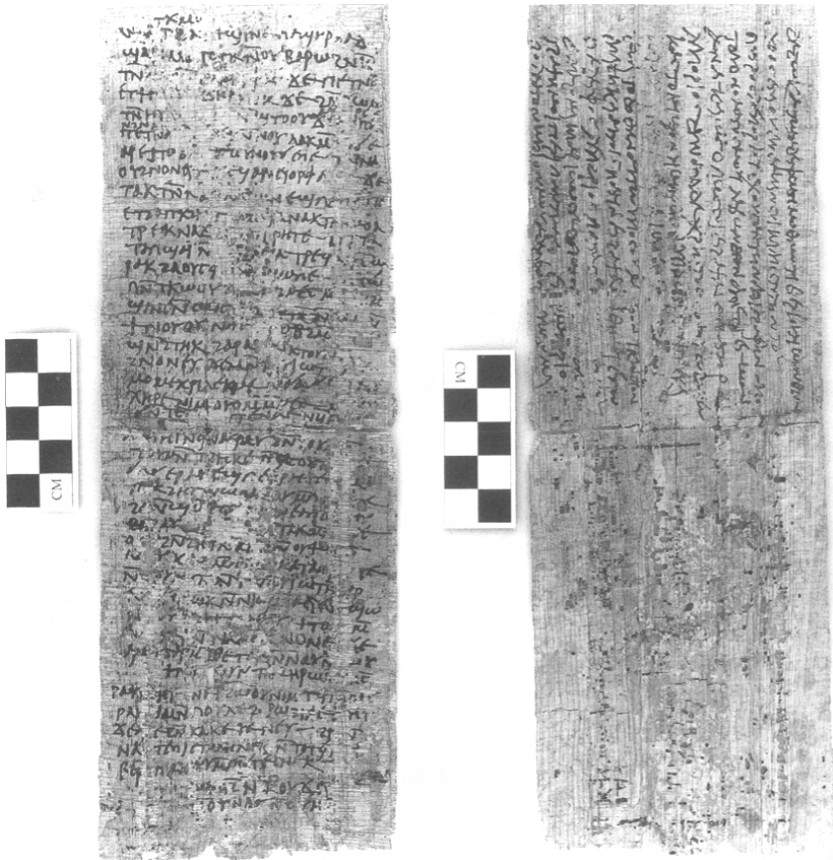
Fig. 4: P.Kell.Copt. 43; Coptic letter written by Tehat to her son; from Kellis; *c.* 355 CE; reprinted from Gardner, Alcock and Funk 1999, pl. 35. © Colin A. Hope & Dakhleh Oasis Project.

3 Female devotees and monastics as graffiti writers

After having discussed the difficulties in identifying female writers in the production of documentary papyri from Christian Egypt, we will examine what graffiti tell us about the diffusion of writing practices among female devotees and monastics.

The three corpora examined in this paper – namely the graffiti identified at the sites of Oxyrhynchus, Athribis, and Abydos – provide interesting evidence of cultic practices involving female devotees, as well as new insight into the role of women

as graffitists in Christian Egypt. Contrary to the sources provided by documentary papyri, much of the written evidence discussed in the following pages can be confidently attributed to female writers. This is mainly due to the fact that these graffiti have been found in archaeological contexts hosting a community of female monastics in antiquity (i.e. like the nunnery identified among the ruins of the temple of Ptolemy XII at Athribis) or in religious spaces associated with the cultic activities of specific female congregations residing in neighbouring villages, like some of the areas of the temple of Seti I in Abydos. Interestingly, as occasionally recorded in papyrological sources such as in the aforementioned case of Tsie, these women often wrote on behalf of others. Many of them are indeed noted for their writing skills,[79] and on some occasions, it seems feasible to identify scribes with a certain degree of experience in copying literary texts.[80]

On the other hand, on several occasions, the authorship of these written testimonies remains uncertain, and we cannot exclude the possibility that the women mentioned in some of these graffiti were helped by someone else in writing their names and prayers on the walls of these religious institutions. This is especially the case of the Basilica of St Philoxenos, where it seems plausible that members of this Christian congregation occasionally wrote on behalf of male and female devotees visiting this holy site. This phenomenon was probably widespread throughout the Mediterranean and beyond; however, it finds especially extensive evidence in Nubia and, in particular, in the upper church at Banganarti, in association with the shrine of the Archangel Raphael, where the recorded testimonies suggest the presence of what we might call, in the words of Adam Łajtar, a 'graffiti industry'.[81]

A variety of techniques and writing tools can be recognised by observing the graffiti recorded in these religious complexes. Considering the raw materials and/or writing tools employed alongside the peculiarities of the writing hands remains essential to reconstructing the authorship of these graffiti and the context of their creation. The graffiti here analysed ranges from exemplars scratched or hastily written with a piece of charcoal and a variety of pigments by authors who are certainly not noted for their writing skills, to others carefully painted with brushes and different types of inks by writers evidently writing on a regular basis who, on some occasions, might be linked to a professional writing setting. In this sense, we

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79 Much evidence is provided especially by the nunnery identified in Athribis. The exceptional state of conservation of these graffiti – contrary to the evidence recorded in, for instance, Abydos – allows for a detailed study of writing hands. See below, Section 3.2.

80 See, in particular, the 'book hands' recorded in the monastic complex of Athribis, discussed below in Section 3.2.

81 Łajtar 2021, 165.

can identify a variety of writers and occasions on which graffitiing practices were performed. The production of some of these graffiti was perhaps often dictated by a simple willingness to stress a physical presence within the religious building.[82] However, others that had clearly required a certain amount of planning were likely meant to last and aimed at conveying a specific message to supernatural or mundane audiences.[83] Equally important to understanding what these graffiti disclose about their writers, and the needs these writings were called to answer, is considering the spatial context of these written testimonies. The areas in which these writings have been recorded are often communal spaces where numerous people gathered on the occasion of meals (as in the refectory of the nunnery associated with Shenoute's confederation), liturgical services (like the evidence identified in the crypt of the Basilica of St Philoxenos), and other cultic activities.[84] As discussed by numerous scholars, this phenomenon underlines the social function that graffitiing practices were often meant to play, and thus distinguish them from other forms of writing.[85]

3.1 Oxyrhynchus

The ruins of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus lie on the western bank of the Bahr Yusuf River, near the modern village of el-Bahnasa in the province of Minya. The site has been the object of extensive investigations by the mission of the University of Barcelona since 1992.[86] The presence of nuns and female devotees across the city

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82 For instance, we frequently find 'tags' recording no more than devotees' names, which can nonetheless be considered testimony of cultic practice. On the concept of 'tag', see Macdonald 2023. For an overview of the parallels offered by other late antique contexts, from Europe to Africa and the Near East, see Felle and Ward-Perkins (eds) 2021.

83 While many of these graffiti, even 'tags', were to some extent believed to have a supernatural audience – namely as a medium between devotees and God – others were likely meant to be read by other visitors and/or members of the same religious institutions.

84 This might be the case for some of the graffiti recorded in room 'z' of the annex of the temple of Seti I at Abydos, which were perhaps associated with the cult of St Moses and the observation of the Nile flooding.

85 On the social function of graffiti, see Ragazzoli et al. (eds) 2018; Felle and Ward-Perkins (eds) 2021; Škrabal et al. (eds) 2023.

86 For an overview of the archaeological investigations carried out at the site, see Erroux-Morfin and Padró (eds) 2008; Subías Pascual 2008; Subías Pascual 2012; Padró (ed.) 2014; Mascort (ed.) 2018; Pons Mellado (ed.) 2020.

is attested by the graffiti[87] and funerary stelae[88] discovered within or nearby several Christian buildings excavated over the last decades (Fig. 5). However, although recorded in the local epigraphic documentation, Christian women in Oxyrhynchus can be claimed as possible authors of graffiti in only a few instances.[89] Yet potential evidence for the presence of female devotees and monastics engaged in writing practices has been uncovered by the recent investigations carried out in the area of a Christian building discovered in Sector 24 in 2012, which was likely in use between the middle of the fifth and the eighth or ninth centuries CE.[90] The study of the graffiti found in this religious complex in light of the information provided by the papyrological documentation has only recently led to the identification of this building as the Basilica of St Philoxenos.[91] The corpus comprises textual graffiti written in Coptic and Greek and a variety of figural graffiti, which originally covered the walls of the basilica's superstructure and the inner chambers of its underground area. Among the more than one hundred and fifty textual graffiti recorded,[92] the exemplars mentioning women are only a few.

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87 Two *tabulae ansatae* painted in red on the walls of the funerary houses in the high necropolis of Oxyrhynchus preserve short epitaphs in memory of young women whose names are unfortunately not preserved. They were probably buried within this Christian complex. For a translation and short commentary of these *dipinti*, see Piedrafita 2008, 142. For further insights into the graffiti discovered in this religious complex, see Subías Pascual 2003. A certain ⲀⲘⲀ Silla is mentioned, together with several monks, in a Coptic painted graffito (no. 15) discovered on the right side of the central niche in the apse of a church in a monastic complex located in the suburb of this city; see Bosson 2015, 78–79. For an overview of the archaeological investigations carried out in this religious complex, see Subías Pascual 2012 and 2020.

88 A woman possibly named Isidora is mentioned in a funerary stela discovered in the necropolis near the Basilica of St Philoxenos. See the edition and commentary in Mascia and Martínez García 2021.

89 Indeed, the graffiti recording female names in the funerary houses are likely epitaphs written by family members to honour their memory. Seemingly, the nuns and female devotees cited in the graffiti of the suburban monastic complex are always listed in graffiti recording predominantly male names and likely written on their behalf by someone else.

90 For a brief report on the discovery of this Christian building, see Padró et al. 2012, 8–11; Padró et al. 2013, 10–12; Padró et al. 2014, 11–13. On the dating of this religious complex, see Martínez García and Mascia 2023.

91 On the identification of this religious institution as the Basilica of St Philoxenos, see Padró, Martínez García and Piedrafita 2018; Martínez García and Mascia 2023. For an overview of the papyrological evidence witnessing the presence of a church of St Philoxenos, see Papaconstantinou 2001, 286–288, and Papaconstantinou 2005.

92 The corpus of graffiti discovered at this religious complex is currently under study by the writer in collaboration with José Javier Martínez García, who is in charge of the study of the archaeological context.
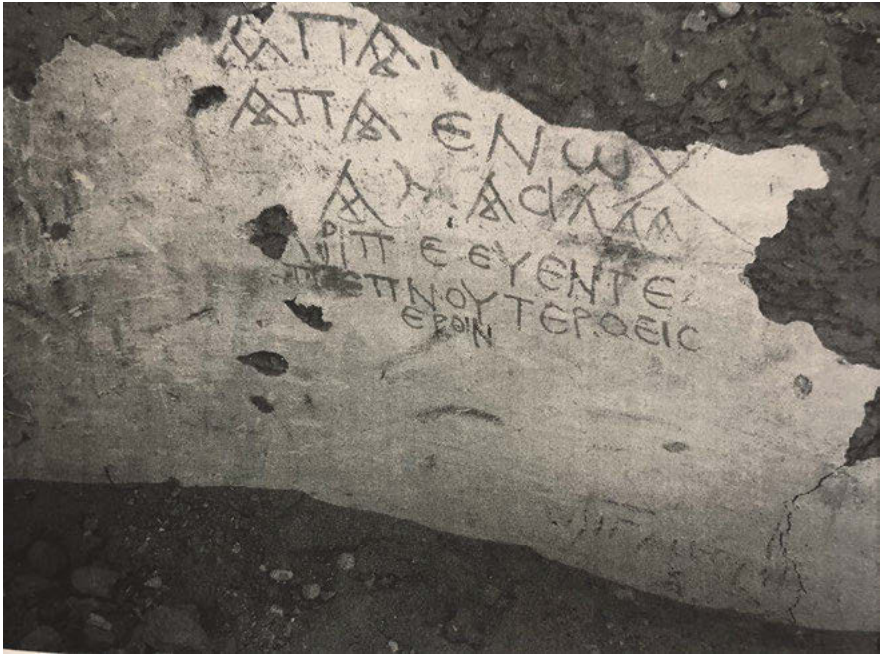
Fig. 5: *Dipinti* no. 15 and no. 16. The name of the female monastic Silla is recorded in a communal graffito (no. 15) found in a monastery of the suburb of Oxyrhynchus; *c.* fifth century CE (?); reprinted from Bosson 2015, 89; © Archaeological mission of the University of Barcelona at Oxyrhynchus.

The difference between the Oxyrhynchite testimonies regarding this religious building and those discovered in Abydos and Athribis, which will be discussed shortly, lies in their function and the reasons that led the women mentioned in the graffiti to visit this holy site. Indeed, the Basilica of St Philoxenos was likely neither a religious complex directly associated with a nunnery (like the monastic complex of Athribis) nor a building that has left tangible traces of the periodic performance of cultic activities from a specific religious congregation of female monastics (as the temple of Seti I in Abydos). The presence of women inside the building indeed seems associated with participation in the liturgical activities performed inside the crypt, their request of aid to St Philoxenos through prayers written by members of this religious institution, and their visit to the area surrounding the main religious building. The variety of occasions that led these women to write (or ask someone else to write) their names and prayers within this religious complex can be guessed by observing the spatial distribution of these graffiti, the content of the texts, the peculiarities of the writing hands, and the tools used in the performance of these

activities. The surviving evidence indeed testifies to a variety of individuals engaged in graffitiing practices – from writers recording no more than their names on the walls with a piece of charcoal (especially in the underground galleries), to more practised hands carving or painting short prayers in various areas of the religious complex. A graffito hastily engraved with a sharp tool records the name of a certain 'Anna' on the eastern wall of the crypt. Climbing one of the benches surrounding the chamber, the author used the geometric decorative programme as a writing surface. The writer of this ephemeral inscription, does not seem accustomed to writing on a regular basis. Similar observations can be made for another graffito, where the same anthroponym is recorded. As in the latter case, Anna may have written this 'tag' on her own,[93] scribbling it on the southern wall of the crypt with a piece of charcoal. The graffito was perhaps intended, like the previous inscription, as a memento of her visit to this cultic space. The position of the graffito seems to suggest that the author was, at the time, sitting on the bench while writing, perhaps on a break from one of the religious services being performed in this underground area.

Several female monastics identified by the honorific title ⲀⲘⲀ are recorded in a series of Coptic graffiti listing predominantly male figures, engraved on a central red band of the decorative programme spanning the crypt's walls. As in the case of the other Christian buildings investigated at the site, a single individual seems to have written the graffito on behalf of his/her male and female associates. A similar case is that of a Greek graffito engraved on the northern wall of one of the nearby annexed chambers, where a votive inscription records the names of a certain Doxia and Phaustine, mentioned together with a man named Biktor, asking for St Philoxenos's protection.[94] Various female names are recorded in the votive texts present in this area, which might have been used as a cultic space associated with the oracular function of the church.[95] Probably the most interesting inscription can be found in room no. 4 of this complex of chambers, where an incised graffito reads '+ Lord remember me, lord. Margarites +'.[96] The inscription has been accurately engraved

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93 As already noted, the term 'tag' generally indicates graffiti consisting of simple anthroponyms; on the practice of 'tagging' in antiquity, see Lohmann 2017; Lohmann 2020; Macdonald 2023.

94 For a preliminary description of the graffito, see Padró, Martínez García and Piedrafita 2018, 710. An edition of the text may be found in Delattre, Dijkstra and van der Vliet 2020, 401.

95 This is indeed suggested by the abundance of votive inscriptions addressed to St Philoxenos, the formulary of which frequently seems to find parallels in the oracle tickets associated with the cult of this saint that have thus far been published. For an overview of the investigations carried out in this area and the graffiti recorded in the 2022 excavation campaign, see Mascia 2023.

96 For a preliminary discussion of this inscription, see Padró, Martínez García and Piedrafita 2018, 710–711. An edition of the text may be found in Delattre, Dijkstra and van der Vliet 2020, 401–402.

by a practised writer, and we cannot determine whether the votive text was in-
scribed by Margarites during a visit to this holy site, or rather written by someone
else, perhaps commissioned to one of the members of this religious institution,[97]
who were likely often writing on behalf of the devotees visiting the church. Female
names also appear on a few graffiti, painted in red and preserved on several stone
slabs discovered inside the crypt during the excavations. These blocks were used in
antiquity to seal the crypt after the destruction of the religious complex in the Byz-
antine phase. Originally, these slabs formed the walls of the superstructure of the
basilica, which were framed by a variety of textual and figural graffiti, predomi-
nantly painted in red. Many of them were clearly made when the basilica was still
an active religious centre.[98] A Coptic prayer written by (or on behalf of) an unnamed
woman – most likely a novice, as indicated by the use of the term ϣⲏⲙ – was hastily
written with red paint on one of these stone slabs.[99]

3.2 Athribis

Athribis is located near the village of Sheikh Hamad, around 5 km from the city
of Sohag, which was home to the White Monastery founded by Apa Shenoute
(*c.* 348–465 CE).[100] On this site was built the third monastic congregation in
Shenoute's federation, a convent for female monastics. Thirteen Coptic letters dated
between the fourth and fifth centuries CE record Shenoute's complex relationship
with the women of this congregation, who, while belonging to the religious commu-
nity under his control, lived separately from him and the other monks.[101] Through
the lens of the epistolary exchange with Shenoute, closely re-examined by Rebecca

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97 As discussed in the introduction to this section, similar testimonies are offered by the religious
complexes of Christian Nubia; see Łajtar 2021, 172–173. Still, while Margarites is here likely used as
a personal name, as noted by Jitse Dijkstra, Alain Delattre and Jacques van der Vliet, it is also a
toponym attested in the Oxyrhynchite nomos; see Delattre, Dijkstra and van der Vliet 2020, 401.
98 For a description of the graffiti identified on some of these stone slabs, see Martínez García and
Mascia 2023.
99 This graffito is currently under study by the writer in collaboration with José Javier Martínez
García, who is in charge of the analysis of the archaeological context.
100 On Shenoute and the literary evidence associated with his figure, see Emmel (ed.) 2004.
101 These letters are preserved in nine collections of epistles that Shenoute wrote to male and
female members of his community. On these letters and their significance in reconstructing life
within this female monastic community, see Krawiec 2002, 5–8. On Shenoute's correspondence, see
also Emmel 1993, 158–159.

Krawiec in the early 2000s, we have earned a glimpse into life at this monastic congregation.[102] However, tangible evidence of this religious community has remained only a desideratum until recently.

The archaeological investigations being carried out at the site over the last decades are finally helping us shed light on life within this Christian congregation. Since 2016, the team of the Yale Monastic Archaeology Project (YMAP) has joined the Universität Tübingen to investigate the archaeological remains of a Christian religious institution identified in the area of the ancient temple of Ptolemy XII, which served as the centre of the monastic complex.[103] The evidence seems to prove that the building hosted the women's community belonging to Shenoute's monastic federation, recorded in the above-mentioned Coptic letters.[104]

Stephen J. Davis's analysis of the Coptic graffiti (*dipinti*) found in this context has restored the voices of many of the nuns living in Athribis nunnery at the time of its religious activities.[105] The plastered walls of this complex preserve traces of Coptic graffiti written predominantly by female monastics, who recorded their names and religious titles as well as the various activities associated with this religious community. The Christian character of these written testimonies is underlined by the widespread occurrence of Christian markers,[106] prayers addressed to God, and terminology frequently derived from the sacred scriptures.[107] The graffiti also provide a wide range of terms that help us identify different religious offices and ranks within this community. For instance, there is the frequent association of the Coptic word ϣⲏⲙ with the names of various female monastics, which,[108] as already discussed, probably functioned as a technical term referring to the status of some of these women as novices. High-ranking members of this congregation

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102 Krawiec 2002.

103 On the archaeological investigations carried out in the refectory as well as the entire complex, see El-Masry 2001; Kościuk 2012; Abul-Yazid et al. 2019; Pyke 2019a; Pyke 2019b; Davis 2020a.

104 The clearest evidence that the monastic community was associated with Shenoute's federation is the recording of a prayer (6PH-25), on one of the pilasters of the six-pillared hall, invoking the saint by name; see Davis 2020b, 276–277.

105 Davis 2020b.

106 For instance, *nomina sacra* (6PH-25) and crosses (REF-11 and REF-12); see Davis 2020b, 269, 271, 276–277.

107 Like the expression 'table of Zion', which was used in two graffiti (REF 12 (E-07) and REF-06 (E-12)) with reference to the refectory. See Davis 2020b, 269, 276, 282.

108 As in REF-08; REF-10 (E-05); REF-12 (E-07); REF-11 (E-06); 6PH-20; 6PH-03; see Davis 2020b, 267–271, 273–274, 281–282.

are also mentioned in several graffiti, like Anastasia, who is identified as the 'head of the table', and her stewards.[109]

The chronology of these graffiti and the monastic activities recorded by them remains uncertain; however, a partial time frame between the sixth and seventh centuries CE may be suggested by the date preserved by one of these graffiti and by the chronology attested by the ceramic material found in the refectory and the six-pillared hall.[110] The spatial context in which these graffiti were found provides a glimpse into graffitiing practices in the daily life of these female monastics. Indeed, numerous *dipinti* have been identified in the refectory, close to circular seating that may originally have been located around low tables,[111] suggesting that at least some of these writings were made on the occasion of communal meals. Another privileged area for 'writing activities' involving the women of this religious congregation was among others the six-pillared hall, which preserves numerous Coptic ephemeral inscriptions.[112] These findings are not only relevant for understanding how these areas were inhabited as social spaces,[113] but also in light of the wealth of evidence they offer for the selection of writing tools and techniques, writing skills, onomastic data,[114] and information on various aspects of life within this monastic

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109 The latter term might be translated as 'managers of the household'; they helped the head of the monastic community in administrating the religious organisation. In this specific context (6PH-22), these women seem to have been responsible for the provision of meals in the refectory. See Davis 2020b, 274–276, 279–281.

110 A graffito in the refectory written by a female monastic named Antinoe, namely REF-10 (E-05), records the date 594/595 CE (311 AM); see Davis 2020b, 265. A study of the ceramic material found at the site of Athribis has been published in Pyke 2019a and Pyke 2019b. On the results of Gillian Pyke's examination of the ceramic containers found in this area for the dating of the monastic graffiti discussed, see Davis 2020b, 265–266. Some insights into the date of the pottery discovered in the refectory and six-pillared hall can be found in YMAP's online report at <https://egyptology.yale.edu/expeditions/current-expeditions/yale-monastic-archaeology-project-north-wadi-al-natrun/monastery-of-john-the-little> (accessed on 5 May 2023).

111 Davis 2020b, 264. For an initial description of this area and photographic documentation of the circular seating, see Kościuk 2012, 108, 125. A recent report on the discoveries in the refectory and photographic documentation of this seating have been published in YMAP's online report at <https://egyptology.yale.edu/expeditions/current-expeditions/yale-monastic-archaeology-project-north-wadi-al-natrun/monastery-of-john-the-little> (accessed on 2 May 2023).

112 Davis 2020b, 270, 273–282.

113 As discussed by Davis: 'Especially this cluster of graffiti vividly demonstrates the interactivity of wall writings, architectural space, and social practice'; see Davis in <https://egyptology.yale.edu/expeditions/current-expeditions/yale-monastic-archaeology-project-north-wadi-al-natrun/monastery-of-john-the-little/trash-deposit> (accessed on 12 May 2023).

114 The graffiti recorded indeed shows the names of numerous female monastics, like Jelet, Mariam, Kyra, Tanasta, Mana, Apostolia, Taēse, Iousta, Evangelia, Anastasia and several nuns named Thecla;

milieu.[115] The study of this entire cluster demonstrates a broad repertoire of writing hands and a glimpse of the wide range of scribal skills within this monastic community. As noted by Davis:

> Overall, the writing-styles range widely, from relatively unpractised to more formal scribal hands. A couple of special cases also feature ornamented letter forms. [...] The texts also feature grammar and terminology that deliberately echo each other.[116]

Various graffiti suggest an authorship that goes beyond the occasional practice of writing, but rather indicates that several of these women were trained scribes, at least in some instances accustomed to copying literary texts. Several are the 'book hands' identified by Davis in his overview of the graffiti present in this monastic complex. Three graffiti have been recorded in the southern quadrant of the six-pillared hall, among which 6PH-21 and 6PH-22, featuring ornamented letters,[117] probably written by the above-mentioned Anastasia, 'head of the table' (Fig. 6).[118] Another 'fairly formal book hand' has been identified as the author of a graffito (6PH-25) recorded on the central pilaster built into the south wall of the six-pillared hall.[119] If the attestation of 'book hands' is considered in light of the material choices made by these women in undertaking the act of writing, some of them could have been linked to the realm of manuscript production in some way. The graffiti from Athribis stand out for the variety of

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Davis 2020b, 267, 273. Davis suggests that the attestation of numerous female devotees bearing the name Thecla might be associated with a local cult of this saint, which is also probably recorded in graffito REF-17 (C 03); see Davis 2020b, 270, 272–273. On the evidence for the cult of St Thecla, see Davis 2001.

115 As Davis notes, the graffiti recorded in the refectory and the six-pillared hall demonstrate the social function of these areas. When the epigraphic sources are analysed in light of the archaeological evidence, they help to reconstruct their essential 'association with storage, administration, and distribution of food and drink'. For instance, several graffiti found in the refectory refer to water distribution (REF-10 and REF-12); Davis 2020b, 269, 281–282. An administrative function similar to that of the six-pillared hall in the monastery of Athribis can be hypothesised for one of the buildings (referred to by the Greek term *diakonia*) of the White Monastery; on the function of the *diakonia* in a monastic context, see Blanke 2019, 91, 121, 142–143.

116 <https://egyptology.yale.edu/expeditions/current-expeditions/yale-monastic-archaeology-project-north-wadi-al-natrun/monastery-of-john-the-little/trash-deposit> (accessed on 12 May 2023).

117 Davis has noted similar occurrences in other graffiti recorded in the monastic complex. On this topic, see the online report <https://egyptology.yale.edu/expeditions/current-expeditions/yale-monastic-archaeology-project-north-wadi-al-natrun/monastery-of-john-the-little/trash-deposit>(accessed on 12 May 2023).

118 While it cannot be excluded that someone else was writing on behalf of Anastasia, according to David, the presence of her name – perhaps used as a self-identification marker at the beginning of 6PH-22 – and the closeness of 6PH-21 and 22, written in a similar script, seem to foster the identification of Anastasia as the author of these graffiti; see Davis 2020b, 275.

119 The text contains a prayer addressed to Shenoute; see Davis 2020b, 276–277.

colours (and pigments) selected for writing on the plaster walls of this religious complex, ranging from black[120] and red[121] to green.[122] The extensive use of paint and brushes compared to charcoal and similar raw materials implies not only a certain grade of intentionality and planning in the production of graffiti within these spaces, but also the use of tools that, in a monastic context, were necessarily linked to specific production settings associated with, among other things, the manufacture of manuscripts and artistic works.

Fig. 6: *Dipinti* 6PH-21 and 6PH-22, presumably both associated with the female monastic Anastasia; Athribis; *c.* sixth to seventh century CE (?); reprinted from Davis 2020b, 275; © Stephen J. Davis and the YMAP. Photography, photogrammetry, and application of D-Stretch technology by Alberto Urcia.

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120 Black pigment seems to have been selected for writing most of these graffiti. The raw material can occasionally be identified as charcoal or graphite, as it seems when examining the photographic documentation recording a graffito (6PH-20) preserving the name of a certain 'little Kyra' identified in the six-pillared hall; see Davis 2020b, 271, 273. This raw material is extensively employed for writing graffiti throughout the Mediterranean. On the use of charcoal in graffitiing practices, see DiBiasie-Sammons 2022. Nonetheless, it is clear that the source is commonly black ink/paint, as is evident in the images collected in Davis's publication.

121 Red paint seems to have been used only in a few cases among the writings recorded throughout the complex, as in at least one of the graffiti identified on the west face of the east wall in the refectory; see Davis 2020b, 264. The use of this pigment in the religious complex of Athribis differs from Oxyrhynchus, where red paint was extensively used for writing on the walls of the basilica superstructure.

122 At least one surviving *dipinto* identified in the refectory, REF-17 (C-03), possibly mentioning St Thecla, was written in green pigment; see Davis 2020b, 272–273. The use of this pigment is interesting, since this colour is rarely recorded in the surviving evidence. The pigment used is perhaps derived from green earth (mixture of celadonite and glauconite); however, verdigris, malachite, or a mixture of blue and yellow pigments (such as Egyptian blue with orpiment) cannot be excluded. I am grateful to Olivier Bonnerot for providing information on the possible raw materials used in the production of this pigment.

3.3 Abydos

Abydos is located on the west bank of the Nile, an ancient site that encompasses several modern settlements, among which el-ʿAraba el-Madfuna. In the Early Pharaonic Period, the site hosted a necropolis for the earliest Egyptian pharaohs, and later became a pilgrimage centre associated with the cult of Osiris. The most prominent monument in the landscape of the modern city is the temple of the nineteenth-dynasty pharaoh Seti I and the nearby temple catacomb of Osiris. The sanctuary of Seti I features two hypostyle halls, seven sanctuaries, and a series of other spaces associated with the cultic and administrative activities of the sanctuary. Erected as a mortuary temple in honour of Seti I, the sanctuary underwent several major transformations in the course of the centuries. The graffiti recorded in this religious complex help us in reconstructing its history from the Dynastic phase to the Byzantine Period. First published at the beginning of the twentieth century by Paul Perdrizet and Gustave Lefebvre,[123] the Greek graffiti recorded in the temple have more recently been the object of an extensive study by Ian Rutherford who, through these sources, has identified three major phases of reuse of this sanctuary.[124] The first evidence of Christians visiting this ancient building probably dates to the fourth century CE, following the closure of an oracular shrine associated with the cult of the god Bes. Various archaeological evidence points to the progressive transformation and reuse of the spaces of the ancient temple, the chronology of which remains extremely uncertain.[125]

A clear understanding of the different phases of this religious space's transformation throughout the Late Antique and Byzantine periods has also been prevented by the extensive destruction of the Christian structural changes to the temple that were made in modern times in an attempt to restore the original appearance of the sanctuary.[126] While the study of the Coptic epigraphic corpus today is largely

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123 Perdrizet and Lefebvre (eds) 1919.

124 To a first phase – which Ian Rutherford has called the 'early period' (sixth to third centuries BCE) – belong a number of Greek, Cypriot, Phoenician, and Aramaic graffiti witnessing the names of visitors (many of whom were soldiers) partly associated with the cult of Osiris. In a second phase, between the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman periods, the evidence witnesses the worshipping of the god Serapis. The graffiti associated with the third phase, namely the Late Roman Period, indicate the existence of a cult associated with the god Bes. See Rutherford 2003, 177–180. For a rediscussion of Rutherford's chronological phases, see Westerfeld 2017, 189–190.

125 As Westerfeld discusses, a chronology of the Christian activities within the temple has been based on, among other things, the epigraphic material found in the area, which has allegedly been dated, using prosopographic data, between the seventh and tenth centuries CE; see Westerfeld 2017, 191.

126 Westerfeld 2017, 191–192.

limited by previous scholars' lack of interest and the partial publication of evidence[127] – which unfortunately has mostly vanished today – a recent study conducted by Jennifer Westerfeld helps us to understand the importance of the graffiti written in Coptic for reconstructing the activities of female monastics within the temple. Indeed, as Westerfeld notes, 'the Coptic graffiti from the Seti temple are unique in that almost all of them were written by or for monastic women'.[128] This fact has led to the hypothesis, still sustained by several scholars, that the temple of Abydos had been transformed into a nunnery in the Late Antique Period. However, as Westerfeld has recently noted, the preliminary stage in the study of this corpus of graffiti doesn't allow us to verify this theory.[129] According to Westerfeld's rediscussion of the extant evidence, the main cluster of Coptic graffiti is located in room 'z'[130] of the annex, and a significant number is also recorded on the pillars of the outer court. A few Coptic graffiti are also known from other areas of the temple (i.e. the second hypostyle hall; the chapel of Amun, Isis, and Seti; the corridor of kings; the chambers behind and below the corridor of kings; the vestibule; and the western exterior wall).[131] While the scattered Coptic evidence recorded in most areas of the sanctuary seems to suggest that, although accessible, these were not privileged spaces for writing practice, the corpus of graffiti from room 'z' and the annex in general has yielded several hypotheses regarding the function of this area. In particular, numerous scholars have advanced the possibility that one or more rooms in this part of the temple complex had been reused as a Christian church or chapel in Late Antiquity. As Westerfeld underscores, despite the traces of building activities in the

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127 Eighteen Coptic graffiti were published by Urbain Bouriant in 1887; see Bouriant 1887. Forty-nine graffiti were recorded by Margaret Murray during investigations held under the direction of Flinders Petrie between 1901 and 1902 and then studied by Walter Ewing Crum; see Murray, Milne and Crum 1904. According to Murray, the edition comprised 'about half' of the total Coptic inscriptions visible in the temple of Seti I at the time; see Murray, Milne and Crum 1904, 36. As Westerfeld notes, many of these graffiti were grouped together; when single graffiti are separated, the total amount of textual evidence published rises to 'around ninety inscriptions'; see Westerfeld 2017, 193. Several of these graffiti have recently been re-edited by Alain Delattre (SB.Kopt. III 1514–1536); see Delattre 2003.

128 Westerfeld 2017, 187.

129 For a discussion of the arguments used in previous scholarship to sustain the presence of a nunnery in the temple of Abydos, see Westerfeld 2017, 206.

130 As noted by the author, the selection of this specific space could have been dictated by the area's particularly favourable conditions for graffitiing practices. Indeed, the walls here were higher compared to those of nearby areas of the building. The structural peculiarities of this chamber made 'the area best-suited to meet the dual needs of protection from the sun and sufficient ambient light to make graffiti-writing practicable', Westerfeld 2017, 197. For a description of the structural characteristics of this temple area, see Caulfeild 1902, 8.

131 For an overview of the spatial distribution of Coptic graffiti in these areas, see Westerfeld 2017, 196.

annex during the Christian Period, the extant material evidence is unfortunately too scant to ascertain the use of one or more spaces within the temple of Seti I as a church:

> Neither the Butcher's Court nor Room z clearly exhibits the sort of architectural adaptations one might normally expect to find associated with the installation of a Christian place of congregational worship [...] The walling-off of intercolumnar spaces to create a zone appropriate for congregational worship would be consistent with late antique Christian practice at other sites in Egypt, but without the supporting evidence of an altar, prayer niche, or in-situ late antique columns or column bases, the use to which this area of the temple was put in Christian times cannot be conclusively demonstrated. As noted above, Coptic graffiti have been found in both the outer court and the second hypostyle hall, but in neither area do the inscriptions clearly point to the use of that space as a church.[132]

It is interesting to note that the Coptic graffiti recorded, which ranges from individual names and lists of anthroponyms[133] to prayers, quotations of passages from the sacred scriptures, and inscriptions associated with the flooding of the Nile,[134] were apparently predominantly painted (i.e. *dipinti*). Not much can be said about the range of writing hands witnessed by Abydos's Coptic graffiti, since the majority of the documentation discussed is only recorded in facsimile and through the extant photographic documentation. However, in some cases it is possible to distinguish between unskilled writers – often authors of short and isolated graffiti recording no more than a name – and individuals who were probably able to write on a more or less regular basis (Fig. 7).[135] As previously discussed, this fact to some extent seems to point to an intentional and programmed effort by the authors. The female authorship behind the production of these graffiti is stressed by the almost exclusive presence of female names, many of which are associated with the honorific title ⲁⲙⲁ[136] or the epithets ⲥⲱⲛⲉ (i.e. sister)[137] or ϣⲏⲙ in the recorded testimonies.[138]

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132 Westerfeld 2017, 198–199.

133 Such as I.Abydos.Copt. 73, a list of female monastics followed by a prayer on behalf of a religious community; see Westerfeld 2017, 209.

134 Westerfeld 2017, 199.

135 As noticeable in I.Abydos.Copt. 44; see Murray, Milne and Crum 1919, pl. 33. For further comments on the practised writers of some of these graffiti, see Westerfeld 2017, 203, 205.

136 For instance, ⲁⲙⲁ Giorgia (I.Abydos.Copt. 90, 91), ⲁⲙⲁ Drosis (I.Abydos.Copt. 90, 91), ⲁⲙⲁ Therbeke (I.Abydos.Copt. 85), ⲁⲙⲁ Parthenope (I.Abydos.Copt. 91), and ⲁⲙⲁ Sousanna (I.Abydos.Copt. 78); see Westerfeld 2017, 201.

137 Like ⲥⲱⲛⲉ Elisabeth (I.Abydos.Copt. 4); see Westerfeld 2017, 201.

138 As we have already seen at the site of Athribis and Oxyrhynchus, the term was likely used to indicate novice status in the monastic hierarchy.

Fig. 7: I.Abydos.Copt. 44, cluster of graffiti showing writers with various levels of expertise; temple of Seti I, Abydos; uncertain date; reprinted from Murray, Milne and Crum 1904, pl. 33.

Male figures are named only rarely, generally in clusters of names where females predominate,[139] or in inscriptions stating that a woman has written the text on their behalf.[140]

The concentration of the graffiti in specific areas, the abundance of honorific titles, the recurrence of specific names in multiple inscriptions, and references to

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139 As in I.Abydos.Copt. 10, which records the name of a man mentioned as 'Victor their brother' (ⲃⲓⲕⲧⲱⲣ ⲡⲉⲩⲥⲟⲛ). This is the only male name recorded in the entire inscription, which otherwise attests only women; see Westerfeld 2017, 200.

140 As in I.Abydos.Copt. 42, a prayer written by a woman named Metredora for '[Ko]louthos the Little, her beloved brother' ([ⲕⲟ]ⲗⲟⲩⲑⲟⲥ ⲡⲉⲥⲥⲟⲛ ϣⲏⲙ ⲙⲉⲣⲓⲧ); see Westerfeld 2017, 200.

female monastics in the upper hierarchy[141] of a monastic community seem to suggest, according to Westerfeld, that most of these women were associated with a specific religious congregation located in the village of Pertês (modern Bardīs).[142] The inscriptions might have been made by the nuns during periodic visits to the temple, perhaps in association with ritual activities associated with the cult of a local saint, Apa Moses.

4 Conclusion

This survey has aimed to provide some insight into the lives of female devotees and monastics in late antique and Byzantine Egypt, offering tangible evidence of their roles as readers, writers, scribes and active participants in the contemporary literary society. While numerous questions remain open regarding women's literacy in Christian Egypt, the integration of papyrological and epigraphic evidence – in their original archaeological contexts whenever possible – strongly suggests that a significant part of female society was able to read and write. These data force us to rethink many of the dogmas upon which our understanding of female literacy in ancient Egypt is based. While many women were probably not accustomed to reading and writing on a regular basis, others stand out for their remarkable writing skills, which in some cases are comparable to those of professional scribes. The examination of textual evidence associated with specific monastic communities leads us to think that women may also have played a significant role in book production. In this sense, the comparative study of written and archaeological sources and, in particular, the evaluation of the Coptic textual evidence alongside the Greek have the potential to shed new light on the role played by women in shaping the manuscript culture of Christian Egypt.

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141 I.Abydos.Copt. 91 attests a certain ⲀⲘⲀ Giorgia as the head (ⲦⲀⲠⲈ) and ⲀⲘⲀ Parthenope as 'the steward' (ⲦⲢⲘⲎⲎⲒ); in the same text, ⲀⲘⲀ Parthenope is indicated as 'the mother of the monastery' (ⲦⲘⲀⲀⲨ ⲚⲞⲈⲚⲈⲦⲈ). See Westerfeld 2017, 201.

142 Is indeed particularly significant that this place's name is cited in I.Abydos.Copt. 73, which is a communal graffito written by a certain Mekalou the Little on behalf of her sisters. As Westerfeld notes: 'Given that the Coptic graffiti from the temple form a fairly homogeneous corpus in terms of their style and content, this suggests that a significant proportion of all the Coptic inscriptions found at the site may have been the work of women living, not in the temple itself, but in a monastery in the nearby village of Bardis'; see Westerfeld 2017, 209.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

6PH = Six-pillared hall.

AM = Anno Martyrum.

CC = Clavis Coptica.

CLM = Coptic Literary Manuscript.

I.Abydos.Copt. = Jennifer Westerfeld, *Landscapes of Memory: Pharaonic Sacred Space in the Coptic Imagination*, PhD thesis, University of Chicago, 2010.

O.Mon.Epiph. = Crum and White 1926.

O.Vind.Copt. = Walter C. Till, *Die koptischen Ostraka der Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, Wien: H. Böhlaus Nachf, 1960.

P.Berl.Zill. = Henrik Zilliacus, *Vierzehn Berliner griechische Papyri*, Helsingfors: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1941.

P.Cair.Isid. = Arthur E. R. Boak and Herbert C. Youtie, *The Archive of Aurelius Isidorus in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, and the University of Michigan*, Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan University Press, 1960.

P.Charite = Worp (ed.) 1980.

P.Kell.Copt. = Iain Gardner, Anthony Alcock and Wolf-Peter Funk, *Coptic Documentary Texts from Kellis I: P.Kell. V (P.Kell. Copt. 10–52: O. Kell. Copt. 1–2)*, Oxford: Oxbow Books, 1999.

P.KRU = Walter Ewing Crum, *Koptische Rechtsurkunden des achten Jahrhunderts aus Djême (Theben)*, Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1912.

P.Mon.Epiph. = Crum and White 1926.

P.Neph. = Kramer and Shelton (eds) 1987.

P.Oxy. = *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1898 to present.

P.Pisentius = Eugène Revillout, 'Textes coptes: extraits de la correspondance de St. Pésunthius, évêque de Coptos, et de plusieurs documents analogues (juridiques et économiques)', *Revue d'Égyptologie*, 9 (1900): 133–177; 10 (1902): 34–47; 14 (1914): 22–32.

PSI = *Papiri della Società Italiana*, Firenze: Istituto Papirologico 'G. Vitelli', 1912 to present.

REF = Refectory.
SB = *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten*, Straßburg: Karl J. Trübner / Heidelberg: Im Selbst-
    verlag des Verfassers / Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz / Berlin: De Gruyter, 1915 to present.
SB.Kopt. = Monika R. M. Hasitzka, *Koptisches Sammelbuch*, 5 vols, Wien: Hollinek / Munich: K. G. Saur /
    Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993–2020.
TT = Theban Tomb.

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Melissa Moreton

Materials, Methods, and Motives: Female Scribal Agency in Late Medieval and Early Modern Italian Religious Houses

Abstract: Book production flourished in Italian female religious houses in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. Nun-scribes copied thousands of texts in urban production centres throughout the Italian peninsula. Though each convent needed books to fulfil devotional, liturgical, and administrative needs, the production of texts served a broader range of goals. Books were powerful tools, used to improve their communities' standing within commercial, religious, and socio-political networks. Creating manuscripts gave women agency over the texts they made, read, and used. Within the gendered confines of the place and period, life within a religious house offered women an opportunity to pursue an artistic and intellectual life rarely afforded to their secular sisters who were typically obliged to give up writing, painting, and similar pursuits after marriage. This essay explores how heads of religious houses and nuns used their scribal skills to further their religious, economic, social, and political agendas. In particular, it highlights how their intimate knowledge of the materials and techniques of book production allowed them to create products tailored to specific audiences inside and outside the convent walls.

1 Introduction: Overview of nuns' book production

Female scribes produced an astounding number of books in late medieval and early modern Italian convents[1], as scribes and painters involved in manuscript production. This labour, traditionally associated with men, was a part of female monastic life across Europe from the early centuries of the Middle Ages through the Early

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1 I will use the term 'convent' to describe a nun's house. This is unlike the modern Italian usage, where the term '*convento*' is not gendered, but can refer to a male or female house connected to a mendicant order, such as Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian, etc. (in contrast to non-mendicant orders, such as Benedictines, whose houses are called '*monasteri*'). In the medieval usage, nuns referred to their own houses variously as '*convento*', '*monastero*' or '*monasterio*', regardless of their religious order.

Modern Period, well past the advent of the printing press.[2] Though early medieval book production often took place in rural monastic centres on the Italian peninsula, this production shifted to urban centres as religious women found refuge within the walls of cities and on urban peripheries beginning in the 1200s.[3] As copyists, nuns across all religious orders created high-end liturgical manuscripts for royal patrons, copied personal and communal devotional texts for in-house use, and produced books for a variety of secular and religious audiences.[4] These are women who – because of the circumstances of their birth, the moral and religious strictures of the period, or because of a true spiritual vocation – were nuns. Their scribal production provided essential texts for their houses, and produced manuscripts used in high-stakes gift exchanges that strengthened socio-political alliances. Convent scribes often worked in close-knit teams within the convent and collaborated with secular male illuminators and manuscript painters to complete a commissioned book's border decoration and paintings. These collaborations broadened the range of books they were able to produce and, in turn, put these women in contact with a broad book-buying clientele including aristocratic and ecclesiastical patrons. In the premodern and Early Modern Period, female scribes had a tremendous knowledge of the materials they used and made conscious choices in selecting materials appropriate to the genre of text they were copying, the audience, and use. These choices were essential to their success and the success of their convents since book production, in many cases, was a lucrative industry that brought in much-needed funds to support their communities. This essay offers an overview of book production by Italian religious women living in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, discusses their motives for copying texts, the scribal methods they used to make books – both in the scriptorium and in solitary labour – and explores how nuns chose

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2 For a broad survey of nuns' book production, see the three volumes devoted to *Nuns' Literacies in Medieval Europe*, Blanton, O'Mara and Stoop (eds) 2013; 2015; 2017. Two important monographs on female monastic book production in the Germanic lands include Beach 2004 and Cyrus 2009. On Portuguese nun-scribes, see Cardoso 2017.

3 By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the traditional Benedictine houses in urban centres across the peninsula were joined by the new mendicant orders (Dominican, Franciscan, Augustinian, etc.) and these orders – often 'reformed' – would have a strong role in the production and dissemination of texts by female scribes.

4 On Italian nun-scribes, see Richardson 2020, 96–126; see also the bibliography by Miglio and Palma 2012, and their database *Donne e cultura scritta nel Medioevo* (<http://www.tramedivita.it/donne/index.html>, accessed on 21 November 2023) which identifies hundreds of female scribes in medieval Europe from the eighth through fifteenth centuries. For an overview of nun-scribes in Italy, see Moreton 2013.

materials and production practices that allowed them to further their communal and personal goals.

The current evidence of nuns' book production centres on northern Italy (especially Florence) in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and includes over two hundred and fifty manuscripts (devotional, theological, liturgical, administrative) from over one hundred nuns and miniaturists from approximately fifty convents across all orders: Franciscan, Dominican, and Augustinian, as well as Benedictine, Carmelite, and Bridgettine.[5] Though only a small percentage (probably less than 1%) of nun-scribed texts survive, the estimate of texts produced in the fourteenth and fifteenth century alone is in the tens of thousands, if one accounts for the average production of an established scriptorium based on evidence of writing desks and the need for a basic set of administrative, liturgical, paraliturgical, devotional, and theological texts, documentary evidence of personal and commercial book production, and the skills of female scribes attested in their surviving texts. Seeing even one single well-copied convent book can tell us that the same hand produced over a hundred manuscripts to achieve such a high level of mastery and skill.

The copying of texts demonstrates nuns' literacies in Italian, Latin, and even Greek, and allowed them to be involved in intellectual and artistic work as part of their *labora* or conventual work. Though it varied from house to house, the basic skill set for producing texts (literacy and penmanship) existed in most convents. The demand for books came out of the conventual need for texts, which increased as convent populations increased (imagine the number of devotional/theological texts needed by a house of one hundred nuns) and reform movements necessitated the production of new liturgical manuscripts. Aside from fulfilling an in-house need for texts, nuns also saw bookwork as a means to increase their financial base – whether books were sold to an increasingly literate clientele or gifted to build alliances with wealthy family members, ecclesiastical or secular patrons. The production of books provided a creative outlet for learned women who entered convent life – either voluntarily or by force.

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5 This is not meant to paint a picture of production only in northern Italy – it may be that there was book production in central and southern Italian convents in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – such as in Rome, Naples and Sicily – but so far this evidence has not been demonstrated. In general, the evidence from Rome dates to a later period, especially the seventeenth century, which aligns with a shift in the centres of learning, flourishing of aristocratic court life, and changing convent demographics in Rome at that time which likely had the kind of impact on book production as it did in Florence and northern Italy in the fifteenth century. See Moreton 2013.

So, who were these women? Nun-scribes primarily came from merchant class families or were girls or women born into aristocratic families. Not necessarily wealthy, many of the most prolific scribes were from branches of merchant (new wealth) or aristocratic families (old family names, old wealth) who had fallen on hard times and given their daughters to the convent.[6] The concentration of female scribal activity during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries comes from the rise in convent population and the increase in literacy, education in writing, and the arts and many future scribes entered the convent as highly educated girls and women, who brought these skills to their houses.[7] The number of women and girls entering the convent increased dramatically in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In Venice, three of five patrician girls were nuns by 1581.[8] In Florence, as many as one in nineteen residents of the city was a nun by the mid fifteenth century.[9] Those given to the convent as toddlers could be fully educated within the house – tutored in languages and taught manuscript production and scribal work by the scriptorium's senior scribe. This is the case with 1-year-old Angela di Lionardo Rucellai, who entered the Dominican convent of San Jacopo in Ripoli in Florence in 1444, learned Latin and Italian writing from her older convent sisters, and became a prolific senior scribe and a powerful and influential prioress of the house.[10] Leadership within the convent and advanced work in the scriptorium were often aligned.

Whether tutored privately in the home by male and female tutors, in a Latin grammar school setting by female *magistrae* and/or in the convent schools by

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6 Besides what can be gleaned from the manuscripts themselves, there are also a great range of documents produced within convents, including administrative documents and convent chronicles. Genealogies, diaries, family histories, and tax records provide vital information about nuns' families. For example, *catasto* records for cities like Florence (tax records that also provide census information) provide data on the size of a nuns' family of origin and household, their economic status, and where they lived within the city before entering the convent.

7 On Italian girls' and nuns' education in the period, see Richardson 2020, 97–99; Moreton 2017, 385–390; Strocchia 1999.

8 Brian Richardson also notes that convent populations in Milan increased fourfold and in Bologna eightfold over the course of the sixteenth century. Richardson 2020, 96–97.

9 Sharon Strocchia notes that before the Black Death in 1348, one in two hundred and fifty residents of Florence was a nun and by 1552, one in nineteen was. Strocchia 2009, xii. The rise in marriage dowry rates drove many families to place their younger daughters in religious houses. Nuns did come to the convent with dowries, but these cost much less than marriage dowries. On convent dowries, see Molho 1994; and Zarri 2000.

10 Florence, Archivio di Stato, San Jacopo di Ripoli, 23: Croniche, segnato A, 1508–1778, fols 121[r]–122[v]. This source, the necrology of San Jacopo di Ripoli, and Rucellai's biography have been examined by Strocchia 2007.

learned nuns, upper- and middle-class girls and young women received varying levels of education from vernacular reading, craftwork, and learning the virtues, to a broader humanist education in Latin grammar, studying vernacular and Latin texts (moral philosophy, grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry), writing in Latin and Italian, penmanship, and basic accounting. An ever-increasing number of these educated girls entered the convent from the mid fifteenth century onward. Choir nuns (those who took full vows, could vote within the convent, were obliged to attend all choir Offices, were generally from elite or wealthy families, and could read and write) were the most educated members of the convent, and by and large, were the scribes, secretaries, authors, composers, poets, playwrights, singers, artists, and savvy financial and political administrators of urban convent communities. Within the convent, literacy was necessary to work in the scriptorium, assume administrative positions, and rise through the ranks. 'Impara, impara a leggere: così diventerai badessa' ('Learn, learn to read: this is how you will become abbess') said Margherita da Faenza, thirteenth-century foundress of the Florentine convent of San Giovanni Evangelista.[11] Certainly by the late fourteenth-century, literacy and the convent were firmly linked in the minds of the secular public as the Florentine merchant Paolo da Certaldo demonstrated when he wrote that one should certainly educate one's sons, but there is no point in educating your daughter in reading unless she is destined for the convent.[12]

Work was regulated within the scriptorium, which could be defined as a formal space set aside for writing with numerous writing desks, but likely also included more informal spaces at houses where book production was not a primary activity. Fig. 1 illustrates a writing desk situated outdoors, under the arch of a loggia – placing the scribe, Saint Bridget of Sweden, in an imaginary space in keeping with the medieval practice of writing in the cloister, which was spacious, provided shelter, and excellent light.

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11 Miglio 2008, 30.

12 'Lo fanciullo [...] ne' sei o ne' sette anni, porlo a leggere [...] e s'ell'è fanciulla femina, polla a cuscire e none a leggere, ché non istà troppo bene a una femina sapere leggere, se già no la volessi fare monaca' ('The child [...] at six or seven years of age, teach him to read [...] and if the child is a girl, teach her to sew and not to read, for it is not good for a woman to know how to read, unless you want her to become a nun'), Schiaffini (ed.) 1945, 126–127.

Fig. 1: This portrait of Saint Bridget at her writing desk may provide some information about the appearance and location of writing desks at the convent. Detail of a drawing by an anonymous nun of Santa Brigida al Paradiso, Florence (*c.* 1500); Florence, BNC, II.II.393, fol. 1ʳ; © Florence, BNC.

Most evidence of female monastic scriptoria, however, show that the nuns worked in a designated space set aside for writing.[13] At the Benedictine house of Santissima Annunziata delle Murate (Le Murate), the construction of writing desks was well documented in the convent's chronicle. The chronicle notes the establishment of the scriptorium in the early 1470s, and its reconstruction and enlargement after a fire, supported by the patronage of a powerful local family, the Medici, who funded the building of ten new writing desks. The convent eventually had an astounding twenty-six desks.[14] A scriptorium, as a physical space, could be quite simple – writing desks or *scrittoi* – equipped with the basic tools necessary for the production of texts: parchment or paper, straight edge and tools for ruling, awl, quill, ink, and a knife for trimming parchment, quill-cutting, and scraping away parchment if a mistake needed correcting. The tools and space (unlike those needed for printing) were quite low tech and basic. The greatest expense was in sheet materials (parchment and paper) and the investment of time needed to turn a nun into a proficient scribe. So, for a convent in need of books – which they all were – this was a wise venture that could pay off in supplying the communal library with texts, and if the scribes were talented enough, in supplying the convent with beautiful books that could be sold (supplementing the community's coffers) or given away as gifts, in exchange for the promise of patronage from wealthy donors. The choices they made in creating each book demonstrate that these women were savvy book producers, knowledgeable about how materials and methods impacted the products they were creating for audiences both inside and outside the convent walls.

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13 Some conventual plans note a scriptorium space, generally situated facing the cloister or other open-air courtyard, to take advantage of the abundant natural light. In the case of Le Murate, there is evidence of a large number of writing desks being used within a prescribed space that faced east; the scriptorium at San Jacopo di Ripoli may have faced south-east; the Paradiso scriptorium may have had light from both the west and east. It is interesting to note that the planned scriptorium at the Venetian convent of Santa Croce della Giudecca places the scriptorium opening to the west. See Moreton 2013, 104–106.

14 The Murate convent chronicle states 'li scrittoi, che vi sono oggi di numero xxvi, divisi con li assiti' ('the writing desks, which today number twenty-six, divided by partitions'). Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 88ᵛ. For other references to scriptorium augmentation, see fols 42ʳ, 45ʳ, 67ᵛ–68ʳ, 74ᵛ, and 88ᵛ. The chronicle has been transcribed and translated into English by Weddle (tr. and ed.) 2011. See also Weddle 1997.

2 Scribal training, production, and choice

Scribes used specific styles of scripts in their book production, which were suited to particular genres of texts (liturgical, devotional, theological, administrative). Each script was chosen for its speed (slow, fast), appearance (formal, informal), and the audience (personal, communal, for use inside the convent or for the public) and often said something about a nun's level of education and her motives for writing. Systems of partnership, mentorship, and training are visible within the manuscripts and noted within colophons. Divisions of labour in the scriptorium provided specialization in certain areas of work, giving them focused expertise in either scribal work or notation for choir books and other liturgical manuscripts. These partnerships allowed them to streamline their scriptorium practice and excel in liturgical manuscript production, raising the quality of these books for in-house use and increasing their value for sale to other religious communities, both male and female. The development and use of decorative penwork also had economic advantages (no need to outsource decoration to secular manuscript painters) and gave nuns more control over the decoration of their books.

2.1 The choice of script

Nuns' choice of script depended on the genre of text and the audience. A *littera textualis* (Gothic book hand) was the most common script used for liturgical, paraliturgical, devotional, and theological texts. Its long use for this conservative genre of manuscripts dictated that scribes continued to support the traditional use of this script with little variation. A central factor in nuns' loyalty to *littera textualis* was the scribal logistics of making a copy from an exemplar. If the source manuscript was written in *littera textualis*, then the copy was most often written out in the same script. To deviate from this and keep the same letters per line and lines per page would be extremely challenging and this contributed to the longevity of this script in the monastic context. In its varied forms, *littera textualis* was the visual lingua franca, the common scribal currency, of the monastic world in Europe used by their priest confessors, conventual overseers, and the Church as a whole. The script also provided a formal authenticity to the texts they copied, recalling the handwriting of early medieval patron saints, theologians, and spiritual exemplars dear to the convent community. This adherence to tradition and textual 'authenticity' was slow to change.

There are a wide number of variations within the *littera textualis* family. For large communal liturgical manuscripts, a southern *textualis* (Gothic rotunda) was

commonly used. Choir books were necessarily large (requiring several people to move them) and demanded a large, highly legible, script that could be seen from far away, important for reading communal liturgical books on a lectern from the distance by singers in the choir. By the sixteenth century, a bold and rounded Gothic script had fully developed on the Italian peninsula and the nuns adapted the elegant and modernized letterforms for use in their large communal music manuscripts.

Formal book hands, upright and regular, required more strokes to form each letter than a cursive script did. Though speed was not necessarily an issue for the early medieval monk, whose work in the scriptorium was part of his monastic *labora*, this was not necessarily true for nuns. Their book production varied widely across orders and within individual communities. Many houses produced books for sale, the proceeds of which were essential for maintaining the community financially. Others produced luxury manuscripts for gift exchange, important for building critical patronage bonds between the convent and wealthy supporters.

All houses with active scribes produced devotional texts for use within the house, for sale, and for exchange with other convents. For devotional books not requiring the full formality of a formal Gothic book hand, an abbreviated form of *littera textualis* was often used. As a formal script, requiring several penstrokes for each letter, *littera textualis* was a slow script to write and Italian nuns who were copying devotional books for use within the convent or for personal use were often less concerned about orthographic formality than about getting a manuscript copied out as quickly as possible. In these cases, the scribe may choose a *littera textualis semplificata*, the name Italian palaeographers use to describe a Gothic book hand with an abbreviated number of strokes. For example, a miniscule or lower case 's' in a formal *littera textualis* may require four strokes, but in its simplified form, could be accomplished in as little as one, thus saving time. Though speed was often a consideration when choosing a script, nuns also used this abbreviated script even when they were not in a hurry to finish a text. It was a relaxed book hand that was easy to write in and involved less concentration and rigid adherence to visual rules than a formal *textualis.* Comfort and familiarity with a style often outweighed the need for speed.

In one case, a nun tells us that she is copying out her devotional book 'by the light of an oil lamp', suggesting this was solo labour carried out in the dark and quiet hours in her monastic cell, between early morning prayers.[15] The colophon

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15 Florence, BNC, Conv. Soppr. G.II.1441, fol. 204ʳ. The 204-folio manuscript, containing Books III–IV of Simone da Cascia's *Esposizione dui Vangeli,* measures 291 × 212 mm and has an average of 29 lines per

tells us the book took almost two years to copy out, which translates as roughly 1.2 folios (a little over one page) per day, if she was working seven days a week – slow, by scribal workshop standards.[16] Even though this is a personal book which the nun is copying out as an act of meditation and devotion (not a race), the nun still uses a more efficient *littera textualis semplificata*. It is the script she is most comfortable with and the book is for her – no one else – so she makes that choice. This issue of 'scribal speed' is an underdeveloped area of study within female monastic production. Women had varied motives when deciding on a choice of script – decisions that were not always dictated by the economic demands that drove secular scribal workshops.

By the sixteenth century, a formalized and elegant chancery cursive (*cancellaresca corsiva*) had been adopted from the chancery scribes and was in use by an increasingly literate public – something the nuns would have been introduced to through the letter-writing and correspondence they engaged in with family members outside the convent walls. *Cancellaresca* went from a chancery script to a book hand, which was more formal and used by a wide public (and formed the basis of the new Italic type developed in Italy in the early sixteenth century). The script was used in the period by nuns for their devotional manuscripts, as well as a more formalized version used for presentation copies of convent chronicles, a popular genre of nun-authored writing by the mid sixteenth century. There are many examples of this script in use by Italian convent scribes in the sixteenth century (see details in Fig. 2).

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page. Bridgettine scribe Cleofe (Ginevra di Lorenzo Lenzi) of Santa Brigida al Paradiso notes in her colophon that she began the book 12 November 1502 and finished it 28 October 1504, stating that it was 'written with extreme effort and great discomfort, the major part by the light of an oil lamp' ('Iscricti con grandissima faticha (et) disagio, la maggior parte a llume di lucerne'). Cleofe uses variations on this colophon phrase in several other devotional compilations she copied in the late 1400s, which contain Books I–II of Bridget of Sweden's *Rivelazioni* (Florence, BNC, MS II_130, fol. 154ʳ) and Books VII–VIII (Florence, BNC, MS II.III.270, fol. 137ᵛ). Cleofe may have drawn part of the phrase ('faticha et disagio') from her scriptorium mentor, Raffaella di Arnolfo Bardi, who uses it in several devotional texts, including one written over the course of seven and a half years (Florence, BML, Acq. e doni 85, fol. 72ʳ). This practice of solo devotional writing is not unusual; it is simply rarely documented. Colophons provide unusual insight into scribal production practices, which are otherwise invisible or difficult to recover. On the Paradiso manuscripts, see Miriello 2007; on colophons, see Moreton 2014 and 2023.

16 In Johan Peter Gumbert's classic study on scribal speed (Gumbert 1995), he calculated the speed of a scribe working on a manuscript of similar size and number of lines would on average complete 3.2 folios per day. This is almost three times the speed of Cleofe, however, this is calculated on the work of secular scribes whose work sessions were not constrained by the demands of the monastic calendar and daily hours. Also, the style of script is not indicated in Gumbert's example. The speed of cursive scripts, of course, was very fast; formal book hands could be quite slow to write. Variations in between, such as a *littera textualis semplificata* would be a medium-paced script.
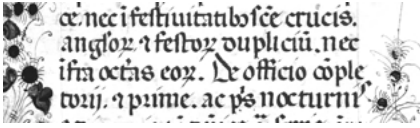
a: *Littera textualis* (Gothic book hand)
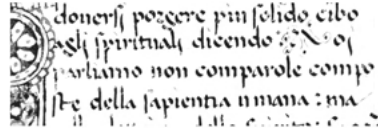
b: *Littera textualis semplificata*

c: Southern *textualis* (Gothic rotunda)
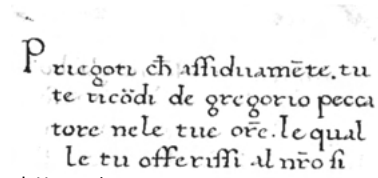
d: Humanist
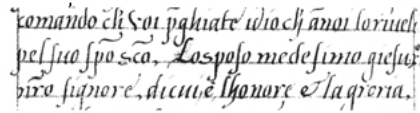
e: *Cancellaresca corsiva* (chancery cursive)
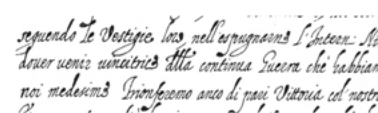
f: *Cancellaresca corsiva*

Figs 2a–f: The variety of scripts used by nuns in late medieval and early modern Italy. These were paired with specific genres of texts – and chosen for their speed, appearance, and the book's intended audience and use. (a) Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 459, fol. 7ʳ; (b) Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 469, fol. 1ʳ; (c) Florence, Museo di San Marco, 630 (unfoliated); (d) Verona, Biblioteca Civica, 1196, fol. 30ᵛ; (e) Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1794, fol. 98ᵛ; (f) Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 1ʳ, © Florence, BNC, BML, Biblioteca Riccardiana, Museo di San Marco; Verona, Biblioteca Civica.

One example of a nun's choice of cursive for speed is a copy of the *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto* ('Rule of Saint Benedict'), a vernacular reissue made specifically for reformed Benedictine nuns in the period. We know the exemplar is from a new 1532 print edition of the text because the nun copied it out, including the printed colophon, in her personal manuscript copy (Figs 3a–b). She is moving here between reading the Roman typeface with abbreviations, set in thirty lines per page, to making her own copy with approximately twenty-two lines per page. The printed book, with eighty folios, becomes a 139-folio manuscript. She chose a fast script for the task – *cancellaresca* – and her version bounces between upright ascenders ('l' and 'd') and slanting capitals and descenders ('g'). She adds her own abbreviations, deviating regularly from those of the exemplar (she sometimes spells out the printed abbreviations and sometimes abbreviates words that are printed out in full), demonstrating her advanced reading and writing skills, literacy in the vernacular, and familiarity with Latin (Italian abbreviations are drawn from those used in Latin manuscripts). She is clearly in a rush to finish this job, judging by ink spills in the manuscript and her hurried cursive script – perhaps eager to return the popular and new print edition to whomever she borrowed it from.

CAL NOME DEL NOSTRO SI,
gnore Misser Iesu Christo incommincia il
Prologo della Regula del Patre nos
stro Santissimo Benedetto.

℃Prologo della Regula;

Scoltate o dilettissime figlio
le li cōmandamenri del Mae
stro, & inclinate le orecchie
del vostro core, & volunties
ri receuiti la admonitiõe del
Pietoso patre & mettitela in
opera efficacemente, accio
che per fatica di obedientia
ritornati a quello, dal quale
per pigritia de inobedientia vi erati partite. A
voi dunqz al psente se drizza el mio parlare qua
lunche seti, che renunciando alle proprie volun
tade apprenditi le arme fortissime & lucidissime
della obedientia, per seruire a Christo Iesu vero
Re & Signore. Prima & inanzi ad ogni cosa, fa,
ti, che con instantissima oratione domandati da
Dio che conduca a psectione quel tanto de ope
ra bona, che incōminciati a fare, accio che esso
che gia si e dignato computarci nel numero de
sue figliole, giamai per le nostre male ope 'non si
habbbia a cōtristare. Perche noi in tal modo do
uemo sempre obedire alle sue bone inspirationi,
che non solamente come irato patre non exhes
redi noi sue figliole, ma ne etiam come terribile

A 2

Fig. 3a: The 1532 print edition of the new *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto* composed in Italian for re-formed Benedictine nuns in Venice and printed in a Roman typeface by Francesco Bindoni and Maffeo Pasini; Pistoia, Biblioteca capitolare Fabroniana, p. 2; © Pistoia, Biblioteca capitolare Fabroniana.

Fig. 3b: Venetian nun-scribe's copy of the printed book copied out in a hurried *cancellaresca*-related script, showing her command of abbreviations which do not follow those of the print edition; Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MMS 01207, fol. 2ʳ; © Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

The most surprising choice of handwriting style might be the humanist script found in a late fifteenth-century theological text produced by northern Italian nun

Domitilla Bernabuzi (Fig. 2d). The text is a theological treatise translated into Italian by the nuns and Bernabuzi's use of a humanist miniscule in this manuscript is unique within the over two hundred and fifty nun-scribes' manuscripts consulted. The overwhelming majority of devotional and theological works copied by nuns in the fifteenth century were written out in a *littera textualis* and Bernabuzi is differentiating herself and her work through this choice of script, signalling to the reader that she was educated – possibly by a humanist scribe – within a secular aristocratic household before entering the convent. This messaging through the choice of script.[17]

Hands – the writing of an individual scribe within a given script – also vary widely. Some are quite practised, others more 'rough and ready' in style. But from this variety, we gain a lot of information about the motives for writing the text. Did the nun write in a hurried hand – to get the book copied out? Or did she take more time? The hand, if extremely well practised, can provide valuable information about where that scribe was in her career when she made the book. Even if we only have one known book from a scribe, but it is extremely accomplished, we know she is likely to have made at least one hundred manuscripts before she made this one. This is the case with a manuscript penned by Benedictine nun Battista Carducci from Le Murate (Fig. 4). The manuscript was expertly scribed in an elegant *littera textualis* in the early 1500s and exquisitely decorated by famed secular manuscript painter Attavante de Attavanti, becoming a gift for Pope Leo X, member of the illustrious Medici family of Florence. An important gift exchange was certainly not left to a new scribe! Carducci does not name herself in a colophon (not uncommon for liturgical manuscripts, especially high-end commissions). We learn her name only from the convent chronicle – as well as the story of the gift exchange. The nuns presented the manuscript to a powerful member of this important local patron family, and he gave them a bag of gold coins in return.[18]

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17 The manuscript is Verona, Biblioteca Civica, 1196, a copy of Gregory Correr's epistle, *De commodis vitae regularis seu de contempt mundi,* which she copied out in 1474. On Domatilla Bernabuzi, her humanist education, and self-identification as a humanist-trained scribe, see Moreton 2014, 55–57, and Moreton 2023.

18 On Le Murate missal gifted to Pope Leo X, see Le Murate chronicle (Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 76ʳ), and Lowe 1996. Other examples of high-end production from female scribes include a mid-fifteenth-century breviary by Augustinian nun Maria di Ormanno degli Albizzi of the Florentine convent of San Gaggio, and a missal of 1447 by scribe and abbess, Piera de' Medici, of the Vallombrosan monastery of Santa Verdiana in Florence. For more on Maria di Ormanno degli Albizzi's breviary (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 1923), see Arthur 2017 and Moreton 2023. Piera's missal is Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr., Vallombrosa codex 235. For more on Piera's manuscript and the creative leveraging of her Medici status, see Strocchia 2014.

Fig. 4: A 385-folio missal completed by Murate nun Battista Carducci in 1509 and illuminated by Atta-vante de Attavanti between 1509 and 1515 in Florence. The coat of arms of Pope Leo X was added at the bottom, once it was decided that the important Medici patron was to be the recipient. Paris, BnF, lat. 17323, fol. 13ʳ; © Paris, BnF.

It is critical to analyse the hands within a manuscript as well as the choice of script. Both provide information about scribal agency, the motives for copying, the manuscript's audience, how the book was used, and allow us to construct a wider view of scriptorium training, partnerships, and practice.

2.2 Scribal practice, training, and teamwork in the scriptorium

Once a girl entered the convent and showed a vocation for scribal work, she was educated in copying within an informal system within the house where novices were mentored by senior scribes, worked in teams through many decades. We know this from the manuscript evidence where the 'hand' of a senior scribe was dominant in a manuscript; her apprentice taking on very little of the production and often left to scribe the middle section or a section of the manuscript that is not highly visible. Over time that relationship shifted and it was the novice that was the senior scribe, working on the majority of a text, and the elder scribe is only completing a small section of the manuscript. There are a number of documented examples of this mentoring from the Florentine scriptorium of the Bridgettine double monastery of Santa Brigida al Paradiso, occupied by friars and nuns from the early fifteenth through the mid sixteenth century.[19]

Raffaella di Arnolfo Bardi, a senior scribe at the Paradiso mentored a generation of nun-apprentices in the scriptorium, including Cleofe (Ginevra di Lorenzo Lenzi) who went on to mentor Cecilia (di Francesco Cattani da Diacceto) and several less prolific, but well-trained scribes. There are several known examples of Raffaella scribing the majority of a manuscript, and junior scribe Cleofe completing a smaller section. This pattern of mentorship continued once Rafaella retired from the scriptorium and Cleofe took over as senior scribe, mentoring younger scribes Cecilia, Margherita (Niccolini), and Maria (Matilde Chiavacci). One example of Cleofe and Cecilia's shared work at the Paradiso is a late fifteenth-/early sixteenth-century copy of Giovanni da Calvoli's *Meditazioni sulla vita di Gesù Cristo* (Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1413) (Fig. 5).

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19 The friars were the first to produce books (for a Franciscan book market) and by the early fifteenth century had begun teaching the nuns book production. By the mid fifteenth century the nuns had taken over scribal production, copying twice as many books with half as many scribes in the period they were active – and producing hundreds of books for their community. Under the guidelines of the Bridgettine order, the community was run under the leadership of the abbess with friars taking on the quotidian demands of maintaining the monastic complex, thus freeing the nuns to focus on spiritual perfection, prayer (meditation, chanting, solitary, and communal reading), sewing, embroidery, and for a select group, work in the scriptorium. On the nun-scribes of Santa Brigida al Paradiso, see Miriello 2007.

Senior scribe Cleofe is the main scribe (of Section 2 of the manuscript), completing fols 267ʳ–296ᵛ. Cleofe allows Cecilia to complete a small text at the end of the manuscript, excerpts from the *Articoli della dottrina Cristiana* (fols 295ʳ–396ʳ).[20] Later, as a senior scribe, Cecilia would continue mentoring new novices in the same way. The surviving manuscripts from the Paradiso scriptorium allow scholars to study changes in a nun's hand over time, from uncertain apprentice and novice (completing small sections of manuscripts), to accomplished senior scribe with a strong hand (completing the majority of a text), to elder scribe whose hand is shaky (again completing small sections).

Nuns also often worked in teams on large communal liturgical manuscripts with one scribe completing the scribal work or lettering and the other copying out the musical notation. They tell us about this division of labour in their colophons. These teams included Angela di Leonardo Rucellai (lettering work) and Lucrezia Panciatichi (musical notation) of the Florentine Dominican convent of San Jacopo di Ripoli and Gostanza Cocchi (Nannina di Niccolo di Messer Donato Cocchi) who completed the lettering with Angela di Antonio da Rabatta (as miniaturist) at the convent of Sant'Ambrogio, Florence.[21]

The level of scribal production varied depending on the skill level of the scribe and her expertise in the scriptorium. Advanced scribes became proficient at many scripts. Mentorship over many hours, days, and years was essential to master a diverse range of scripts including the formal book hand (*littera textualis*) and its variants, used for most copying within the scriptorium. Not all scribes mastered this diversity of scripts. The most accomplished scribes, like Angela Rucellai, who were able to gracefully execute the large Gothic lettering needed for the massive communal choir books, could easily copy out devotional and other texts in an elegant *littera textualis* – whether those books were destined for sale or gifting to external patrons or for use by the sisters. However, even scribes with basic proficiency learned how to write in a decent *littera textualis* – a script needed for smaller liturgical and paraliturgical texts (communal processionals, rituals, etc.) and personal devotional manuscripts.

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20 Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 459. The first section of the manuscript (fols 1–266) was completed by an unidentified scribe and contain various *commedia* and laudes; Section 2 was scribed by Cleofe and Cecilia. The book was used by a friar (Peter) of the house, who left his possession note in the manuscript's margins in the early sixteenth century (on fols 277ʳ, 332ᵛ, 355ʳ, 396ᵛ). On the Paradiso scribes, see Miriello 2007, 156–161.

21 On these scribe-notator teams, see Moreton 2023 and 2014. Rucellai and Panciatichi's teamwork survives in several manuscripts in the Museo di San Marco, Florence, including manuscripts Graduale 630 and 634 Corale P. The Sant'Ambrogio example is Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 90. On Rucellai, see Strocchia 2007; on the Sant'Ambrogio example, see Strocchia 2002.

a   b   c
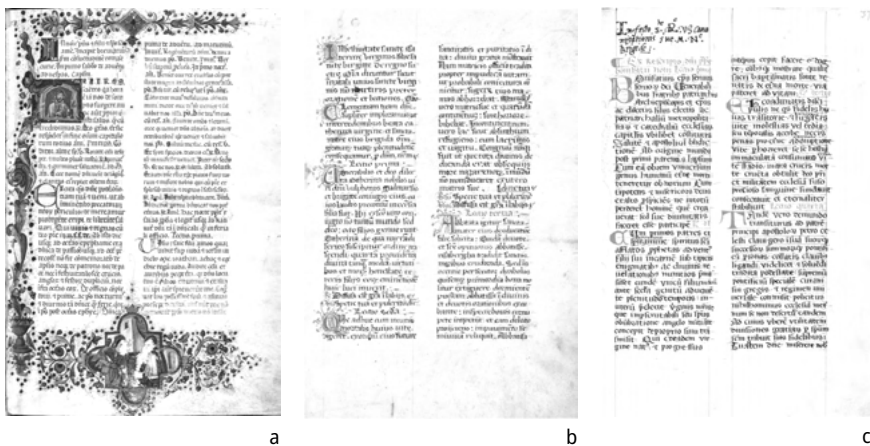
Figs 5a–c: Italian Bridgettine nuns' late fifteenth- / early sixteenth-century work copying a breviary/prayer book, Florence, BML, Conv. Soppr. 459: (a) fol. 7ʳ, senior scribe Raffaella's formal *littera textualis*; (b) fol. 364ʳ, one of only a few folios at the end of the text by Cecilia (who worked in the scriptorium in the early 1500s); (c) fol. 375ʳ, another nun's scribal work on paper, dating to the early sixteenth century (perhaps Cecilia at a later date, or her student); © Florence, BML.

2.3 Decorative penwork as a mark of communal and self-identification

Penwork decoration – that is, decoration made entirely with the quill – could include simple or ornate ribbon initials, Roman capitals, borders, and drawings and show a tremendous range throughout the late medieval and Early Modern Period. Nuns did not always leave their names in their colophons, but instead found other ways of marking their presence within the manuscripts they produced. Within work traditionally bound by the expectation of pious anonymity, penwork provided an outlet for self-expression and self-identification ('I made this book!'). Scribes developed their own decorative flourishes, including elongated descenders and ascenders, stylized penwork initials, and distinctive and repeated patterns of marks surrounding their catchwords. These are ubiquitous (once you know to look for them) and include a range of personalized penwork that allowed nuns to create the hierarchy of script needed for reading and gave them artistic license over the decoration of their books.
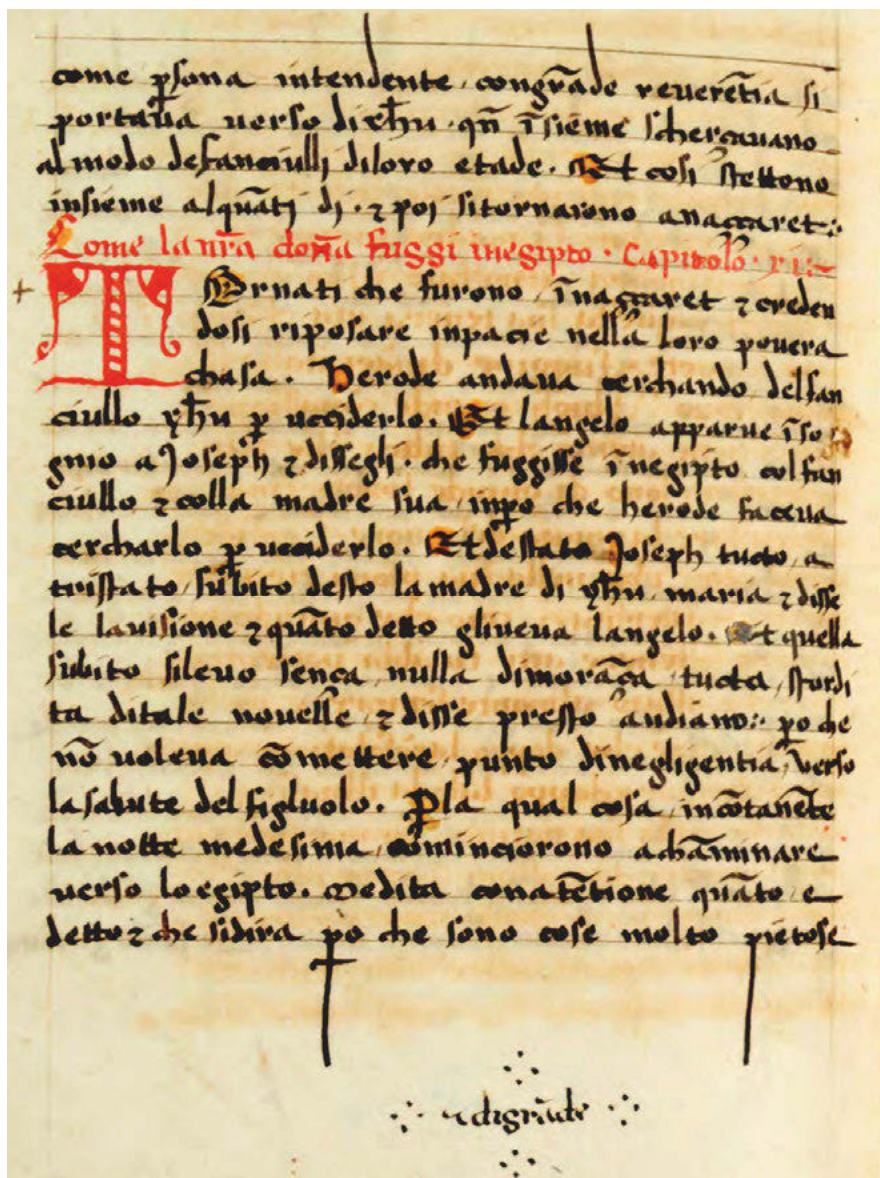
Fig. 6: Devotional manuscript by Cleofe of Santa Brigida al Paradiso written in a simplified *littera textualis* with a penwork initial in red and with the guide letter 't' in margin indicating which initial to draw. Above the 'T' is the rubricated chapter heading. Small ribbon initials begin each line, which are *toccata di giallo* ('touched with yellow' paint) in imitation of gilded letters. Late 1400s–early 1500s. Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 1413, fol. 296ᵛ; © Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana.

Examples include Paradiso scribe Cleofe's devotional manuscript with small ribbon initials highlighted in yellow, her distinctive long ascenders and descenders, and catchwords surrounded by her characteristic four dot style, visible in the lower margin of this verso folio (Fig. 6) and Ripoli scribe Angela Rucellai's signature catchword decoration used in both small devotional and large liturgical manuscripts (Fig. 7). These flourishes are distinctive to each scribe and used across many decades. Decorative penwork is an underdeveloped method for identifying an unnamed scribe, identifying, and dating a known scribe's manuscripts. Once a number of examples are gathered, they may be used to create a chronology of a given scribe's work (something difficult to do if manuscripts are undated). Decorative penwork, such elongated and/or dashed descenders and catchwords with distinctive decorative motifs were one way in which scribes could leave self-identifying marks in their manuscripts. Without signing with her name, she is leaving her calling card within the books and connecting herself to her work in perpetuity.

Figs 7a–c: (a) Detail of Angela Rucellai's simple four-leafed flower design surrounding her catchword on the verso folio of a personal devotional *collectar* or collection of prayers; New York, Columbia University Libraries, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, MS Western 112. (b) A more decorative variation of Rucellai's catchword on the verso folio of another *collectar*, Florence, BNC, Conv. Soppr. D.7.344. (c) Detail of Rucellai's distinctive catchword with an extra flourish for a large communal choir book. Lower verso margin of a gradual, *c.* 1500; Florence, Museo di San Marco, Graduale 630. © New York, Columbia University Libraries; Florence, BNC, Museo di San Marco.

Penwork borders and decorative 'ribbon initials' – initials built entirely from penstrokes instead of painted with a brush and pigments – flourished throughout the sixteenth century in Italian convents. These built-up calligraphic initials provided nuns with another form of lettering within their expanding toolbox of decorative penwork and moved the production of large initials out of the miniaturist's workshop and into the hands of nun-scribes. It was economical to do this work in the monastic scriptorium, rather than outsource it to secular illuminators. Ribbon initials became popular for building a hierarchy of script, especially in communal liturgical manuscripts which required large initials visible to the singers at a distance.
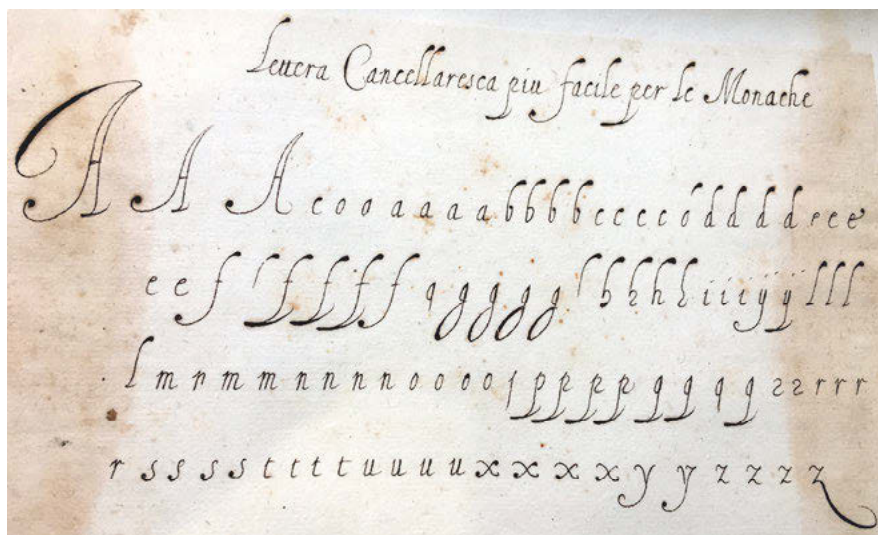
Fig. 8: 'Lettera Cancellaresca più facile per le Monache' / '*cancellaresca* script made easy for nuns'. A folio from an Italian handwriting sample book for nuns, demonstrating how to write an easy, simplified *cancellaresca* script. Late 1600s / early 1700s. Chicago, Newberry Library, Vault Wing MS ZW 735.C697 (unfoliated); © Chicago, Newberry Library.

Convent chronicles – authored and written out by the nuns – were also decorated with drawings and border designs in ink and constituted a type of communal self-identification. The source of this flourishing may be twofold. One, convents were filled with women who increasingly had graphic skills in writing and the calligraphic arts, influenced by the boom in the popularity of penmanship 'how to' sample books, which demonstrated how to write in the new stylized *cancellaresca corsiva*, build ribbon initials, and add decorative flourishes onto one's scribal work (see Fig. 8).[22] Two, the popularity of printed books and the development of the title page influenced the convent chronicle genre (see Fig. 9).

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22 These books were common in the sixteenth century. A newly literate population was not only buying printed books, but also eager to learn how to write in the new handwriting style, to participate in letter writing and self-publishing manuscript copies of their own work. The Newberry Library, Chicago, has a large collection of Italian writing sample books from the period in their calligraphic collections.
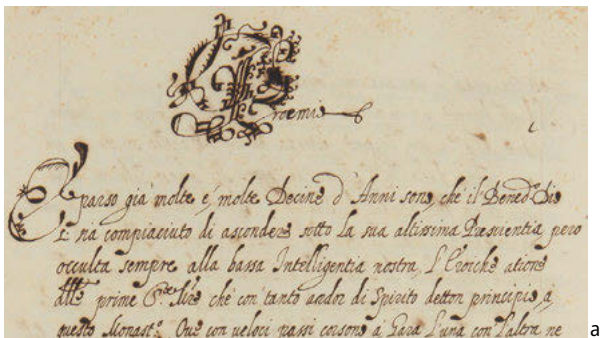
Figs 9a–b: (a) A ribbon initial with elaborate flourishes in the 1598 convent chronicle of Le Murate, Florence, scribed by Suor Maria Benigna di Stiatta Cavalcanti. Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. 1ʳ. (b) The chronicle title page, with penwork drawings of animals and flora, decorative borders, and calligraphic flourishes filling the page. Florence, BNC, II.II.509, fol. IIIʳ; © Florence, BNC.

As a self-made product, the chronicles were produced for the nuns themselves and not for sale to an external audience – and this was the type of decoration they could complete in-house. High-end books made within the convent scriptorium and destined for sale or gift exchanges were most often painted and gilded by male secular decorators – a cost that was factored into the final cost–profit equation. However, most devotional and communal history books made for the convent could be decorated by the nuns themselves, with penwork initials and border designs or painted with simple initials. This reduced external production costs and provided an opportunity for artistic expression in books that were shared with the convent community for generations. These skills became increasingly important beginning in the seventeenth century, as secular illuminators and painters became less common in Italian cities. The nuns, who were active in book production well into the Early Modern Period, could no longer outsource decorative work and necessarily had to become more self-reliant, engaging artists within their own houses to embellish their manuscripts.

3 Knowledge of materials

Books were valuable commodities, and nuns carefully weighed the economics of material costs, a book's intended audience, and its use when deciding on sheet material, clasps, and covers. A knowledge of materials was critical, and analysing a book's materials – such as parchment, paper, and leather, can provide valuable information on the costs of production, who owned the book, and how it was used.

3.1 Sheet material: Paper vs parchment

Though it is difficult to analyse comparative prices – they change across time and place – it is safe to say that parchment was more expensive than paper and economics increasingly determined which sheet material was used for writing from the fifteenth century onward. Parchment prices varied depending on the time of year, type of animal skin, availability of hides and processing operations, and the quality of the finished sheet material which varied widely from maker to maker, region to region. With the advent of printing and the proliferation of mills meeting the demand for paper, costs of paper dropped substantially, and the choice of using parchment became much more deliberate. It is instructive to think of the pairing of certain materials with genre and several types of manuscripts written on parchment emerge from the sea of works on paper. The first are liturgical works large

and small for worship of the Mass and Office, which had to be durable and worthy of God. Next are paraliturgical texts, such as monastic rules, constitutions, etc., made on parchment because of their important spiritual, administrative, and legal role in communal life. Parchment was used well beyond the seventeenth century for these types of manuscripts, despite the costs.

The preference for parchment comes from two notions – one, that fine parchment was a godly material suitable for the word of God and two, that it was a superior sheet material able to withstand the type of use and abuse that functional liturgical manuscripts were subjected to. The latter reason was articulated in the treatise *De laude scriptorium manualium* ('In Praise of Scribes') written in 1492 by German abbot Johannes Trithemius. He states that books written on parchment are more durable, accurate, reliable, better edited and distributed than those printed on paper (he had issues with both paper and printing).[23] He also makes a point – that the scribe, unlike the printer, can reproduce whatever text he likes, without the constraints of censorship. Ideas about the durability and godliness of parchment persisted for centuries, but by the sixteenth century, parchment was increasingly selected only for works of high practical (instructional/liturgical), legal (administrative/archival), spiritual (patristic/hagiographic) or economic value (luxury manuscripts for sale or gift exchanges).

Monastic rules were commonly written on parchment, like the Monteluce copy made by Clarissan nun Maria di Bartolomeo da Perugia at Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio. This was a sacred text and one that – if all else was destroyed – would be a foundational document the nuns would need. Maria copied out this *Regola di Santa Chiara* in the vernacular, on *carta pecorina* (parchment).[24] They knew that parchment was more durable and used it judiciously for specific texts that warranted the extra cost because of their central importance to the life of the commu-

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23 Chapter VII, 'Quod propter impressionem a scribendis voluminibus non sit desistendum' is cited in Petrucci 1995, 509–510.

24 The death record for Maria di Bartolomeo, memorializes her as a woman 'molto suffitiente [sic], docta de lectere et de scrivere' ('very learned in reading and writing') and notes that she wrote out 'doi Regule vulgare, cioé la Regula nostra: una in carta bambagina, la quale se usa in leggere ad la mensa; l'altra scripse in carta pecorina, la quale ne vulghariçò el sancto padre beato Bernardino da Feltro per nostra consolatione' ('two rules in the vernacular, that is, our rule: one on *carta bambagina*, which is used for reading during mealtimes: the other written on parchment, which was vulgarized by holy Father Beato Bernardino da Feltro for our consolation'). They are distinguishing between two different vernacular versions of the *Rule of Saint Claire*, and choosing parchment for one and paper for the everyday copy. Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio, *Memoriale*, fol. 51ʳ (cited in Umiker 2012, 115).

nity. However, we also learn that Maria made another copy of the *Regola* for reading at mealtimes. They note that she wrote this copy on '*carta bambagina*' (paper), a term that referred to a handmade paper made from high quality fibre. The nuns are making it clear that though it was not on parchment, this everyday copy was a quality item as well.[25]

The prestige of the scribe may have been another decision-making factor when choosing parchment. The well-born and aforementioned nun Domatilla Bernabuzi copied out a work on parchment in her humanist script in 1474 – a personal theological manuscript, Gregory Correr's *De commodis vitae regularis seu de contemptu mundi* (Verona, Biblioteca Civica, 1196). She was from an aristocratic family and likely came to the convent with scribal and language skills. She or her family may have bought the material for the book, a practice that was not uncommon. Writing materials, such as quills and parchment, were sometimes supplied in this way. It is clear from the Paradiso manuscripts on parchment, that only the most accomplished scribe, Suor Raffaella Bardi, had access to this expensive sheet material. Judging from the manuscripts she completed on parchment, she allowed the junior scribes in the scriptorium to pen only a few folios in the centre of the book. Mistakes were too costly, but she clearly wanted them to have the experience of writing on parchment.[26]

Parchment was produced in varying levels of quality and sold by grade. The most high-end Italian parchment sheets had no blemishes, were a uniform creamy white colour, and had no holes or uneven edges. When this level of quality is present in a manuscript, one can be sure the scribe or patron paid a high price from the *cartolaio* ('stationer') for such a material and the work was of great value to its owner. Information on the economic choices of scribes can also be gleaned from a manuscript produced on poor quality parchment, which may be discoloured, have holes either on the writing surface of the sheet or along the edge, have surface damage from some injury to the animal or a parchment-maker's tear, show parchment-maker's surgical repairs, or bear the scars from disease, insect bites, or wounds. This information can provide a basic guideline for understanding the economics of

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25 Another exception to the use of parchment for monastic rule is the handwritten paper copy of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, discussed previously (Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MSS 01207). This vernacular copy of the rule was a personal copy – so paper was affordable and an appropriate choice.

26 Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, 2878 from the late quattrocento, containing Bridget's *Regola del Salvatore* and other writings by Saint Bridget completed by Suor Raffaella and Suor Cleofe. Similarly, Cleofe the less experienced scribe, completes only a small part (fols 57ʳ–61ᵛ), the first ten folios of Pietro di Alvastra's *Additions to the Regola del Salvatore*. She stops in the middle of fol. 61ᵛ and the text is picked up again by Raffaella who completes it.

the production of a work, and is especially instructive when looking at a particular scribe's work over time. This is the case with the work of aforementioned scribe Angela Rucellai, who produced a number of collectars, all generally dated to *c.* 1500 based on the known dates of her lifespan. Palaeographical evidence of her writing – from uncertain to confident scribe – gives us one indication of where to place each manuscript chronologically. But the quality of materials adds another layer to the understanding of how to date a scribe's work and place it within the timeline of her scribal career. Early in their scriptorium work, they may not have had access to high quality parchment. Only after they proved proficiency in writing would they be allowed to work on a finer grade of material and be able to purchase, or have provided to them, fine parchment of a higher quality.

In any case, scribes who learned on paper (as the evidence suggests most of them did in this period) would need some training in working with parchment, as it was now no longer the dominant sheet material used in the production of books. The pleasures must have been immense for these nun-scribes who finally got to work on parchment, especially if it was well prepared. Italian parchment was some of the finest and writing on it was like writing on a buttery, silky smooth surface that accepted the ink and made it part of its structure.

Timothy Barrett's studies of late medieval Italian papers have shown that papermakers, testing and adapting their product for the new incunable presses in the late fifteenth century, were intentionally trying to replicate the parchment sheet in surface quality, crispness, durability, colour and weight.[27] Part of this imitation involved sizing – dipping the handmade paper sheets into a dilute gelatine solution, then drying and burnishing them. This gave the paper a parchment-like surface suitable for writing on (something readers did in manuscripts and printed books alike). Parchment was too expensive and too difficult to print on (though they tried) and could not match the demand for the massive levels of production soon to be underway. Though the work of a burnisher or glazier was time- and labour-intensive, burnishing a well-made and well-sized sheet of paper succeeded in producing a product with characteristics similar to parchment.[28] For the scribe, nothing compared to a fine piece of parchment – but a well-burnished piece of paper was a close second.

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27 Barrett 2013, 120.
28 Barrett 2021, 40.

3.2 Sheet material: Paper

The Monteluce *memoriale* is a large folio-size manuscript on paper and begins with a note about its production, dating to 1483. Incredibly, the note states 'Questo libro biancho segnato + di foglio Reale de charte 300' ('This white book marked with the symbol + [is made with] 300 sheets of Royal size paper') – valuable information for understanding the economics of book production at Monteluce, known for its prolific scribes and thriving scriptorium (Fig. 10).[29]
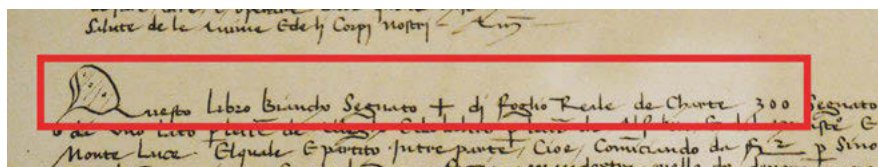
Fig. 10: Inscription from 1483 in the Monteluce *memoriale*, noting, 'Questo libro biancho segnato + di foglio Reale de charte 300'; Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio, *Memoriale*, fol. 1ʳ; © Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio.

Royal or *Reale* paper measured approximately 44 × 61 centimetres.[30] This is large paper that would not have been readily available in Perugia, where papermakers produced smaller sheets for a local market. Instead, the paper came from Fabriano, north of Perugia, according to its watermarks – a *giglio* (*fleur-de-lis*), *eagle,* and *frecce decussate* ('crossed arrows'), and the telltale quality and spacing of the laid lines on the sheet. There was a continuous importation of Fabriano papers into Perugia, and Fabriano mills were known to have produced the finest papers keeping the quality high, even after many Italian mills began to produce thinner sheets to meet the demand of required by printing presses in the late fifteenth-century onward.[31] Both the large Royal-sized *memoriale* and many of Monteluce's smaller de-

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29 Perugia, Monastero di Santa Maria di Monteluce in Sant'Erminio, *Memoriale,* fol. 1ʳ.

30 Paper dimensions in medieval Italy were set to standard sizes. In cities like Bologna, the *comune* or civic government monitored production and set the dimensions of the sheet to protect both guild workers and consumers. The so-called 'Bologna stone' (a stone with carvings of the standardized paper sizes) indicates dimensions, including the second largest sheet size (*Reale*) and the largest (*Imperiale*). See Harris *s.a.*

31 On Fabriano, see Albro 2016.

votional manuscripts produced in the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth cen-
turies are on Fabriano paper, some with the same *frecce decussate* watermark.[32]
This suggests that large sheets were purchased for the massive *memoriale* and re-
maining sheets were later used for some of the devotional books. What is curious
here is that the paper in the *memoriale* is *not* burnished or polished but the paper
in the smaller devotional manuscripts is. Burnished paper – at least burnished to
the level of shine seen in Monteluce's devotional manuscripts – is very rare (see
Fig. 11). Were the nuns burnishing this paper by hand? Burnishing a sheet of paper
that has been dipped in gelatine sizing produced a very parchment-like material
and as experienced scribes, they knew that paper finished in this way was a supe-
rior sheet material to write on. Since this is only seen on the nuns' surviving devo-
tional manuscripts, it may be a material that was desired for writing this genre of
text – the mainstay of their production on paper.[33] A burnished sheet would cer-
tainly have raised the price of a book, and the nuns had a ready market for their
devotional texts, which they sold to a wide clientele of secular noblewomen, reli-
gious laywomen, abbesses and friars buying books for female houses under their
care.[34]

Materials were important and the nuns were well versed in how to describe
the types of materials they chose for their book production. Within the *memoriale*
there are a number of references to paper and parchment. In a note from 1508, the
nuns record the obituary of one of the convent's nun-scribes, Maria di Bartolomeo
da Perugia, who they memorialize as being 'well versed in reading and writing' and
who copied a breviary, two rules in vernacular, one in '*carta bamagina*' (paper)
used for reading at mealtimes and the other in '*carta pecorina*' (parchment). This is
an incredible detail about the choice of materials. The rule of the order, which was
often copied out in parchment because of its durability, here is also produced in (a
high quality) paper, destined for communal use to be read in the refectory during

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32 Many of Monteluce's surviving fifteenth- and sixteenth-century devotional manuscripts, which
are smaller in format, are now in the Biblioteca Comunale Augusta in Perugia.

33 Some of the paper made in the Fabriano mills was sent to the central square in the town to be cal-
endared or burnished to give it a smoother finish and make it more desirable for writing. However, it
is unclear whether the sheets used in the devotional manuscripts were calendared in Fabriano – or
burnished by hand by the nuns in Perugia. Since the paper in the large folio-size *memoriale* is not bur-
nished – we know they ordered unburnished paper for the larger volumes and may have burnished
smaller sheets by hand or purchased them burnished (at a higher price). The *memoriale*, begun in the
fifteenth century was written in for several centuries, so it is conceivable that the three-hundred folios
of Fabriano carta *Reale* (noted in the 1483 inscription on fol. 1ʳ) lasted until the early 1500s, when several
of the smaller devotional manuscripts were made with the same watermarked paper.

34 On Monteluce, see Umiker 2012; Laniati 1983; and Niccolini 1971.

meals. We know the nuns had the choice between paper and parchment and those choices reflected their understanding of economics and the characteristics and quality of the material, as well as how the book would be used and by whom.
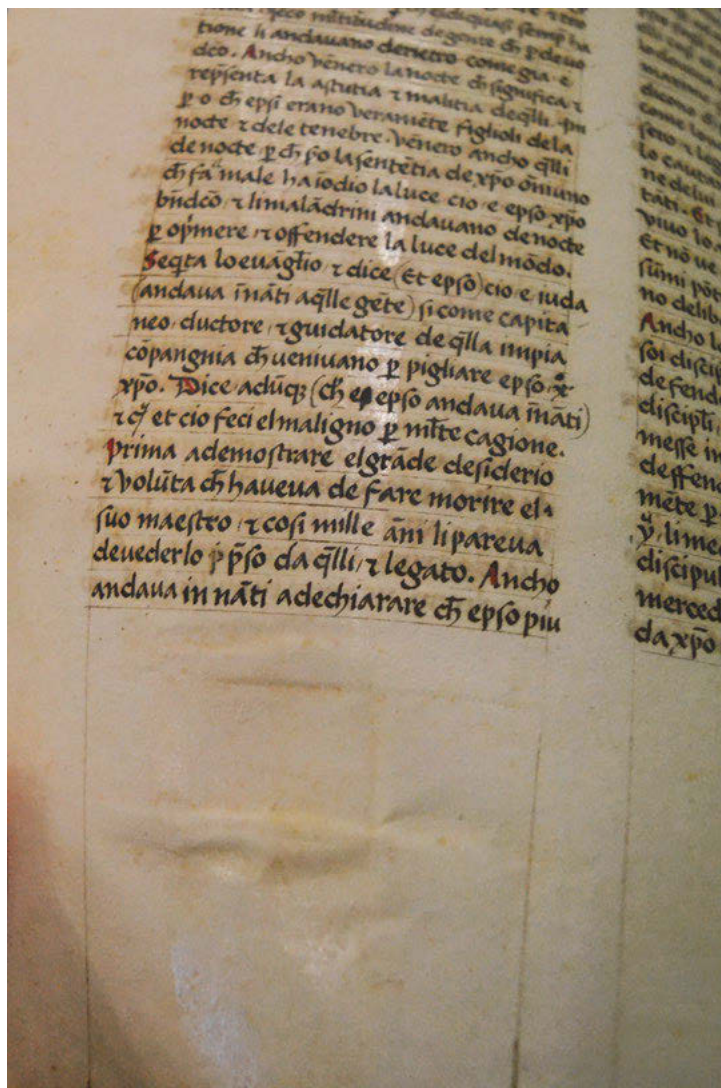
Fig. 11: The shiny surface of sized and burnished paper in a Monteluce devotional manuscript from 1512, containing Gabriele da Perugia's *Libro de vita*; Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta, 993; © Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta.

3.3 Book covers: Parchment *vs* leather and sheep *vs* goat

Returning briefly to the Venetian *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto*, the book was bound in a utilitarian limp parchment cover, recut, refolded, and reused from the cover of an earlier, larger book. The *Regula*'s well-worn covers indicate that it was heavily used – and this evidence is confirmed by the numerous notes of possession written out in the margins of the paper manuscript.[35] Limp parchment covers were common on books for students and preachers – and anyone whose interest in the text outweighed their desire (or budget) for a more ostentatious tooled leather cover over boards. The binding was a common choice for booksellers, who would have books bound into a parchment covering, with the idea that the owner could have them rebound in leather and boards at a later date, if desired.[36] It was sometimes meant to be temporary, sometimes meant to be permanent, and sometimes meant to be temporary but became the final binding out of neglect or a lack of funds to slip it into a finer binding. Limp parchment, particularly when recycled from another book, was inexpensive and durable.

The book was sewn on supports, which were laced into holes in the covers, holding it in place. This covering may have been added by the nuns themselves. A mark up for the binder on the inner cover turn in notes the direction of the cover placement ('*Supra*' – basically 'this way up') and is in a hand not dissimilar to those of the possession notes (see Figs 12a–c). Whether bound by the nuns or by someone outside the convent, the nuns were making a statement in their choice of materials – one that demonstrates their interest in studying this new version of the *Regula,* rather than showing off its binding.

Choices were also made about leather used for book covers. The cheapest leather was sheepskin (followed by goat and then calf, which was generally the costliest). As an 'oily' skin, sheep has a layer of fat between the inner and outer epidermis, which, when it dries out over time causes the upper skin to delaminate easily and tear away. The telltale sign of sheep delamination can be seen in Fig. 13.

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35 The possession notes, written by successive users of the manuscript, state the temporary owner's name followed by a variation on the phrase: 'Io sono padrona di questa regola' ('I am the owner of this rule'). Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MMS 01207, fols 1ʳ, 139ᵛ.
36 See Pickwoad 2016.

Figs 12a–c: (a) Exterior of the left-hand (upper) cover of the limp parchment binding on the *Regula del sanctissimo Benedetto*, made from recycled parchment and showing evidence of rodent damage (chew marks on right). (b) Inner cover showing bookbinder's notation of '*Supra*' ('above') on the turned in parchment, indicating 'this way up' for the placement of the cover on the book. (c) Possession notes in a hand similar to that of the bookbinder, bottom of fol. 1ʳ; Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MMS 01207; © Toronto, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library.

Though a full-scale study of nuns' book bindings has yet to be carried out, evidence of selected case studies suggests that sheepskin is the most common leather seen on nuns' devotional manuscripts, at least on those books that remain in their early bindings.[37] The choice of sheepskin leather was an economic one. These books are all about the contents, not the covers, and the nuns are taking cost into consideration when paying for the covering material. In considering the economics of production, it is worth noting that the most high-end known surviving manuscript from the Benedictine nuns of Le Murate in Florence (the papal gift produced by Carducci and Attavante in Fig. 4) does not appear to be covered in sheepskin, but perhaps goat, a more costly skin which

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37 In general, medieval books that retain their early or original covers have a low survival rate, since many books that survive have been rebound in subsequent bindings by collectors and libraries who wanted to upgrade whole collections to give them a uniform appearance. Nuns' books – of lesser interest to collectors – have often escaped this renewal process, preserving valuable information on the economics of book production.

is commensurate with the level of scribal production and illumination (eZooMs protein analysis has not been carried out on this skin to determine its animal origin but this would confirm the visual identification).[38]

Fig. 13: Detail of the left-hand (upper) cover of a *collectarium* written and used by the nuns of San Jacopo di Ripoli, Florence, showing delamination of the sheepskin leather. The areas where the upper epidermis have peeled off are lightest in colour; Florence, BNC, Conv. Soppr. C.S.D.7.344; © Florence, BNC.

It is generally assumed that the choice of covering or binding materials was made by the bookbinder at the stationer's shop, where the nuns sent their books to be bound (if it was not bound in a monastic context). However, new archival evidence

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38 The manuscript is Paris, BnF, lat. 17323. The non-invasive method of testing proteins to determine the animal species of a skin has been pioneered by the Beast2Craft team of biocodicologists, and published in Fiddyment et al. 2019.

by Kathleen Arthur, on the nun-scribes of the Augustinian house of San Gaggio, Florence, demonstrates that the nuns did choose the leather and other materials for the books they made for nuns at their own house. As early as the 1430s the Florentine nuns of San Gaggio purchased parchment from *cartolai* for breviaries and missals.[39] Their account book also records the purchase of red '*pellicina cavretta*' or goatskin leather, and silver clasps for the book cover, for a breviary. Goat was more costly than sheep, the most durable skin used for leather, and created a high-quality covering material, with a cost that reflected this. The red goatskin was purchased by the convent for nun Andredea Rinuccini's breviary and costs were reimbursed by Andredea's brother when the book was finished.[40] Wealthy family members of nun-scribes also supplied materials, such as quills and parchment, directly to the nuns for their book production. There were presumably materials needed for special projects outside of their regular scriptorium work, for the making of extra books for themselves, their fellow sisters, and special family members.

4 Conclusions

Bookmaking did not require a great deal of space – however, materials such as parchment, paper, quills, and ink did require some investment of capital, not to mention the labour and time required to train a literate scribe or good miniaturist. If the space, scribal skills, and tools were available to produce books, there was potentially an excellent return on the investment. Savvy abbesses and prioresses, in charge of literate and graphically-gifted communities of women, saw this as an opportunity and developed scriptoria within their convents – an activity that involved cultivating and maintaining important connections with wealthy patrons. The scriptorium was at once a space requiring the support of patrons (for room construction and repairs, provision of writing supplies, etc.) and one that produced objects of patronage (the books that were sold or given away in gift exchanges with important patrons). Bookwork sustained the community financially – selling Books of Hours and paraliturgical texts to a range of patrons brought in much-needed income and offered vital diversification of the convent's income sources, stabilizing it financially.

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39 Their account book shows the purchase of materials from a *cartolaio* named Bartolomeo, including parchment for quires. See Arthur 2017.
40 Arthur 2017, 273–274.

Aside from functioning as a source of income and patronage-building, producing books in-house provided the nuns with the liturgical, devotional, theological and archival books they needed to fulfil their obligations of communal prayer, private devotion, and study, as well as maintaining the community's history through the keeping of vital records such as chronicles, necrologies, account books, and books of profession. Nuns expressed scribal agency through the scripts they used and the manner in which they wrote. Though monastic life was in many ways governed by the virtue of piety, nuns' scribal work show us a different aspect of convent life, one in which cloistered women expressed self-identification in subtle (distinctive catchwords and decorative penwork) and sometimes overt ways (like naming themselves in colophons). These forms of self-identification were understood within their communities and increased nun-scribes' status within the convent, as well as providing a lasting presence within their houses after the nuns passed from their earthly to their heavenly home.

One of the most surprising aspects of nuns' bookwork concerns the material choices nuns made when reproducing texts. Materials were carefully chosen for specific jobs – high-end calligraphic work, fine parchment, and goatskin leather covers for liturgical manuscripts for the most prestigious patrons, a suitable hand-made paper burnished to a smooth shine for communal devotional texts bound in sheepskin, and rough parchment for the beginners producing a personal theological or spiritual text. It is critical to assess the material aspects of these books, since it provides a great deal of information about the motives nuns had in creating them. Was this book meant for a wealthy client – for sale or gift exchange? Was it created for personal use (nuns kept their own books, even if those texts were technically owned communally)? Where did the materials come from? Was the paper (as in the Monteluce example) shipped in specially from a distant paper mill to provide the house with large-sized sheet materials, not available locally? How were these purchases made and which parties negotiated? Why did a nun choose parchment over paper (much more expensive, but the only choice for some texts)? Whether the choice was parchment or paper, what can the quality of the sheet material tell us about her skill level and stage of her writing career? The answers to these questions can tell us about the economic status of the scribe and her community, what level of priority she is giving to the production of each book, and her relationship to patrons, secular collaborators, and her fellow scribes within the scriptorium. Taken together, the evidence of scribal work and materials provide a wealth of information about nuns' deep knowledge of materials, as well as how those choices impacted their artistic and intellectual lives.

The copying of books did not spring spontaneously from nothing – *ex nihilo* – but was instead grounded in a wide-reaching culture of literacy and textual production in female religious communities across the Italian peninsula. Understanding the materials, methods, and motives employed by these religious women enlarges the framework for understanding the broader production of texts (both secular and religious) produced in the period. Women are part of this larger picture – as artists, makers, sellers, readers, and book users – and their bookwork tells a broader story about how they leveraged their scribal skill and knowledge of materials to support their communities and their own spiritual and intellectual ambitions.

Abbreviations

BML = Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (Florence)
BNC = Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale (Florence)
BnF = Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris)
Conv. Soppr. = Conventi Soppressi

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Michael L. Norton

The Invisible Obvious: Women's Liturgy at Klosterneuburg

Abstract: Founded in the early twelfth century CE on the banks of the Danube just north of Vienna, the monastery at Klosterneuburg offers a rare glimpse into how one community of Augustinian canonesses asserted their liturgical voice in the face of male supervision. Like the Benedictine monasteries of the concurrent Hirsau reforms, the Augustinian houses incorporated both men and women in separate and often adjacent precincts, with the canonesses placed under the administrative and spiritual direction of the canons. Despite the illusion of male control, the canonesses of Klosterneuburg charted their own course in the celebration of their liturgy, and they expressed this liturgy with a form of musical notation distinct from that of the canons. Given the divergent forms of their liturgical and musical practices, canonesses likely served as scribes for their liturgical texts and music as well.

1 Introduction

In 1984, Norwegian psychologist Jan Smedslund published an essay entitled 'The Invisible Obvious: Culture in Psychology'.[1] He argued that in disregarding the cultures in which we are embedded, traditional psychology had missed much that was sitting in plain sight. He claimed that without the ability to participate in the cultures that framed its subjects, research itself was impossible.[2] For those who study the residues of past cultures, this is certainly unsettling. Indeed, any attempt to embed within a culture long past requires that we invent rather than experience the cultures we seek to understand. But as Anaïs Nin observed, 'We do not see things as *they* are. We see them as *we* are'.[3] We struggle to connect dots to form an image of what we suspect the past to have been, an image that comports with what our education and experience dispose us to see, with the expectation that should more dots appear, the image will become clearer. But once seen, the now visible dots might unveil a picture altogether different from what we expected to see. For students of the past, this is the 'invisible obvious'.

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1 Smedslund 1984.
2 Smedslund 1984, 445.
3 Nin 1961, 124.

Some aspect of an object or phenomenon hides in plain sight for decades or even centuries and at some juncture slides into view. In an instant, what was invisible is revealed, and once revealed, becomes obvious.

In this essay, I explore one facet of the 'invisible obvious' associated with the long-overlooked musical and liturgical practices of the canonesses enclosed within the double monastery at Klosterneuburg, practices that endured from the middle third of the twelfth century CE until the last canoness died in 1568 (note: CE assumed for all dates hereafter). I will show that the canonesses of Klosterneuburg followed a liturgical *cursus* that was independent from that of the canons in their adjacent precincts, and I will trace the process by which Amelia Carr and I uncovered this liturgical practice and the distinct form of musical notation used to express it. I will survey the extent to which requirements for enclosure were honoured by the canonesses, and I will speculate as to whether such an independent liturgical and notational practice might have manifested at other double monasteries. I will close with a brief summary along with a hint at new directions.

2 The canons and canonesses of Klosterneuburg

Inspired by the reforms for the common life promoted by Pope Gregory VII in the latter part of the eleventh century, Benedictine monks from Hirsau in the Black Forest and Augustinian canons in Austria and Bavaria established or reformed multiple monastic foundations in Swabia, Bavaria, and Austria over the course of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries.[4] Many if not most were double monasteries, with the men and women housed separately in adjacent or nearby precincts and with the women under the nominal control of the male clerics.[5] Despite the wide distribution of such foundations, the liturgical and musical practices of the female side of these institutions have received little attention.[6] To be fair, most of these

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4 For the Hirsau reforms see Jakobs 1961 and especially Schreiner 1991a and Schreiner 1999; as for the culture of Hirsau's manuscript production, see Heinzer 1991. For the Augustinian reforms at Rottenbuch in the late eleventh century, see Mois 1953 and 1974. For the later reforms under Archbishop Konrad I of Salzburg, see Weinfurter 1975, 1984 and 1998.

5 I use the expression 'double monastery' (and in some cases, 'dual-sex monastery') in the sense proposed by Thompson 1991, 55, as 'consisting of two communities, one of monks and one of nuns, established in the same place but not necessarily within the same boundary, observing the same rule, and together forming a legal entity under one authority' (cited in Hotchin 2002, 69). On the problems of defining a 'double house', see Norton and Carr 2011, 71, n. 16.

6 Our understanding of the lives of women enclosed within the double monasteries of the German-speaking south has been broadened by many studies in recent years. The list is too long to engage

foundations can claim too few liturgical manuscripts to allow any meaningful distinctions between male and female use, and most scholars have been content to consider the few manuscripts and fragments that have survived as representing the use of the monks or canons by default.

The manuscripts from Klosterneuburg, on the other hand, stand out for their sheer bulk. Nearly three hundred fifty liturgical manuscripts and fragments from Klosterneuburg and elsewhere survive in the Klosterneuburg Stiftsbibliothek alone, with more fragments coming to light as this is going to press.[7] Built on a bluff overlooking the Danube just north-west of Vienna, Klosterneuburg was founded as a proprietary church in 1114 by the Austrian margrave Leopold III (now St Leopold), who turned it over to Augustinian canons in 1133. As was customary for Augustinian foundations in the region, Klosterneuburg was founded as double, with the canons and canonesses housed in separate, but adjacent, precincts.[8] A late seventeenth-century engraving shows the relative locations for the two parts of the foundation (see Fig. 1): the canons' precincts on the right and the smaller precincts of the canonesses on the left.

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here, so I offer the following by way of introduction. On issues related to literacy and learning among the female religious of medieval Germany writ large, see Kruckenberg 2021. Especially notable for the nuns of the Hirsau reforms are Küsters 1991, Hotchin 2002, and the several studies of Alison Beach (for example, Beach 2004, (ed.) 2007 and 2013). Aspects of the Hirsau liturgy are treated by Felix Heinzer (Heinzer 1992, 2001 and 2004, among others). On the women in Austrian double monasteries within the diocese of Passau, see Christiane Ulrike Kurz's 2010 University of Vienna dissertation (published as Kurz 2015). Some older studies remain useful. For the nuns of Admont see Wichner 1881. For the canonesses of St Florian, see Czerny 1878, 278–282. Despite the recent interest in – and proliferation of studies on – the nuns and canonesses of the region, the liturgical and musical lives of these women remain largely unexplored. This will likely be rectified in Hanna Zühlke's Habilitationsschrift on the Hirsau liturgy, currently in progress, which includes a chapter devoted to the liturgy of the nuns (personal correspondence from Hanna Zühlke, 2 July 2023).

7 The website *Cantus Planus: Musikhandschriften des Mittelalters, Erschließung von Choralhandschriften, mehrstimmiger Musik und Fragmenten aus Österreich,* under the heading 'Austriaca: Liturgische Handschriften in österreichischen Bibliotheken', lists 349 liturgical manuscripts and fragments of various sorts held by the Klosterneuburg Stiftsbibliothek. These include liturgical fragments preserved in non-liturgical manuscripts. See <https://www.cantusplanus.at/de-at/austriaca/HssAustria/index.php> (accessed on 11 June 2023). Additional liturgical fragments are currently being catalogued by Eva Veselovska of the Institute of Musicology, Slovak Academy of Sciences. These can be found at <https://www.austriamanus.org> (accessed on 11 June 2023). Eva Veselovska is currently preparing an article on these fragments for the *Jahrbuch des Stiftes Klosterneuburg.*

8 On the dual-sex foundations associated with the twelfth-century Augustinian reforms, see Weinfurter 1975, 290–292.

Fig. 1: Bird's eye view of Klosterneuburg; engraving by Johann Martin Lerch between 1687 and 1693; Klosterneuburg, Stiftsmuseum, DG 414; © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsmuseum.

The church of the canonesses was built in the thirteenth or fourteenth century as an expansion of an earlier twelfth-century building and still stands.[9] Known as the church of Mary Magdalene in the modern literature, the association of the women's precincts with the saint has recently been challenged by Sarah Deichstetter, who traces the affiliation only to 1687.[10] However, liturgical evidence suggests that the

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9 The church of the canonesses is treated in Kovarik 2011. A more thorough investigation by Barbara Schedl is in progress.
10 Deichstetter 2023 shows that the documentary evidence preserved in the Klosterneuburg Stiftsarchiv supports the notion that the foundation as a whole (including both men's and women's precincts) was dedicated to the Virgin Mary. She notes that the earliest unambiguous connection between Mary Magdalene and the church of the canonesses is found in the 1687 engraving by Johann Martin Lerch (see Fig. 1), where the church is known as the 'Sacellum S. Maria Magdalene'.

church itself had an association with Mary Magdalene since at least the early fourteenth century, if not earlier.[11] The community appears to have been well attended and was populated largely by the daughters and widows of the lesser nobility and *ministeriales*.[12] The canonesses were organised separately, headed by a *magistra* or *Maisterin*, and placed under the spiritual and temporal control of a *custos dominarum* appointed by the provost.

By the mid thirteenth century, the number of women entering the cloister had grown large enough that the *magistra* petitioned the pope to limit the number of women entering the religious life at Klosterneuburg, and the pope complied, directing that the population should not exceed the means available to support it.[13] In an early application of Pope Boniface VIII's pronouncement requiring the strict enclosure of nuns, a visitation order in 1301, confirmed by Passau's bishop six years later, restricted access by the canonesses to the outside world, restrictions that would prove porous at best.[14] In 1330, the bishop further ordered that the number of canonesses not exceed thirty-two.[15]

Over time the number of canonesses decreased. Documents from the late fourteenth century show numbers in the twenties.[16] During the sixteenth century, the combined effects of the plague, the Turkish invasion, and the Protestant Reformation further diminished the ranks of Klosterneuburg canonesses. By the middle third of the sixteenth century, the number had dwindled to twelve.[17] In 1565, three

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11 See Section 2.2 'The limits of enclosure' below on the canons' processions to the church of the canonesses and Norton and Carr 2011, 128–129 and n. 219. Three late-sixteenth-century sacristan's handbooks also identify this as the church of Mary Magdalene. See below, n. 55.

12 Dienst 1990, 174–187.

13 StiAK Urkunde 1253.VII.01 <https://www.monasterium.net/mom/AT-StiAK/KlosterneuburgCanReg/1253_VII_11/charter> (accessed on 11 June 2023). Edition in Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 1, 6–7.

14 The 1301 statute is preserved in StiAK Urkunde 1301.V.26.1 <https://www.monasterium.net/mom/AT-StiAK/KlosterneuburgCanReg/1301_V_26.1/charter> (accessed on 11 June 2023). Edition in Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 1, 68–72. The 1307 statute is preserved in StiAK Urkunde 1307.VII.01 <https://www.monasterium.net/mom/AT-StiAK/KlosterneuburgCanReg/1307_VII_01/charter> (accessed on 11 June 2023). Edition in Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 1, 106–107. On the porous nature of enclosure at Klosterneuburg, see Section 2.2 'The limits of enclosure' below.

15 StiAK Urkunde 1330.II.27 <https://www.monasterium.net/mom/AT-StiAK/KlosterneuburgCanReg/1330_II_27/charter> (accessed on 11 June 2023). Edition in Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 1, 233–234.

16 Documents from 1396, for example, indicate twenty-three and twenty-four canonesses respectively. See Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 2, 286 and 288.

17 Twelve canonesses participated in the election of the new *magistra* in 1535. A tied vote resulted in the intervention of the provost, who appointed Magdalena Münsterinn instead to the post, even though she was of advanced years and not yet professed. See Davy 1995, 38. The original document is contained in StiAK MS 6, fol. 99.

canonesses remained, and, in March of 1568, the last canoness died.[18] The church remained empty for the next century and a half yet continued to serve as a station for liturgical processions.[19] In 1722, the church was deconsecrated, and its bell tower removed. The lower level was converted into a wine press, a function that it continues to fulfil, while the upper level was used to store grain.[20]

2.1 Women's liturgy at Klosterneuburg

When art historian, Amelia Carr, and I began our study of Klosterneuburg's Holy Week rites in the late 1980s, we did not intend to uncover the liturgical practice for Klosterneuburg's canonesses. Our intent rather was to outline how perceptions of the so-called sepulchre rites, rites that marked the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, changed as the interior of the church was recast over the four centuries that separated the church's dedication in 1136 from our lapse in manuscript evidence at the turn of the sixteenth century.[21] We were aware that there were cloistered women at Klosterneuburg, but our focus was on the liturgical practice and the church of the canons. It pains me to admit now, but I had fully absorbed the attitude expressed nearly two centuries earlier by Klosterneuburg's librarian and archivist, Maximillian Fischer, who observed in 1815 that 'Die Begebenheiten dieses Klosters sind so einförmig, als es die natürliche Beschaffenheit eines Frauenklosters mit sich bringt' ('The story of this cloister is as monotonous as the natural condition of a woman's monastery implies', all translations are mine).[22]

We knew then of seventeen manuscripts preserving the *Visitatio sepulchri*, a liturgical re-enactment of the discovery by the Marys of the empty tomb of Christ that concluded the Office of Matins on Easter morning.[23] This ceremony culminated the so-called sepulchre rites of Holy Week that had drawn our attention, rites that began with the ritual burial of the cross on Good Friday (*Depositio crucis*) and its

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18 Appolonia Khatzler, the last canoness at Klosterneuburg, died on 20 March 1568. On the final years for the women at Klosterneuburg, see Davy 1995, 75–77.
19 These are noted in StiAK MS 191 (copied in 1573), CCl 1026A (copied in 1576), and Vienna lat. 15078 (copied in 1594). See Norton and Carr 2011, 74, n. 34.
20 Černik 1914, 38.
21 Our initial findings were reported in a series of presentations given at the International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, MI) between 1989 and 1994 and at the symposium 'Drame liturgique: Sens et représentations', sponsored by the Societé française de musicologie in Fontévraud, France (April 1996).
22 Fischer 1815, vol. 1, 333.
23 These are given in Lipphardt 1976–1990, vol. 2, 286–287 (LOO 225) and 3, 981–1022 (LOO 593, 594, 595, 596, 596a, 597, 598, 599, 599a, 600, 600a, 601, 602, 602a, 602b, and 602c).

removal prior to Matins on Easter Sunday (*Elevatio crucis*).[24] Over the next several years, we were able to extend this number to forty-two.[25] As our sources grew in both quantity and quality, we found that we could separate the settings of this rite into two groups based on variations in the forms of musical notation used, in their melodic structures, and in their implied distribution of singing assignments, and this suggested to us a gendered separation in liturgical practice for this ceremony.

One of our newly discovered manuscripts, CCl 1022B, was a fourteenth-century ritual that contained blessings of various sorts along with the rites for the sick and several special rites for the liturgical year, including the blessings and processions for the Purification of Mary (2 February), Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, and the rites for Holy Week. We assumed that this would be yet another ritual that would likely not enhance our understanding of Klosterneuburg's Holy Week celebration.[26] But on closer examination we realized that this manuscript appeared to have been configured to be used by a priest on behalf of the canonesses.

The manuscript included marginal additions that showed the book to have been used on behalf of women. In the rites for the sick, feminine endings were added interlineally as alternatives for the masculine endings provided in the text, thus rendering *famulam* for *famulum*, *tuam* for *tuum*, *fessam* for *fessum*, *ista* for *iste*, and so on.[27] In both the Palm Sunday procession and the rite for the Adoration of the Cross of Good Friday, marginal notes optionally assigned chants normally sung by boys to *sorores*, or sisters.[28] While these additions may have been added to

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24 Treatments of the *Depositio crucis* of Good Friday are given in Corbin 1960 and Gschwend 1965. See also Chaguinian 2022. Christophe Chaguinian is currently preparing a book length treatment as well.

25 Norton and Carr 1993.

26 The rituals given in Lipphardt 1976–1990 include CCl 629 (LOO 595) and CCl 1021 (LOO 596). Another ritual, CCl 628, was among our newly discovered sources. See Norton and Carr 1993.

27 CCl 1022B, fols 69ᵛ–73ᵛ. Hild 2018 offers a thorough accounting for the rites for the sick and dying as described in manuscripts from Klosterneuburg. Such gendered emendations are found also in the rituals: CCl 1022A, fols 33ᵛ–37ʳ, where they modify the rites at the bedside of a sick or dying canon or canoness, and CCl 629, fols 140ʳ–145ᵛ, where they modify the post-mortem rites. See Hild 2018, 16–17.

28 On fol. 26ʳ, the following direction is found before the hymn 'Gloria laus et honor' during the Palm Sunday procession: 'Deinde veniant duo pueri ante ecclesie stantes et cantantes hunc hymnum: Gloria laus' ('Then come two boys standing in front of the church and singing the hymn "Gloria laus"'). Following the word 'veniant' in the right margin are the words: 'duo sorores a[ut],' the last word broken off due to cropping. With the interpolation, this would read: 'Deinde veniant duo sorores aut duo pueri' ('Then come two sisters or two boys'). A similar interpolation is found on fol. 40ʳ in the rite for the Adoration of the Cross. The rubric directs boys to sing 'Agyos o theos'. A marginal note adds 'aut duo sorores' ('or two sisters').

tailor the manuscript for use in either church as needed,[29] the manuscript's directions for the rites for Holy Week along with its setting of the *Visitatio sepulchri* for Easter morning suggest that it was intended for use on behalf of the canonesses. In the rituals of the canons, the participation of the provost is required for the Palm Sunday procession, the rites of Holy Thursday and Good Friday, and the Elevation of the Cross on Easter morning, while in CCl 1022B, the provost is required only for the Blessing of the New Fire on Holy Saturday.[30] There is no overlap between the two sets of ceremonies. Further support for the ritual's association with the canonesses is given in the rite for the blessing in the principal chapter. In the canons' rituals, this reads: 'Benedictio super fratres in principalibus capitulis idest in pascha domini, in pentecostes, et in nativitate domini' ('Blessing over the brothers in the principal chapters, that is on Easter, on Pentecost, and on Christmas').[31] In CCl 1022B, the word 'fratres' is erased and replaced with the word 'sorores' and the list of feasts at which the blessings occur is altered: 'Benedictio super sorores in principalibus capitulis idest in cena domini et aliis' ('Blessing over the sisters in the principal chapters, that is at the Lord's Supper (i.e. Maundy Thursday) and others').[32] Moreover, the opening prayer in the canonesses' ritual reads: 'Salvas fac famulas tuas' ('Save your servants (fem.)'), while in canons' rituals, this reads: 'Salvos fac servos tuos' ('Save your servants (masc.)').

The setting for the *Visitatio sepulchri* is particularly revealing (see Fig. 2). Settings of the *Visitatio sepulchri* in female houses commonly assign the chants for the chorus and the Marys to the nuns or canonesses, although this is by no means universal.[33] If we assume a similar procedure here – and remembering that this book was intended for use by a priest – we can see that the chants assigned to the chorus and the Marys (*mulieres*) are given here in block text, while the chants likely sung by the priest or his attendants are given in full with musical notation.[34]

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29 Hild 2018, 16–17.

30 Norton and Carr 2011, 118.

31 CCl 629 and CCl 1021, fol. 24ʳ in both manuscripts.

32 CCl 1022B, fol. 33ʳ.

33 For example, settings of this rite from the convents at Essen and Origny-Sainte-Benoît assign all lines to male clerics. See Norton and Carr 2011, 104, n. 142–143.

34 An inverse corollary is found in a twelfth-century antiphoner, CCl 1013, fol. 145ʳ. Here, music is absent for the chants assigned to the angel, thus complementing the assignments provided in the ritual. A similar omission is seen in an early-fourteenth-century processional from the convent of St George in Prague, where the angel's lines are omitted altogether (Prague MS XIII.C.3c, fol. 108ᵛ). For an alternative view on the missing melodies in CCl 1013, see Evers and Janota 2013, vol. 1/2, 461.

Fig. 2: *Visitatio sepulchri*; CCl 1022B, fol. 64ʳ (fourteenth-century ritual); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

With our expanded repertory of liturgical manuscripts, we noticed differences in the musical settings provided for the *Visitatio sepulchri* among our two groups of manuscripts as well (see Figs 3a–b). Some distinctions are evident at first sight. The canons' ritual on the left provides full rubrics for the performance of the rite, while the antiphoner on the right provides cues only. The forms of musical notation also differ. The canons' ritual uses a four-line staff with lines clearly drawn and with both C and F clefs along with Bohemian rhomboid note heads, while the contemporary antiphoner uses an older form of notation found in Klosterneuburg antiphoners from two centuries earlier. This form of notation, called 'Klosterneuburg notation' in the musicological literature, is one of the earliest forms of staff notation known in the southern regions of German-speaking Europe. Notational signs (or neumes) originating in the German north-west (Metz neumes) are combined with others common to the German south-east (German neumes), with the neumes arranged on drypoint lines etched into the parchment and with the line representing F overlayed in red ink and that representing C overlayed in yellow. In addition, key letters are placed at the beginning of each line.[35]

Looking at the melodies themselves, further differences are evident (see Figs 4a–b). The melodies for 'Quem queritis' ('Whom do you seek'), 'Jesum nazarenum' ('Jesus of Nazareth'), and 'Non est hic' ('He is not here') in the antiphoner are set a fourth higher than the corresponding melodies in the canons' ritual. There are melodic differences as well, as can be seen in the notes in the shaded areas, differences that are consistent among the two groups of manuscripts throughout the repertory.

While these distinctions were suggestive of a distinct liturgical practice for the canonesses of Klosterneuburg, they were by no means definitive, and we set out to locate a firmer foundation for our suspicions. To be sure, some manuscripts had always been associated with the canonesses. An explicit in CCl 1000, a hymnal copied in 1336, identified its owner or scribe as the canoness, Geisle Ruedwein.[36] A fourteenth-century breviary, CCl 982, while never eliciting much interest from liturgical

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35 The emergence of the distinctive notational form found in the manuscripts of Klosterneuburg's canonesses is treated most recently in Klugseder 2023, which supplements and to some extent supersedes the earlier studies by Janka Szendrei (Szendrei 1992 and 1998) as well as his own earlier studies (Klugseder 2007, 2008a, and 2008b). I offer an alternative speculation on these new notational forms in Section 3.4 'Early staff notation in southern German-speaking Europe', below.

36 Fol. 123ʳ: 'Explicit liber domine Geisle Ruedweininne. Anno domini M.CCC.XXXVI' ('Here ends the book of Lady Geisle Ruedwein. The year of Our Lord 1336'). The opening flyleaf also

scholars, contained a colophon that identified the women's house at Klosterneuburg as its destination.[37] Perhaps most revealing was the inhabited initial that opened a fourteenth-century gradual, CCl 588, which shows a canoness praying to the Virgin and Child (see Fig. 5).[38]

Regrettably, there was still too little to warrant any claims for a distinct liturgical practice for the women of Klosterneuburg. Our cache of forty-two manuscripts was insufficient, and we set out to expand our understanding of Klosterneuburg's liturgical holdings. Whether any additional manuscripts might have been intended for the canons or for the canonesses (or both), and whether these might reveal an independent liturgical practice for the canonesses, we did not yet know.

Ultimately, we were able to identify twenty-seven manuscripts that reflected the liturgical use of Klosterneuburg's canonesses (see Table 1).[39] These included seven hymnals, nine antiphoners, and three breviaries containing the texts and music for the Divine Office, three processionals and two graduals with music for the Mass and its processions, two rituals used by priests on behalf of the canonesses, and a single miscellany with a uniquely configured setting for the Office of the Dead.

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includes an inscription in a fifteenth-century hand: 'Das puech ist unser lieben Frauen Gotshaus zu Klosterneuburgk und gehort in das Frauen Kloster' ('The book is <in> our blessed Lady's church at Klosterneuburgk and belongs to the women's cloister'), which is repeated on the verso, albeit inverted. The verso also contains a fifteenth-century ownership mark: 'Liber beate Marie virginis In Newenburga claustrali', which is repeated on fol. 125ᵛ, suggesting that the manuscript was in possession of the canons at that time. The manuscript is available online at <https://manuscripta.at/>. For the explicit, see <https://manuscripta.at/diglit/AT5000-1000/0249> (accessed on 11 June 2023).

37 Fol. 275ʳ: 'Das puech ist der vrawen von Czelking in dem vrawen Chloster das Newnburch' ('This book is <for> the women of Zelking in the women's cloister at Klosterneuburg'). This manuscript is the second in a pair of manuscripts that resulted from the division of the manuscript originally presented to the women of Zelking (Lower Austria). See Norton and Carr 2011, 105–108 and below.

38 Another praying canoness is found in an addition to the fourteenth-century hymnal, CCl 1004, fol. 109ʳ, where it introduces a series of offices beginning with the office for the Finding of St Stephan (3 August).

39 The details for this are laid out in Norton and Carr 2011 and Norton 2016.

Fig. 3a: Diverging settings of the *Visitatio sepulchri*; CCl 629, fol. 103ᵛ (fourteenth-century ritual, canons); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

ac via de — — via ? Et valde mane vna sabba
torum veniunt ad monumentu orto iam sole Vt rem.
Ad sepulchrum Maria magdalena et alia maria fere
baut diluculo a romata dominum querentes in monume
to Mulieres Quis reuoluet nobis ab hostio lapidem que
tegere sanctum cernimus sepulchrum Angelus Quem
queritis ut o tremule mulieres in hoc tumulo gementes
Mulieres Iesum nazarenum crucifixum querimus Angls
Non est hic quem queritis sed ato euntes nunciate disci
pulis ei us et petro quia surrexit iesus Mulieres Admo
numentum veimmus gementes anglm domini sedntem
vidimus et dicentem quia surrexit iesus & Currebant
duo simul Petrus et Iohs Cernitis o soror eate nunchedina

Fig. 3b: Diverging settings of the *Visitatio sepulchri*; CCl 589, fol. 2ʳ (fourteenth-century antiphoner);
© Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Figs 4a–b: (a) Melodic settings for canons and canonesses' *Visitatio sepulchri*; CCl 629, fols 103ᵛ–104ʳ (fourteenth-century ritual, canons); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek. (b) Melodic settings for canons and canonesses' *Visitatio sepulchri*; CCl 589, fol. 2ʳ (fourteenth-century antiphoner); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Fig. 5: Canoness praying to Virgin and Child; CCl 588, fol. 4ʳ (detail, fourteenth-century gradual); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Table 1: Klosterneuburg canonesses' liturgical manuscripts.

Manuscript	Date	Notes
		Hymnals
CCl 1000	1336	Colophon indicating scribe/owner as Geisle Ruedwein (1336)
CCl 996	14th c.	
CCl 997	14th c.	German rubrics
CCl 1001	14th c.	Office of the Dead added
CCl 1003	14th c.	St Catherine, Mass and Office for Corpus Christi, St Margaret, St Ursula added with German rubrics
CCl 1004	14th c.	Office of the Dead, Finding of St Stephen, St Catherine, Corpus Christi, and St Acacius added, German rubrics
CCl 999	15th c.	Office of the Dead, Mass and Office for Corpus Christi, St Stephen, and St Dorothy added
		Antiphoners
CCl 1010	12th c.	Winter part – Advent to Holy Saturday, Office of the Dead added
CCl 1012	12th c.	Summer part – Pentecost to octave of St Andrew and Sundays after Pentecost, St Catherine added
CCl 1013	12th c.	Winter part – Advent to Monday after Ascension. Unique *Visitatio sepulchri*
CCl 1011	14th c.	Winter part – Advent to Holy Saturday, Office of the Dead and St Catherine added
CCl 1015	14th c.	Winter part – Advent to Holy Saturday, Office of the Dead, Corpus Christi, St Catherine added
CCl 1017	14th c.	Winter part – St Nicholas to Holy Saturday
CCl 1018	14th c.	Summer part – Easter to St Andrew and Sundays after Pentecost, St Ursula, Office of the Dead added
CCl 589	14th c.	Summer part – Easter to St Catherine and Sundays after Pentecost, Office of the Dead added
CCl 1007	14th c.	New feasts for Visitation, St Anna, and St Dorothy
		Breviaries
CCl 1200	14th c.	Composite MS. German rubrics in psalter, feasts follow antiphoners
CCl 991	14th c.	Originally joined with MS 982, adapted for canonesses
CCl 982	14th c.	Originally joined with MS 991, adapted for canonesses
		Processionals
CCl 995	14th–15th c.	German rubrics, dedication of the church before St Afra
CCl 1006	15th c.	Copy of MS 995
CCl 1005	15th c.	Corrected copy of MS 995

Manuscript	Date	Notes
		Graduals
Graz 807	12th c.	Possibly gift to canonesses at Seckau
CCl 588	14th c.	Inhabited initial with canoness praying to the Virgin and Child
		Rituals
CCl 1022A	14th c.	Gender changes in prayers for the sick and dying
CCl 1022B	*c.* 1330	Gender changes in prayers for the sick, *sorores* in margin, *Visitatio sepulchri* with block text for nuns. Musical notator likely same as CCl 629
		Miscellany
CCl 1190	14th c.	Contains Office of the Dead corresponding to antiphoners

Our process for discovery followed a spiral path. We began with the hymnal, CCl 1000, which was tied to the canonesses through its explicit, and we expanded the list to include six hymnals that shared the same repertory of texts and melodies and the same form of musical notation. The attribution of the hymnals to Klosterneuburg's canonesses was of long standing. The hymnals had been assigned to the canonesses by the editors of the *Analecta Hymnica* in 1903,[40] and this assignment was confirmed by musicologist Bruno Stäblein in his 1956 edition of medieval hymns.[41] So far as we knew, though, no attempts had been made to compare the content of these hymnals with that of the canons. The hymn texts for the canons were preserved in numerous breviaries and ordinals. Hymn melodies were given in two manuscripts dating from the fifteenth century.[42]

Comparing the hymns from the two groups of manuscripts revealed several points of divergence. Hymns for the feasts of Holy Innocents and its octave, the octave for St Stephan, the feasts of Mary Magdalene, St Augustine, St Matthew, St Luke, and the Conception of Mary varied among the manuscripts of canons and canonesses (see Table 2).[43]

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40 See, for example, Blume and Dreves 1903, 29 and 236.

41 Stäblein 1956, viii (introduction), 209–247 (edition), and 565–578 (commentary).

42 Melodies are contained in CCl 599 and CCl 600.

43 The manuscripts consulted are the following: Canons: CCl 590, CCl 599, CCl 600, CCl 601, CCl 602, CCl 1199; Canonesses: CCl 996, CCl 997, CCl 999, CCl 1000, CCl 1001, CCl 1003, CCl 1004. These are given also in Norton and Carr 2011, 144. The hymns indicated in bold and italic are found in hymnals and service books; those in italic in service books; those that are underscored in hymnals only.

Table 2: Variations between canons and canonesses' hymnals

Feast	Date	Office	Canons	Canonesses
Holy Innocents	28 Dec.	Matins	*Aeterna Christi munera (CMM)*	*Salvete flores martyrum*
Stephan, octave	2 Jan.	Matins	*Deus tuorum (FST)*	***Stephano primo martyri***
Holy Innocents, octave	4 Jan.	Matins	*Aeterna Christi munera (CMM)*	***Salvete flores martyrum***
Pentecost	––	Several	***Veni creator spiritus***	*Aeterna sapientia*
Mary Magdalene	22 Jul.	Matins	***Votiva cunctis***	***Deus qui quosvis eligis***
Augustine	28 Aug.	Matins	***Magne pater Augustine***	*Festa patris Augustini*
		Lauds	***Celi cives applaudite***	*Exultemus Deo celi*
Matthew	21 Sep	Matins	*Ortu phebi (CA)*	***Matthee sancta***
		Vespers	*Exultet celum (CA)*	***O verbum fidelissimus***
Luke	18 Oct	Vespers	*Exultet celum (CA)*	***Luca fidelis***
Conception of Mary	8 Dec	Vespers	***Gaude visceribus*** (NM)	***Virga de Jesse generata***

Key for Table 2:
CA = Common of Apostles
CMM = Common of Many Martyrs
FST = Finding of St Stephan (3 August)
NM = Nativity of Mary (8 September)

The hymn texts 'Aeterna sapientia' for Pentecost, 'Deus qui quosvis eligis' for the feast of Mary Magdalene, and 'Festa Patris Augustini', for St Augustine, moreover, were unique to these hymnals and may have been composed by the canonesses themselves.[44] The hymn 'Deus creator omnium', typically given first in the canons' manuscripts but embedded within those of the canonesses, was given different melodies in the two sets of hymnals as well. Further distinctions were also evident.

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44 The listings in the editions of the *Analecta Hymnica*, Dreves 1888, 94 ('Festa patris Augustini') and Blume and Dreves 1903, 29 ('Aeterna sapientia') and 235–236 ('Deus qui quosvis elegis'), indicate the Klosterneuburg manuscripts as the sole source for these hymns. On the hymns 'Stephano primo martyri' and 'Salvete flores martyrum', found in the hymnals of the canonesses but not in those of the canons, see also Szendrei 2004, 55–58.

Fig. 6a: Hymn 'Lucis creator optime'; CCl 600, fol. 152ʳ (fifteenth-century hymnal, canons);
© Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Fig. 6b: Hymn 'Lucis creator optime'; CCl 1000, fol. 7ʳ (fourteenth-century hymnal, canonesses); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Figs 6a–b shows settings for the hymn 'Lucis creator optime' from the hymnals of the canons and canonesses respectively. The canons' hymn, like the rituals shown earlier, is set with Bohemian rhomboid note forms (see Figs 2 and 3a–b), while the canonesses' manuscript adopts the older staff notation seen in the antiphoners (see Figs 3a–b and the discussion below in Section 3.3 'Early Staff Notation in Klosterneuburg'). Also note-worthy is the handling of stanzas. While CCl 599 includes music for all stanzas, CCl 600 provides notation for the first stanza only, with the remaining stanzas given in block text. All of the canonesses' hymnals, on the other hand, repeat the music for each stanza.

Next, we examined a group of eight antiphoners, three from the twelfth century and five from the fourteenth, that shared the style of musical notation preserved in the hymnals.[45] It was the specific form of staff notation common to these manuscripts that led Franz Karl Praßl to associate the antiphoners with the canonesses in his 1987 Graz dissertation.[46] This association was not universally accepted, however, and several scholars continued to assign the antiphoners to the canons, if not those of Klosterneu-burg itself, then possibly those of Reichersberg am Inn or Sankt Nikola bei Passau.[47] However, the inclusion within the antiphoners of hymns that were specific to the hym-nals of the canonesses allowed us to confirm Prassl's insight. The hymns given in bold/italic in the right-hand column of Table 2 are recorded in both the hymnals and the antiphoners. Even stronger confirmation was offered by the distinct liturgical or-dering exhibited in the antiphoners for several feasts. This distinct ordering was first observed by Robert Klugseder in a study published as ours was nearing completion.[48] In particular, the offices for St Benedict, the Conversion of St Paul, Mary Magdalene, St Catherine, and the Office of the Dead were uniquely configured in these antiphoners. We found other features that were similarly distinctive,[49] particularly, as I noted ear-lier, the musical setting of the *Visitatio sepulchri*.

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45 Lacoste 2000 provides the most thorough treatment of the eight Klosterneuburg antiphoners.

46 Praßl 1987, 11: 'Im Stift Klosterneuburg gab es nebeneinander zwei Notationstraditionen: die Chorherren verwendet linienlose deutsche Neumen, die Chorfrauen jedoch die "Metzer Notation" auf Linien, die eigentlich einen Mischtypus zwischen Deutschen (z.B. Strophici) und Metzer (z.B. Unicinus) Neumen darstellt' ('At Klosterneuburg, two traditions of [musical] notation existed side by side: the canons used staffless German neumes, while the canonesses used "Metz notation" on lines, which is actually a mixture of German (e.g. Strophici) and Metz (e.g. Uncinus) neumes').

47 Schmidt 1983 suggested Reichersberg am Inn, while Flotzinger 1989 argued in favour of St Ni-kola bei Passau. Engels 1996 did not point to any particular location but noted that the antiphoners did not reflect the liturgical order of Klosterneuburg.

48 Klugseder 2008b offers a thorough accounting of the manuscripts for the Mass as well as for the Divine Office. Klugseder's findings for the Divine Office are supplemented in Norton and Carr 2011.

49 The Klosterneuburg antiphoners contain additional responsories attached to Matins for the Of-fice of the Assumption of Mary (15 August), a unique arrangement of antiphons for the days follow-ing the Assumption, as well as additional responsories attached to the feast of Mary Magdalene (22 July) and other feasts. See Norton and Carr 2011, 86–91.

The feast for Mary Magdalene (22 July) illustrates the differences existing between the manuscripts of canons and canonesses Table 3 provides a listing of the antiphons, responsories, and hymns for the Office of Matins included in the manuscripts of the canonesses from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries and from the manuscripts of the canons and the cathedral of Passau.[50] The sequence of musical items for the canons follows that of the diocese, while that of the canonesses is independent.[51] Note the items specific to the canonesses rendered in bold. The liturgy for the canonesses did not remain static moreover, as changes are evident between the twelfth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts.

Table 3: Matins for the feast of Mary Magdalene (22 July).

Item	Genre	Canonesses (12th c.)	Canonesses (14th c.)	Canons (14th–15th c.)	Passau (13th–14th c.)
Invitatory	A	***Ploremus coram domino***		*Stellam Christum*	*Stellam Christum*
	H	***Deus qui quosvis***	---	*Votiva cunctis*	---
Nocturn 1	A	*Rogabat Iesum quidam*		*Ingressus Jesus*	*Ingressus Jesus*
	A	***Stans retro Maria secus***		*Quae dum lacrimosa*	*Quae dum lacrimosa*
	A	***Videns autem pharisaeus***		*Incendit plene*	*Incendit plene*
	R	***Soror Marthe Maria stabat***		*Septem ergo Maria*	*Septem ergo Maria*
	R	***Martha stetit et ait Domine***		*Accessit ad pedes*	*Accessit ad pedes*
	R	***Respondens Jesus dixit Martha***		*Caelistis medicus*	*Caelistis medicus*

50 The manuscripts consulted are the following: Canonesses (twelfth century): CCl 1012, fols 22ᵛ–25ᵛ; Canonesses (fourteenth century): CCl 589, fols 48ᵛ–51ᵛ; CCl 1018, fols 79ʳ–84ʳ; Canons (fourteenth–fifteenth century): CCl 67, fols 120ᵛ–134ʳ; CCl 590, fols 364ᵛ–367ʳ, CCl 635, fol. 81ᵛ; Passau (thirteenth–fourteenth century): Clm 16141, fols 106ʳ–108ʳ; CCl 1194, fol. 102ʳ.

51 Kalechyts 2023 offers an in-depth analysis for the music of the canonesses' office for Mary Magdalene (22 July) along with discussions of parallel versions of items found elsewhere.

Item	Genre	Canonesses (12th c.)	Canonesses (14th c.)	Canons (14th–15th c.)	Passau (13th–14th c.)
Nocturn 2	A	***Ungentum quod sibi Maria***		*Intendens porro*	*Intendens porro*
	A	***Capillos ad compositionem***		*Jesus dum vocat*	*Jesus dum vocat*
	A	*Fundans Sion in Saphiris*	---	*Fundans Sion in Saphiris*	*Fundans Sion in Saphiris*
	A	***Quod ergo in se habuit***	***Quod ergo in se abluit*** ***	---	---
	R	***Conversus Jesus ad Mariam***	*Caelestis medicus egram*	*Umbrosum tunc revera*	*Umbrosum tunc revera*
	R	***Cum venisset Maria ubi erat***	***Septem ergo Maria daemonia***	*Vidit Maria duos angelos*	*Vidit Maria duos angelos*
	R	*Maria plorans ad monumentum*			
Nocturn 3	A	***Pius ergo poenitens mulier***		*Maria ergo accepit libram*	*Maria ergo accepit libram*
	A	*Maria ergo accepit libram*		*Cum esset Bethanie Jesus*	*Cum esset Bethanie Jesus*
	A	*Cum esset Bethaniae Jesu*		*Amen dico vobis*	*Amen dico vobis*
	A	---	*Fundans Sion in saphiris rex*	---	---
	R	***Accepit Maria libram***	***Maria Magdalena quae fuerat*** *** [1]	*Post haec conversa est*	*Post haec conversa est*
	R	***Fregit Maria super caput Jesu***	*Umbrosum tunc revera* ** [1]	*Adest testes divine*	*Adest testis divine*
	R	*Vidit Maria duos angelos*	*Adest testis divinae* ***	*Summe propitiator Christe*	*Summe propitiator Christe*

Key for Table 3:
--- = Not present
** = Text only in CCl 1018
*** = Text only in both CCl 589 and CCl 1018
A = Antiphon
H = Hymn
R= Responsory
[1] = Order reversed in CCl 589

This distinct version of the office for Mary Magdalene is evident in the earliest of the canonesses' antiphoners, CCl 1012, which was copied shortly after Klosterneuburg's Augustinian foundation (see Fig. 7). Note the invitatory antiphon given at the bottom quarter of the folio, 'Ploremus coram domino cum Maria ut veniam mereamur cum illa' ('Let us cry before the Lord with Mary so that we may earn forgiveness with her'), that marks the canonesses' use at Klosterneuburg as well as the hymn 'Deus qui quosvis elegis' ('God, who chooses anyone'), given here as an incipit, which was specific to the canonesses as well. The differences in practice evident in the Office of Mary Magdalene carry forth to the other uniquely configured offices as well.[52]
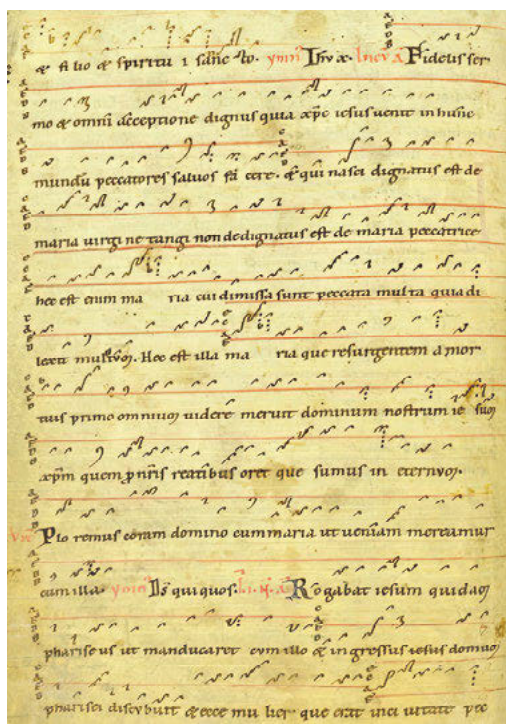
Fig. 7: Matins for the feast of Mary Magdalene; CCl 1012, fol. 22ᵛ (twelfth-century antiphoner, canonesses); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

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52 See the discussions for the Conversion of St Paul (25 January), the Assumption of Mary (15 August), Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne (21 October), St Catherine (25 November), and the Office of the Dead in Norton and Carr 2011, 86–96 and Tables 7, 8, and 9b (148–152 and 154–155).

The fourteenth-century breviary, CCl 982, whose colophon tied it to the women of Klosterneuburg, turned out on closer examination to be the second in a pair of manuscripts containing inserts that reflected the usage of the canonesses. The single manuscript given to the women of Zelking did not express the use of Klosterneuburg as presented, but was subdivided to form what are now CCl 991 and CCl 982 and supplemented with liturgical offices and hymns reflecting the use of the canonesses.[53] CCl 1200, a composite breviary from the fourteenth century, conversely, was intended specifically for the use of Klosterneuburg's canonesses.[54] Fig. 8 shows the opening of the Office of Matins for the feast of Mary Magdalene from this manuscript. Note the invitatory antiphon, 'Ploremus coram domino', that introduced the office in the antiphoners.
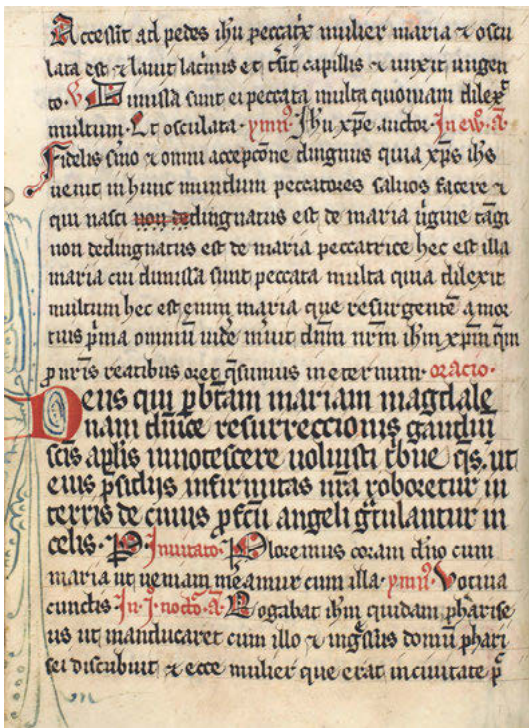
Fig. 8: Matins for the feast of Mary Magdalene; CCl 1200, fol. 202ᵛ (fourteenth-century breviary, canonesses); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

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53 Norton and Carr 2011, 105–108. On the colophon, see n. 37.
54 Norton and Carr 2011, 108–109.

Three processionals from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could also be associated with the canonesses due to the distinctive form of musical notation shared with the hymnals and antiphoners in the earliest of these. Like the hymnals and antiphoners, the processionals contained a unified repertory that was uniquely configured when compared to the processions found in the manuscripts of the canons (see Table 4).[55] Note the items in bold in the right-most column, which are specific to the three processionals. Note also the extended series of antiphons given for the Rogationtide processions. The association of these manuscripts with the canonesses is further supported by their placement of the procession for the Mass of the dedication of the church.

Table 4: Uniquely configured processions of the canons and canonesses.

Feast	Date	Destination (Canons)	Canons	Genre	Canonesses
Advent 3		Nicholas altar	*Suscipe verbum*	R	*Suscipe verbum*
			Ecce Dominus veniet	R	
				R	***Ecce radix Jesse***
Advent 4		Nicholas altar		R	***Nascetur nobis***
			Missus est Gabriel	R	
			Ecce dies veniunt	R	
				R	***Ecce Dominus veniet***
Rogation Days		Cemetery	*Exurge domine ad viva*	R	*Exurge domine ad viva*
			Surgite sancte de mansionibus	A	*Surgite sancte de*
			De Jerusalem exeunt reliquie	A	*mansionibus*
			Cum jucundate exhibitis	A	*De Jerusalem exeunt*
			Ego sum Deus patrum	A	*reliquie*
			Populus Syon	A	*Cum jucundate exhibitis*
			Domine deus noster qui	A	*Ego sum Deus patrum*
			Confitemini domino filii Israel	A	*Populus Syon*
			Exclemus omnes od Dominum	A	*Domine deus noster qui*
			Parce Domino parce populo	A	*Confitemini domino filii*
				A	*Israel*

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55 Manuscripts consulted: Canons: CCl 590, CCl 629 (Rogation only), CCl 635, CCl 983, CCl 1014, CCl 1199, CCl 1213; Canonesses: CCl 995, CCl 1005, CCl 1006. Norton and Carr 2011, 110–114 and 165–169 (Tables 13a–13c). In addition, the canonesses observed processions for the Conversion of St Paul (25 January) and Corpus Christi that are not documented in the canons' fourteenth-century manuscripts. A procession for Corpus Christi by the canons first appears at turn of the sixteenth century (CCl 1014, fols 96ʳ–96ᵛ, *c.* 1500 ordinal), and this is independent of that observed by the canonesses.

Feast	Date	Destination (Canons)	Canons	Genre	Canonesses
			Domine imminuti summus propter	A	*Exclemus omnes od Dominum*
			Iniquitates nostre	A	*Parce Domino parce populo*
			Dimitte nobis Domine debita	A	*Domine imminuti summus propter*
			---	A	*Iniquitates nostre*
			---	A	**Domine non est alius**
			---	A	**Miserere Domine plebi tue**
			---	A	**Exaudi Deus deprecationem**
			Domine rex Deus Abraham Numquid est in idolis gentium Omnipotens Deus mestorum consolatio	A	**Deprecamur te Domine** **Multa sunt Domine** *Domine rex Deus Abraham Numquid est in idolis gentium Omnipotens Deus mestorum*
Dedication of the church (women)	4–10 Aug.		See below	R R	*In dedicatione templi* **Vidi civitatem sanctam**
Augustine	28 Aug.	Augustine altar	*Invenit se Augustinus* *Sensit igutur et expertus* *Verbum Dei usque ad ipsam*	R R R R	*Invenit se Augustinus* *Verbum Dei usque* **Volebat enim conferenti** *Sensit igitur et expertus*
Dedication of the church (men)	29 Sep.	*per ambitu et cymeterium*	*Asperges me Domine* *In dedicatione templi* *Benedic Domine (AS)* *Fundata est* *Te sanctum Dominum (MI)*	A R R R R	See above

Key for Table 4:
AS = From the feast of All Saints (1 November)
MI = From the feast of St Michael (29 September)
A = Antiphon
H = Hymn
R = Responsory

The date celebrated by the canonesses for the dedication of their church had long eluded scholars. While a dedication ceremony is documented for the church on 23 September 1324,[56] this date had never been marked as the date for the liturgical feast. A group of sacristan's handbooks from the late sixteenth century, though, specify that the feast was to be celebrated on the Sunday following the Finding of St Stephan, thus between 4 and 10 August.[57] While this designation may be suspect, having been written down five years following the death of the last canoness, the assignment is supported by the dates given in a series of sermons recorded over a century earlier. CCl 880 includes four sermons for the dedication of the canonesses' church that are grouped between sermons for the Finding of St Stephan (3 August) and those for the Nativity of Mary (8 September).[58] The first in the group specifically identifies the occasion and the date: 'Sermo de dedicatio ecclesie factus in claustro dominarum in vigilia s. Laurenci anno domini M° CCCC° L° 5to' ('Sermon for the dedication of the church given in the church of the sisters at the vigil for the St Lawrence (9 August) in the year of Our Lord 1455').[59] The second gives the date as an explicit (fol. 271^v): 'Anno domini M° CCCC° L° 6to in die s. Afre martyris, quod fuit eodem anno in uno Sabbato die' ('The year of Our Lord, 1456 on the day of St Afra (7 August), martyr, which was on a Saturday').[60] The processionals support this assignment with their placement of the procession for the Mass of the dedication between the processions for the Finding of St Stephan (3 August) and St Afra (7 August).[61]

Finally, two graduals, one copied in the twelfth century and the other in the fourteenth, can be tied to the canonesses.[62] Both employ the older staff notation found in the hymnals, antiphoners, and processional, and the more recent of these opens with an inhabited initial showing a canoness praying to the Virgin and Child (see Fig. 5). More significantly, both include a series of processional antiphons for Rogationtide that corresponds to the list given in the processionals (see Table 5). The items in the shaded portions are specific to the canonesses' manuscripts. Note

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56 This was originally cited by Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 2, 207. The notice appears in StiAK Rechnungs-buch 6/1a, fol. 2^r, cited by Röhrig 1966, 147.

57 StiAK MS 191, fols 90^v–91^r (copied 1573), CCl 1026A (copied 1576), fol. 55^r, Vienna lat. 15078, fol. 43^v (copied 1594): 'Dominica postquam fest. S. Stephani habetur dedication monasterii monialium ad S. Maria Magdalena' ('The Sunday following the feast of St Stephan is considered the dedication of the church for the sisters at Mary Magdalene').

58 CCl 880, fols 264^r–279^v.

59 CCl 880, fol. 264^r.

60 CCl 880, fol. 271^v.

61 CCl 995, fols 39^r–39^v; CCl 1005, fols 66^r–67^v; and CCl 1006, fols 59^v–62^r.

62 Graz 807 (twelfth century) and CCl 588 (fourteenth century). On the provenance of Graz 807, see Froger 1974, 19*–23*; Praßl 1987, 457; and Norton 2016, 73–80.

the change in ordering in the first set of antiphons along with the omission of the second set in the fourteenth-century manuscripts listed in the right-most columns.

Table 5: Rogationtide procession in Klosterneuburg graduals and processional.

Graz 807, fols 114ᵛ–120ᵛ (12th c. gradual)	CCl 588, fols 102ᵛ–106ʳ (14th c. gradual)	CCl 995, fols 26ᵛ–31ᵛ (14th c. processional)
Exurge Domine	*Exurge Domine*	*Exurge Domine*
Surgite sancti	*Surgite sancti*	*Surgite sancti*
De Jerusalem exeunt	*De Jerusalem exeunt*	*De Jerusalem exeunt*
Cum iocunditate	*Cum iocunditate*	*Cum iocunditate*
Ego sum Deus patrum	*Ego sum Deus patrum*	*Ego sum Deus patrum*
Populus Sion	*Populus Sion*	*Populus Sion*
Domine Deus noster	*Domine Deus noster*	*Domine Deus noster*
Confitemini domino	*Confitemini domino*	*Confitemini domino*
Exclamemus omnes	*Exclamemus omnes*	*Exclamemus omnes*
Parce Domine parce	*Parce Domine parce*	*Parce Domine parce*
Domine imminuti	*Domine imminuti*	*Domine imminuti*
Iniquitates nostre	*Iniquitates nostre*	*Iniquitates nostre*
Domine non est alius	***Domine non est alius***	***Domine non est alius***
Deprecamur te Domine	***Miserere Domine plebi***	***Miserere Domine plebi***
Miserere Domine plebi	***Exaudi Deus***	***Exaudi Deus***
Dimitte Domine peccata	---	---
Exaudi Deus	***Deprecamur te Domine***	***Deprecamur te Domine***
Multa sunt Domine	***Multa sunt Domine***	***Multa sunt Domine***
Domine rex Deus Abraham	--	--
Nunquid est in ydolis	--	--
Dimitte nobis Domine	*Domine rex Deus Abraham*	*Domine rex Deus Abraham*
Omnipotens Deus mestorum	*Nunquid est in ydolis*	*Nunquid est in ydolis*
Christe qui regnas	----	----
Omnipotens Deus supplices	---	---
Benedicat nos una	---	---
Benedicat nos Deus	---	---
Timor et tremor	---	---
Oremus dilectissimi	*Omnipotens Deus mestorum*	*Omnipotens Deus mestorum*
---	---	---
Sancta virgo Maria	***Sancta virgo Maria***	***Sancta virgo Maria***

2.2 The limits of enclosure

In lifting the veil from Klosterneuburg's canonesses, we learned that the canonesses of Klosterneuburg maintained a liturgical *cursus* that was independent from those of the canons and the diocese and that they expressed this *cursus* with a form of musical notation they could also call their own. What was invisible became obvious, and this exposed a new set of questions. How, for example, did the ostensibly cloistered canonesses interact with the less constrained canons, and how did the canonesses interact with the world beyond?[63]

Interactions between canons and canonesses were by no means rare. Rubrics in manuscripts from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries identify the church of the canonesses as the destination for the canons' procession before Mass on Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and the feasts of the Assumption and Nativity of Mary.[64] CCl 590, a breviary copied in the fourteenth century, offers a glimpse as to how this worked in practice. Prior to Mass on Easter Sunday, the canons processed from their church to that of the canonesses, where they chanted a responsory from the feast of Mary Magdalene at the entrance to women's church:[65]

> Vidit Maria duos angelos in albis sedentes, unum ad caput et unum ad pedes, ubi positum fuerat corpus Jesu, dicunt ei illi: mulier, quid ploras?[66] (John 20:12–13)

> Mary saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been laid and they said to her: woman, why do you weep?

The canonesses then responded with the verse:

> Dicit eis quia tulerunt dominum meum et nescio ubi posuerunt eum. (John 20:13)

> She tells them that they have taken away my master, and I do not know where they have laid him.

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63 Two doctoral dissertations currently in progress at the University of Vienna that should offer greater insight into these questions: Peka forthcoming and Deichstetter forthcoming.

64 Norton and Carr 2011, 128–129. The canons' processions to Mass are documented in the ordinals CCl 1213, fols 171ᵛ–177ʳ (1325); CCl 635, fols 108ʳ–111ʳ (mid fourteenth century); CCl 983, fols 132ʳ–136ʳ (1383); and CCl 1014, *passim* (*c.* 1500) and in the breviary CCl 590, *passim* (fourteenth century).

65 CCl 590, fol. 301ᵛ.

66 'Vidit Maria' (CAO 7885) was the third responsory of the third Nocturn in the Office of Matins for the feast of Mary Magdalene (22 July) in the twelfth-century manuscripts of the canonesses and is given among the additional responsories in the fourteenth-century manuscripts. In the manuscripts of the canons, this responsory is given as the second responsory for the third Nocturn. See Table 4. This is detailed in Norton and Carr 2011, 148–149 (Table 7). See also Kalechyts 2023, 86–87.

The provost then chanted a verse drawn from a different Magdalene responsory before leading the procession back to the canons' church for Mass.

> Dimissa sunt ei peccata multa quoniam dilexit multum.[67] (Luke 7:47)

> Her many sins were forgiven, for she loved much.

This pattern likely held for the other processions as well. In each, a responsory from the feast of Mary Magdalene was sung by the canons upon their arrival at the entrance to the church of the canonesses, and in most instances the provost sang the responsory verse 'Dimissa sunt' before returning to the canons' church.[68]

The processions went in both directions, moreover. Among the complaints cited in the 1301 visitation was a reference to processions that the canonesses were joining outside of their church, which the visitors prohibited.[69] This prohibition had little effect, though. In a letter addressed to Klosterneuburg's provost a century and

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67 'Dimissa sunt' is the verse for the responsory 'Accessit ad pedes' (CAO 6016), which is sung at First Vespers for the feast of Mary Magdalene in the manuscripts for both the canonesses and canons. It is used also as the second responsory for the first Nocturn in the manuscripts of the canons. See Table 4. Full details are given in Norton and Carr 2011, 148–149 (Table 7). See also Kalechyts 2023, 37–39.

68 For the feast of the Ascension, the canons sang the responsory 'Umbrosum tunc revera' (CAO 7806) at the entrance to the church of the canonesses. This responsory is given in the twelfth-century manuscript of the canonesses as an extra responsory for the feast of Mary Magdalene and in the fourteenth-century manuscripts as either the first or second responsory of the third Nocturn. The canons sang this as the first responsory of the third Nocturn. For Pentecost, the canons sang the responsory 'Summe propitiator Christe' (CAO 7720), given in the canonesses' manuscripts as an extra responsory for Matins and as the third responsory of the third Nocturn in the manuscripts of the canons. For the feast of the Assumption of Mary (15 August), the canons sang the responsory 'Adest testis divine' (CAO 6034), which the canonesses sang on the octave of the feast of Mary Magdalene (29 July) and which the canons sang as the second responsory of the third Nocturn on the feast itself. See Kalechyts 2023, 16–17 and 106–108, for a discussion of the two musical settings for this text in the manuscripts of the canonesses. For the feast of the Nativity of Mary (8 September), the canons sang 'Maria plorans' (CAO 7129), which is found in both the canons and canonesses' manuscripts as the third responsory of the second Nocturn. The use of 'Dimissa sunt' is documented in CCl 590 for the processions to Mass on Easter (fol. 301ᵛ), Ascension (fol. 330ʳ), and Pentecost (fol. 335ʳ), but not for the Assumption or Nativity of Mary. In CCl 1014, the verse is listed for the procession to Easter Mass only (fol. 69ʳ). For the procession before the Mass for the Nativity of Mary (8 September), the canons are given the option of processing to the nearby *capella speciosa*, dedicated to John the Baptist. When arriving at the *capella*, they are instructed to sing 'Inter natos mulierum', which is the third responsory of the third Nocturn of Matins for the feast of John the Baptist (24 June).

69 See above, n. 15.

a half later, the writer noted with obvious disapproval that not only were the canonesses still processing to the canons' church for the feast of the Nativity of Mary, they also participated in the liturgy there:

> Thema tale est: quedam domus sanctimonialium ord. s. Augustini Canonicorum regularium sita penes Monasterium virorum dicti ordinis ex antiqua consuetudine introduxit, vt in festo nativitatis glorióse virginis Marie dicti monasterii virorum (nostri videlicet) patrone liceat monialibus dicte domus processionaliter ire ad ecclesiam virorum ordinis ejusdem, et ibi divinum officium decantare, nunc queritur.[70]

> The issue is this: there is a certain house of holy nuns of the order of St Augustine situated close to the men of said order, introduced there according to ancient custom, that on the feast of the birth of the glorious Virgin Mary, the patron of the said monastery of men (namely ours), the nuns of said house are permitted to go in procession to the church of the men, and there sing the Divine Office, for which I now offer this complaint.

Canons and canonesses interacted directly in the rites for sick and dying and during funeral rites.[71] We learn from fourteenth-century rituals that the body of the deceased canon or canoness was carried from the canons' church to the church of the canonesses, where 'a *missa pro defunctis* was heard'.[72] The body was then returned to the canons' church for the funeral Mass. Other interactions took place during Holy Week. Both the Palm Sunday procession and the Adoration of the Cross required the women's participation.[73] Women also participated in the *Visitatio sepulchri*, where the angel's query, 'Quem queritis?' ('Whom do you seek?'), and the Marys' response, 'Jesum Nazarenum' ('Jesus of Nazareth'), would have taken on a particular poignancy – from their enclosure, the canonesses might have been able to gaze into the empty tomb, but, like Mary Magdalene herself, they were unable to touch the risen Christ.

While requirements for enclosure were observed in the main, practical considerations allowed for flexibility. Indeed, exceptions to the strict separation from the world, and especially from men, were not infrequent. Early-fifteenth-century account books document payments to the *Orgelmeister* for repairs and upgrades to

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70 Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 1, 73. The letter is preserved in StiAK K230 no. 56, fol. 272ᵛ.

71 A thorough analysis of the rites for the sick and dying and the funeral rites at Klosterneuburg is given by Hild 2018.

72 'Mane facto post Salve Regina cum funere ad dominas vadant, missam pro defuncto audiant' ('In the morning, after the "Salve Regina", they go with the funeral to the church of the canonesses to hear the Mass for the deceased'): CCl 629, fol. 135ᵛ; CCl 1021, fol. 86ʳ; and CCl 635, fol. 113ʳ.

73 See the discussion above.

one or more organs in the church of the canonesses,[74] and other entries show payments for a new organist and his servants.[75] Numerous payments for craftsmen of various sorts are also recorded in the account books, putting men within the church and the living spaces of the canonesses.[76] In 1322, canonesses were given the right to testate,[77] which would have put them in proximity to male witnesses, and records from the mid fourteenth century onward show canonesses serving as witnesses to documents of various sorts.[78] Canonesses also had access to a bather, who would handle bloodletting and cupping, along with prescribing medicines and ointments, cutting hair, and even pulling teeth.[79] Canonesses with more serious ailments could be attended by a physician or wound doctor, either within their own precincts, at the home of a family member or relative, or in nearby Vienna.[80] The canonesses maintained a school for girls, prepared liturgical vestments, and managed several vineyards. Presumably interaction with outsiders would have been required here as well.

3 Klosterneuburg and beyond

To my knowledge, Klosterneuburg is the only double monastery where such a gendered liturgical and notational dichotomy is so clearly expressed. But was this an anomaly? Can it be that Amelia Carr and I accidentally stumbled upon the only dual-sex religious community in the south of German-speaking Europe where the women charted their own liturgical course? This I find incomprehensible. Yet, despite the abundance of research into the scribal and literary activities of similarly constituted nuns, the liturgies celebrated by these women remain invisible.[81] While the dearth of manuscript evidence may hinder strictly liturgical investigations, other avenues might prove fruitful. We

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74 StiAK Rechnungsbuch 1/1, fol. 313^r. Cited by Röhrig 1966, 150.

75 StiAK Rechnungsbuch 7/1, fol. 4^v. Cited by Röhrig 1966, 152.

76 Röhrig 1966.

77 StiAK Urkunde 1322.VI.10 <https://www.monasterium.net/mom/AT-StiAK/KlosterneuburgCanReg/1322_VI_10/charter> (accessed on 11 June 2023). Edition in Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 2, 184–187.

78 Zeibig 1857–1868, vol. 1, 293–297.

79 On the practice of bloodletting at Klosterneuburg, see Jaritz 1975 and 1996.

80 The functions of the bather (bloodletter), wound doctor, and physician are treated by Unterbrunner 2018, esp. 16–21. She focuses particularly on the tension emanating from the requirement for strict enclosure and the need for health care providers both on and off site. While the edicts from 1301 and 1307 bound the canonesses to their precincts, these restrictions were relaxed in 1322 by the bishop of Passau to allow a canoness to visit physicians in Vienna or to move in with parents or other relatives should her condition require such care. The 1322 document is preserved as StiAK Urkunde 1322.VI.10 (see above n. 77).

81 See n. 6 above.

know, for example, that women in double monasteries used their skills in embroidery to repair parchment both before and after given over to scribes, and we know that women similarly situated served as scribes and as illuminators. The evidence for early staff notation, moreover, extends beyond Klosterneuburg into many of the same double monasteries, and may well reflect female use, at least in part. To be sure, the evidence is fragmentary and inconclusive, but enough has survived to suggest that women enclosed within the double monasteries of Swabia, Bavaria, and Austria might have held greater sway over their liturgical customs than the meagre evidence allows.

3.1 Embroidered parchment repair

Nuns and canonesses collaborated with their male counterparts in the preparation and repair of parchment. While many repairs were made in the parchment making process, other repairs were made later, and these range from rather pedestrian to quite elaborate. In her chapter on 'Stitches, Sutures, and Seams', Christine Sciacca noted numerous examples of embroidered parchment repair from manuscripts stemming from the double monasteries at Engelberg, Weingarten, and Interlaken,[82] and more recent studies show these kinds of repairs spreading throughout Swabia, Bavaria, and Austria by way of the double monasteries of the Hirsau and Augustinian reforms.[83]

The variety of embroidery techniques found in these manuscripts is wide.[84] Some embroidered repairs were made prior to writing, while others were made later. Figs 9a–b shows two examples of pre-scribal repair from a twelfth-century manuscript from Klosterneuburg. The sacramentary of the so-called nuns' missal from Zwiefalten (Stuttgart Cod. Brev.123) contains several examples of such artistic repairs as well.[85] Most were done before scribes set quill to page. Others, though, were clearly added later (see Fig. 10).[86] Fig. 11 shows a beautiful example of a hole repair, although a second hole in the margin is left as it is.[87]

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82 Sciacca 2010.

83 Jakobi-Mirwald, Breith and Csanády 2021.

84 A sampling of such techniques is provided by Christine Jakobi-Mirwald in Jakobi-Mirwald, Breith and Csanády 2021, 252.

85 Beach 2013, 42–45.

86 Felix Heinzer suggests that some of the embroidered repairs made in the thirteenth-century Sacramentary of Abbot Berthold of Weingarten (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M.710) might have resulted from deliberate cuts on certain luxury display-pages in order to give the manuscript a more venerable antique look. Heinzer 1999, 252–253.

87 Additional examples of such hole repairs are given by Sciacca 2010 for Engelberg: Figs 3.6, 3.7, 3.9, 3.10, and 3.11 (pp. 66–69); Weingarten: Figs. 3.17 and 3.18 (pp. 78–79) ; and Interlaken: Fig. 3.20 (p. 83) and by Jakobi-Mirwald, Breith and Csanády 2021: Abb. 4 and 5 (p. 253) and Abb. 7 and 9 (p. 261). See also the samples referenced above in n. 82.
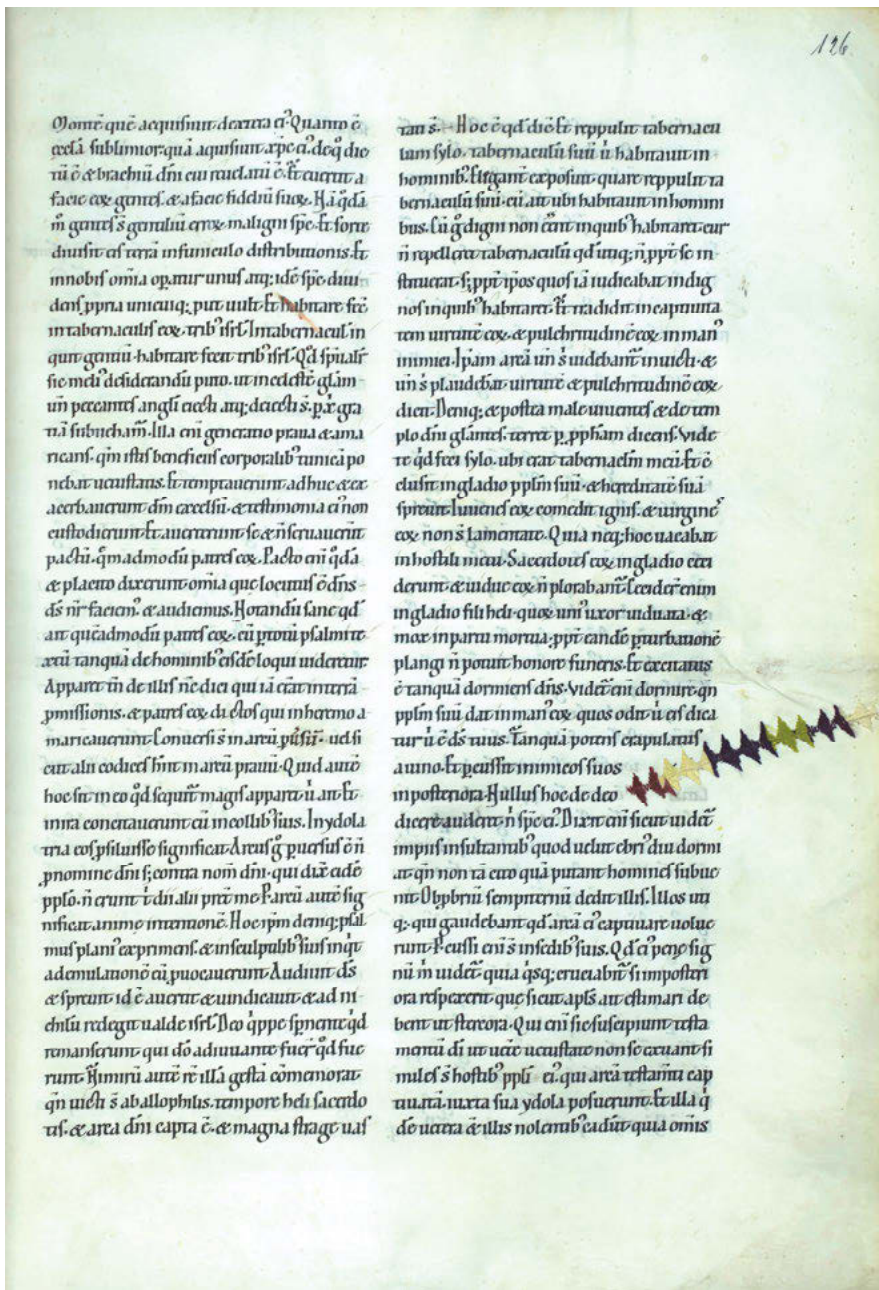
Fig. 9a: Pre-scribal embroidered repairs; CCl 21, fol. 126ʳ (third quarter of the twelfth century, Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.
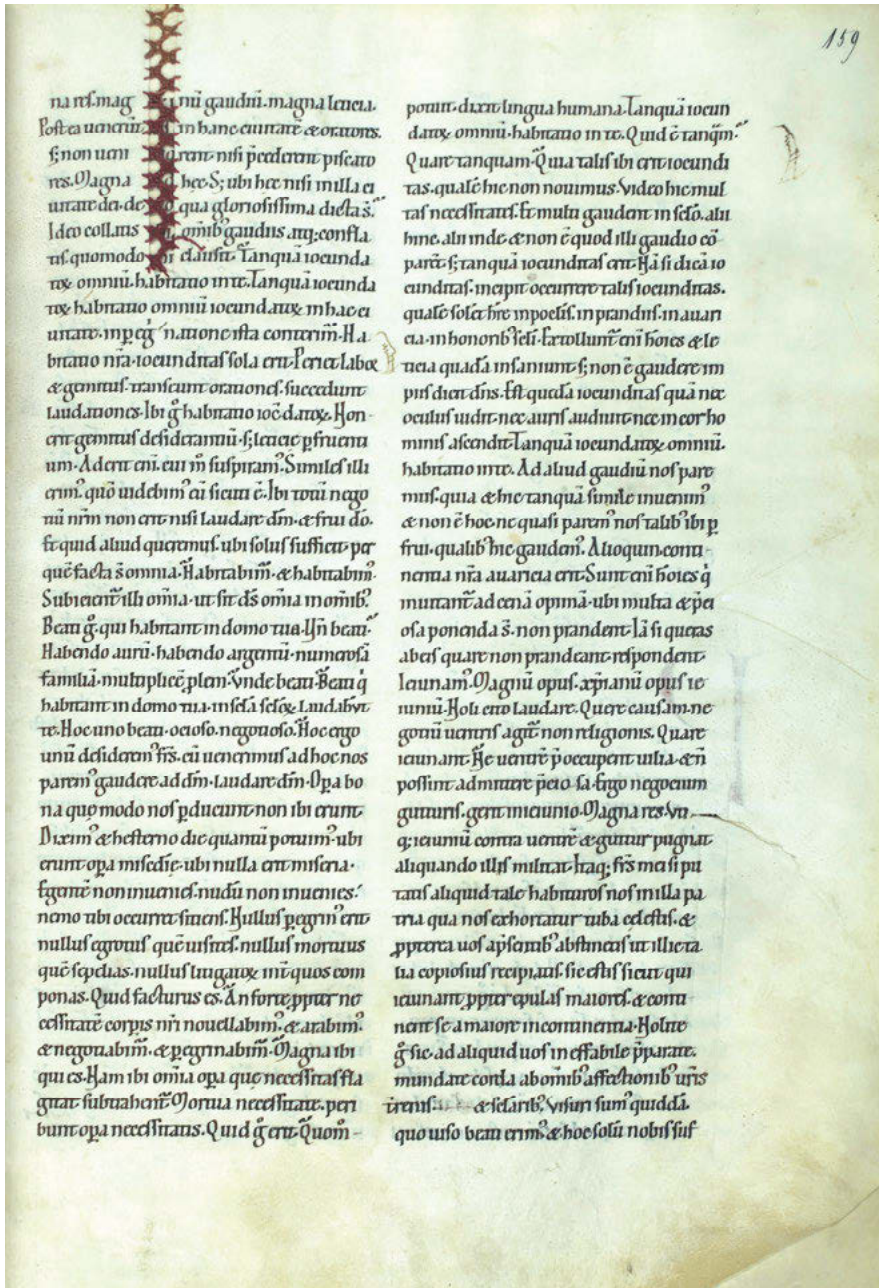
Fig. 9b: Pre-scribal embroidered repairs; CCl 21, fol. 159ʳ (third quarter of the twelfth century, Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos*); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.
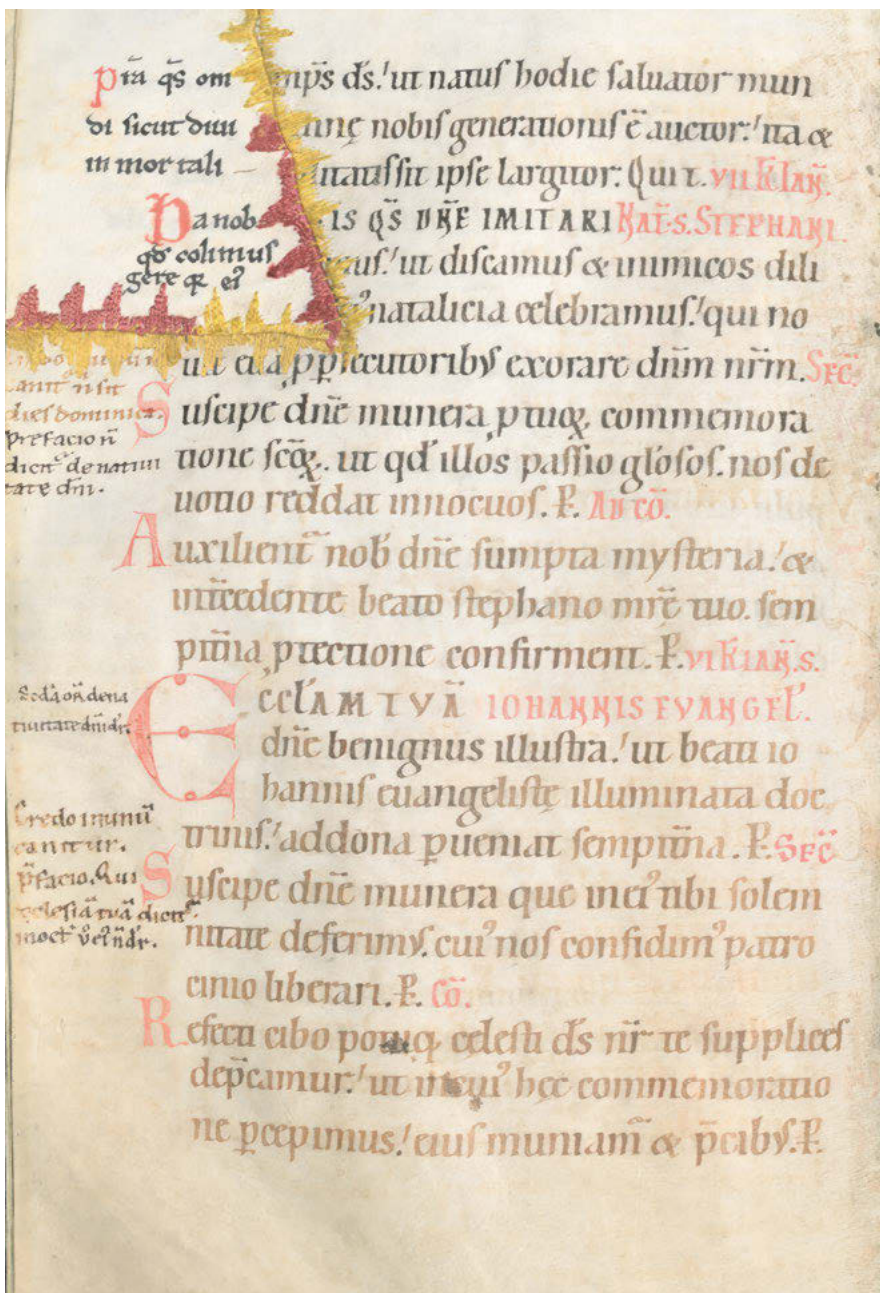
Fig. 10: Post-scribal embroidered repairs; Stuttgart Cod. Brev.123, fol. 86ᵛ (first half of the twelfth century, missal, Zwiefalten nuns?); © Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek.
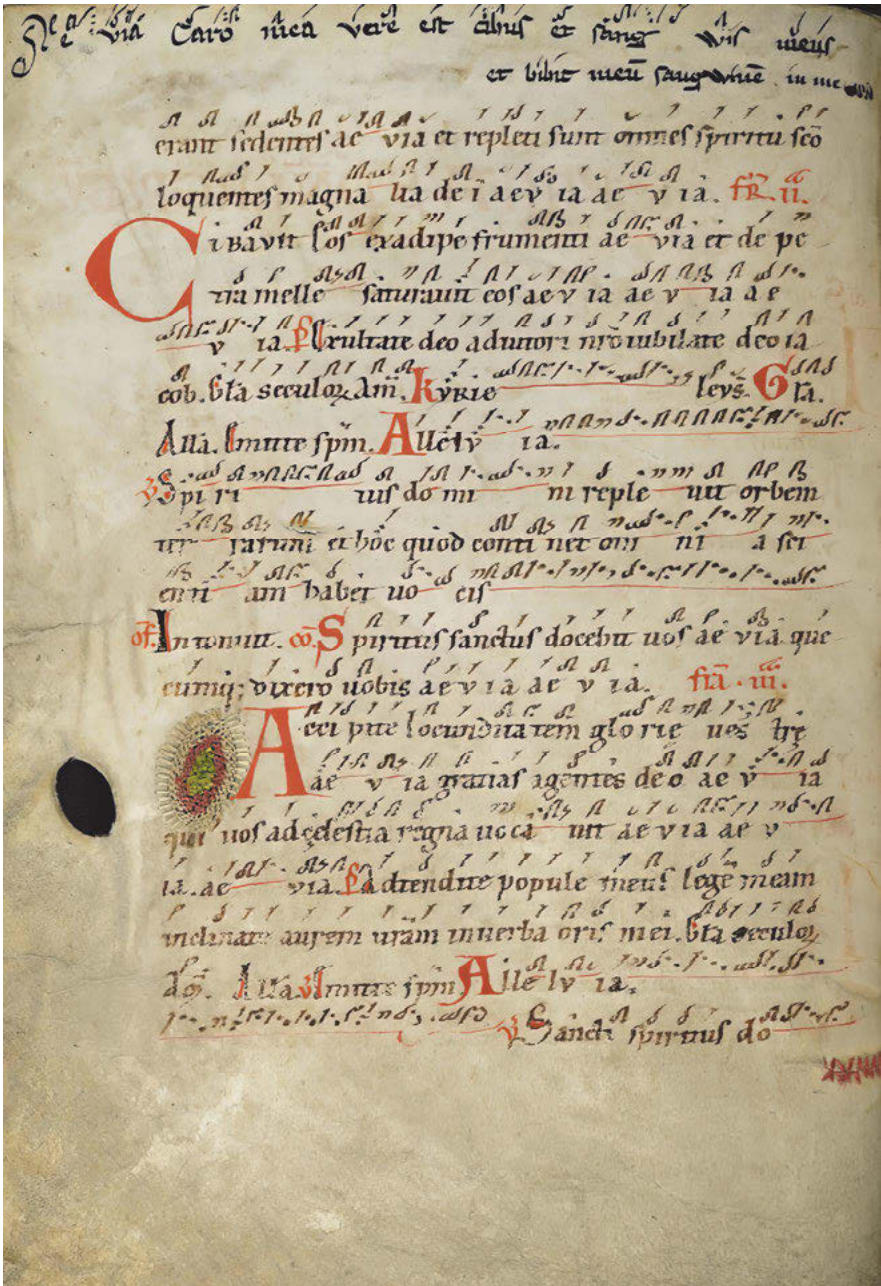
Fig. 11: Pre-scribal embroidered hole repair; Graz 769, fol. 62ᵛ (*c.* 1200 missal, Seckau); © Graz, Universitätsbibliothek**.**

3.2 Nuns as scribes

Nuns and canonesses also served as scribes. In her book, *Women as Scribes*, Alison Beach noted the scribal activity of the *inclusa*, Dietmut, whose cell adjoined the monastery of Wessobrunn during the early years of the twelfth century.[88] A manuscript inventory, compiled by a later nun-scribe, listed forty-seven manuscripts copied by Dietmut, including liturgical books, Bibles, and theological works.[89] In the same study, Beach identified two nun-scribes, Irmengart and Regilind, from the double Hirsau monastery at Admont,[90] along with three scribes, Adelheid, Sophia, and Irmingart, from the double Premonstratensian monastery at Schläftlarn.[91]

In a later study, Beach treated the twelfth-century nun-scribe Mathilde von Neuffen, who was active at the double Hirsau monastery at Zwiefalten during the first half of the twelfth century.[92] A thirteenth-century necrology contains an entry for 'Mathilde conversa' with a marginal addition identifying her as the scribe for many books.[93] In his catalogue of the Zwiefalten manuscripts now in Stuttgart, Karl Löffler identified a group of liturgical manuscripts from the first half of the twelfth century that shared a distinctive style of illumination as well as similar scribal tendencies that he associated with Zwiefalten's nuns.[94] While Beach discounted Löffler's assignment on the palaeographic grounds he cited, she did find compelling the use in these manuscripts of artistically embroidered repairs, such as that shown in Fig. 10, and in one case, beautiful silk covers (see Figs 12a–b).

She follows earlier scholars in assigning the twelfth-century gradual/missal, Stuttgart Cod. Brev.123, to the nuns' church due to necrological entries for several women in the calendar, marginal notes on the dedication of altars in the women's

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88 Beach 2004, 32–64.

89 Clm 22001. A listing is given by Beach 2004, 40–42.

90 Beach 2004, 65–103.

91 Beach 2004, 104–127.

92 Beach 2013.

93 Stuttgart Cod. Hist.fol.420, fol. 4ᵛ. Facsimile in Beach 2013, 35.

94 Löffler 1931, 15. Beach identifies four manuscripts as likely products of nun-scribes, if not of Mathilde herself. Among these are Stuttgart Cod. Brev.121 (twelfth-century epistolary), Cod. Brev.123 (twelfth-century gradual/sacramentary – the so-called nuns' missal), Cod. Brev.126 (twelfth-century evangeliary), and Cod. Brev.128 (twelfth-century collectary). See Beach 2013, esp. 42–50 for a more thorough analysis along with more recent research.

church, and two lists of nuns.[95] Given that this was a priest's book, she suggests that this manuscript, and perhaps the others of this group, was kept in the sacristy of the nun's church.[96]

Another nun-scribe known to have been active during the twelfth century was Mechtild (d. 1160), canoness at the Augustinian double monastery at Dießen, south of Augsburg.[97] In the *vita* written forty years after her death by Engelhard of Langheim, Mechthild is reported to have copied missals and psalters,[98] and in another entry, Mechthild is said to have restored the sight of a sister 'practiced in writing on parchment', whose eye had been punctured by an awl.[99] Scribal activity appears to have been commonplace among the canonesses of Dießen.

Whether the manuscripts copied by – or repaired by – the nuns of these houses were destined for use within the female side of the foundations is unclear. However, given the volume of books produced, the nuns likely had a space set aside for copying along with whatever tools they would have required, if not a scriptorium proper. While there is no direct evidence for such, the canonesses of Klosterneuburg may have had their own scriptorium as well. Indeed, the distinct liturgical cursus that they expressed with a distinct form of musical notation speaks strongly for such a facility. The account books, moreover, include payments for the cinnabar needed to make red ink, a necessary component for any scribal workshop.[100] Most intriguing, though, is the explicit that concluded the hymnal, CCl 1000, that identifies the canoness Geisle Ruedwein as its scribe or owner.[101]

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95 Beach 2013, 47–48. These additions are found in the calendar that opens the manuscript, which was put together from several parts that were created at the same time around the middle of the twelfth century. See Fiala and Irtenkauf 1977, 159.

96 Beach 2013, 48.

97 On the origin of the Augustinian monastery at Dießen, see Weinfurter 1975, 100–101. On Dießen's relationship to the counts of Andechs, see Newman 2020, 32–35.

98 Newman 2020, 144–145.

99 Lyon 2018, 210–211.

100 An entry in an account book from 1490, for example, specifies the purchase by the canonesses of 'zynober und galles und gumi' ('cinnabar, gall, and gum'). StiAK Rechnungsbuch 31/2, fol. 576ʳ. I thank Sarah Deichstetter for bringing this to my attention.

101 See above, n. 36.

Fig. 12a: Silk covers removed from the Zwiefalten epistolary; Stuttgart Cod. Brev.121 (first half of the twelfth century); © Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek.

Fig. 12b: Silk covers removed from the Zwiefalten epistolary; Stuttgart Cod. Brev.121 (first half of the twelfth century); © Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek.

3.3 Early staff notation at Klosterneuburg

Applying skills at embroidery in the repair of parchment along with applying quill to parchment in the production of manuscripts were likely commonplace activities among the women enclosed within the double monasteries of Swabia, Bavaria, and Austria. Double monasteries also loom large in the use of early staff notation. The early use of staff notation by the canonesses at Klosterneuburg is well documented, and its divergence from the notational practices of Klosterneuburg's canons offers a useful scaffold for understanding how staff notation might have been employed elsewhere during the twelfth century.

As shown earlier (see Figs 2, 3a–b, and 6a–b), the canons of Klosterneuburg used Bohemian (and to a lesser extent, Gothic) notation on four lines in their liturgical manuscripts from the middle third of the fourteenth century onward. Prior to this, the canons used unheighted German neumes, an older style of notation that did not indicate pitch. Fig. 13 offers an example from a thirteenth century gradual/missal reflecting the use of the canons.

Each sign, or neume, indicates a single note or a grouping of notes. If more than a single note, the neume tells us whether the pitches are ascending, descending, or a combination of these.[102] As was typical for much of German-speaking Europe, this use of staffless neumes prevailed until the middle third of the fourteenth century. While a few twelfth-century fragments in the Klosterneuburg Stiftsbibliothek show attempts to arrange German neumes on a drypoint staff,[103] this practice does not appear to have taken hold among Klosterneuburg's canons, at least not for long. When notational change did come for the canons, it came rapidly. Figs 14a–b offer excerpts from two rituals, each copied around 1330.[104] The ritual on the left uses the older staffless neumes, while that on the right uses Bohemian notation on four lines.

Klosterneuburg's canonesses, on the other hand, followed their own notational muse, adopting an early form of staff notation that blended Metz and German neumes from the start. While the practice of placing neumes on drypoint lines was already becoming old-fashioned west of the Rhine, the canonesses maintained this practice through much of the fourteenth century. Figs 15a–b show examples from the twelfth and fourteenth centuries respectively.

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102 A discussion of medieval chant notations is beyond the scope of the current essay. A good general introduction for non-specialists can be found in Kelly 2014, esp. 41–69.

103 See n. 7. These fragments can be consulted at <https://austriamanus.org/notation/8> (accessed on 11 June 2023).

104 Manuscript dating by Haidinger 1983, 133.
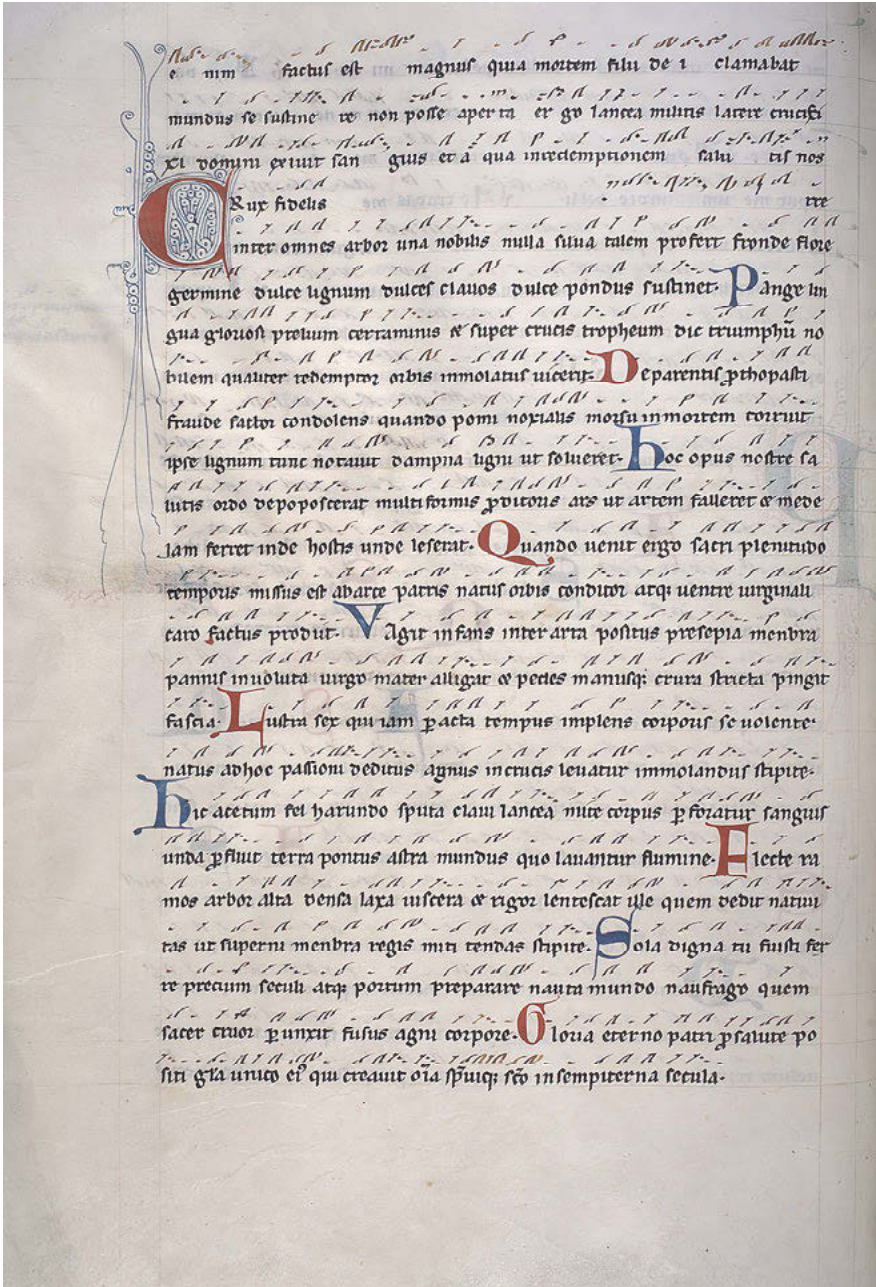
Fig. 13: Unheighted German neumes; CCl 73, fol. 34ᵛ (thirteenth-century gradual/missal, canons); © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.
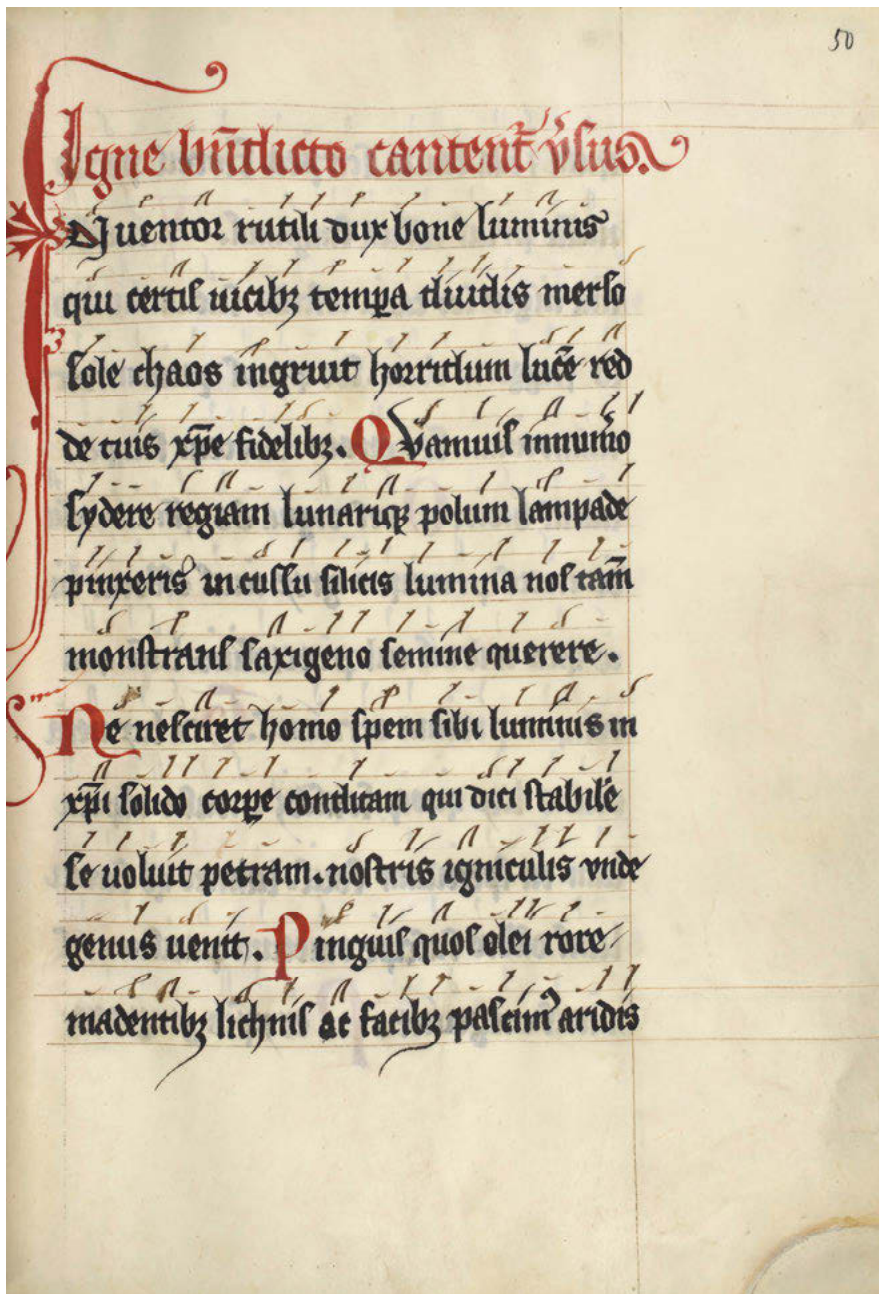
Fig. 14a: Notational change for Klosterneuburg canons; CCl 628, fol. 50ʳ; *c.* 1330 ritual, canons; © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Fig. 14b: Notational change for Klosterneuburg canons; CCl 629, fol. 74ᵛ; *c.* 1330 ritual, canons;
© Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Fig. 15a: Early staff notation, Klosterneuburg canonesses; CCl 1012, fol. 13ʳ; twelfth-century antiphoner, canonesses; © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

Fig. 15b: Early staff notation, Klosterneuburg canonesses; CCl 589, fol. 2ʳ; fourteenth-century antiphoner, canonesses; © Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek.

3.4 Early staff notation in southern German-speaking Europe

The canonesses of Klosterneuburg were not alone in the early use of staff notation. Scattered evidence preserved in manuscripts and manuscript fragments throughout the German-speaking south testifies to the use of staff notation within other double monasteries. The introduction of staff notation into the region was first highlighted by Janka Szendrei in the 1990s.[105] She divided the manuscripts and fragments that placed neumes onto staves into two groups. Her first group included sources that adopted the mixed Metz/German notational scheme used by the canonesses at Klosterneuburg and within several Benedictine monasteries in Swabia and Bavaria. Her second group included sources that applied German neumes directly onto a staff, with most of these originating in Benedictine monasteries associated with the Hirsau reforms.

In a series of studies a decade later, Robert Klugseder expanded Szendrei's list,[106] and in a study just published, he drilled down into the origins for the two notational systems and the extent to which these did and did not endure.[107] He argued that what has typically been called Klosterneuburg notation originated at the Benedictine abbey of St Ulrich und Afra in Augsburg, and he identified as its inventor the monk and music theorist, Udalchalk von Maisach, who would become abbot of that house in 1127. Klugseder argued that this new form of notation spread from Augsburg to other Benedictine houses, such as Ottobeuren, Wessobrunn, and Tegernsee, and to Augustinian houses such as Klosterneuburg and Reichersberg by way of Rottenbuch. While several instances of the new notation were used to illustrate music-theoretical principals among the Benedictines,[108] most are preserved in liturgical manuscripts from both Benedictine and Augustinian houses. Klugseder credits the Augustinian branch of the dissemination to Gerhoh von Reichersberg, who had served as *scholasticus* at the Augsburg cathedral contemporaneously with Udalschalk's years at the nearby monastery. Gerhoh later served as canon at Rottenbuch, and then provost at Reichersberg. His two brothers, moreover, were among the earliest canons at Klosterneuburg, and each would later serve there as provost. Klugseder offered two examples of the close liturgical and notational connections that likely existed among the several Augustinian houses, citing a frag-

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105 Szendrei 1992 and 1998.

106 Klugseder 2007, 2008a and 2008a.

107 Klugseder 2023.

108 Vienna lat. 573 and Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf.334 Gud.lat. (St Ulrich und Afra, Augsburg); Rochester, Sibley Music Library, ML92.1200 (Admont); and Clm 9921 (Ottobeueren).

ment from Rottenbuch and another of unknown provenance that were nearly identical in their melodic settings and opening initials with the same items in Graz 807, the twelfth-century gradual written for the canonesses at Klosterneuburg.[109]

The sources of the Hirsau group do not exhibit the same degree of uniformity seen among those of the Klosterneuburg group. The earliest Hirsau fragment, Stuttgart Cod.Frag.53 (from a twelfth-century antiphoner), uses key letters as at Klosterneuburg but with either two or three coloured lines – F in red, A in blue, and D in a darker blue or black. A Prüfening antiphoner, Clm 23037, copied around 1140, uses unheighted German neumes in most of the manuscript, but for the new feast of St Afra by Hermannus Contractus (fols 240ʳ–242ᵛ), German neumes are arranged on a staff. Key letters are used for each line, but all lines are coloured red.[110] A partial gradual from Prüfening, Clm 10086, copied around 1180, reverts to drypoint with one or two coloured lines and key letters for those lines only. The colours, though, are used inconsistently. Red is usually F, but sometimes C. Yellow is C when above the F, but B if below. An antiphoner from Zwiefalten copied between 1165 and 1170, Karlsruhe Aug.perg.60, retains the original twelfth-century notation in a few spots, but most has been erased and replaced with varying Gothic forms. The twelfth-century portions that remain, from the Palm Sunday procession, the Mandatum, and the Office of the Dead, use German neumes on drypoint lines with red F and yellow C but with dots in place of the key letters.[111]

The use of staff notation in the German south over the course of the twelfth century was thus associated with houses affiliated with the Gregorian reforms, and most of these were allied with the Hirsau and Augustinian reform movements. Most were also dual-sex institutions. A case can easily be made for the use of Klosterneuburg notation among the canonesses of the several Augustinian houses from which such survive. Klugseder's argument for the transmission from Rottenbuch to Klosterneuburg and Reichersberg is strong in my view, particularly given the close association seen in the examples he cited from Rottenbuch, Klosterneuburg, and beyond, and it would be reasonable to suspect, as Klugseder seems to imply, that this transmission was directed toward the female side of these institutions, given what we know about Klosterneuburg.

The Hirsau side is less clear. Klugseder argued that the use of staff notation was a short-lived phenomenon, that even among those Benedictine monasteries where Klosterneuburg notation was invented and used, music scribes reverted to staffless

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109 Klugseder 2023, 138 and 152.

110 Schlager 1984.

111 Metzinger et al. 1996. See especially the introduction by Hartmut Möller, in Metzinger et al. 1996, vii–xxxiv.

neumes in later years.[112] This appears certainly to be the case among the canons at Klosterneuburg, whose twelfth-century flirtation with German neumes on a staff was fleeting. While this may have been the case generally, other possibilities are available.

The liturgical sources from Zwiefalten are illustrative. The Zwiefalten antiphoner, Karlsruhe Aug.perg.60, is the oldest preserved Benedictine antiphoner from the German south-west with diastematic notation. Written between 1165 and 1170, the manuscript was copied with German neumes on drypoint lines throughout, although much was later erased and replaced. The very act of erasure and replacement testifies to the value that the community placed on this manuscript in their efforts to maintain the currency of their liturgical and musical practice over the three and a half centuries that it remained *in situ*.[113] With the marginal notations that were added to identify the textual sources for the liturgical items,[114] this has the hallmark of a manuscript intended more for reference than for liturgical use and would not have been out of place in either the male or female sides of the house. An early thirteenth-century bifolium inserted at the beginning of the Zwiefalten epistolary, Stuttgart Cod. Brev.121, a manuscript attributed to female scribes by both Löffler and Beach and the manuscript to which the embroidered silk covers shown in Figs 12a–b were attached, contains epistle tropes for St Stephan copied with German neumes on four red lines, with a key letter for C and a dot for F. Liturgical manuscripts from earlier in the century, including the so-called nuns' missal, use unheighted German neumes.[115] Given the proximity in date for the antiphoner and the epistle tropes, and the years separating these from the unheighted sources, the divergence in notational practice might indicate a temporary change in scribal habits, as we saw with the canons at Klosterneuburg. It might also reflect a distinct usage by the nuns.

A similar scenario is found among manuscripts copied for the abbey of Prüfening. In the Prüfening antiphoner, Clm 23037, copied around 1140, most chants are

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112 Klugseder 2007, 131 and Klugseder 2023, 164.

113 The manuscript was carried to the abbey of Reichenau by a group of Zwiefalten monks led by Abbot Georg Fischer in 1516. Heinzer 1995, 177–178 identifies the initials G. D. that follow chants for St Mark in the Reichenau supplement (fol. 142ᵛ) as belonging to Gregor Dietz, who was among the Zwiefalten monks who relocated to Reichenau. Dietz would later serve as Reichenau's abbot (1540–1548). See also Möller's introduction to Metzinger et al. 1996, xii.

114 The notations in the margin that identified the textual sources for the chants were entered in the third quarter of the twelfth century by Reinhard von Munderkingen, who would later serve as abbot of Zwiefalten. See Spilling 1989 and Möller's introduction to Metzinger et al. 1996, x–xii.

115 Stuttgart Cod. Bibl.qt.36 (Zwiefalten gradual, second quarter twelfth century) and Stuttgart Cod. Brev.123 (Zwiefalten gradual/sacramentary, mid twelfth century – the so-called nuns' missal).

entered with unheighted German neumes. Only the new, and presumably unfamiliar, Office of St Afra uses staff notation, with the lines traced in red rather than etched into the parchment and with key letters for all lines. In manuscripts copied at the end of the century, though, the scribes revert to the use of drypoint. In the Prüfening gradual, Clm 10086, red lines are used to indicate F – and yellow, as I noted earlier – is used for either B or C. In the antiphoner fragment contained in Clm 12027, coloured lines are absent. Key letters are used, although inconsistently (sometimes F, sometimes C, sometimes A). As was the case at Zwiefalten, the consistent use of German neumes on drypoint lines is found in manuscripts from the end of the twelfth century, while unheighted neumes prevailed before. Again, this might indicate a temporary change in scribal habits. And again, it might also reflect a distinct usage by the nuns.

We know that the canonesses of Klosterneuburg used staff notation from the start, and there is reason to believe that women in other Augustinian houses did so as well. Beyond these, the strength of the evidence weakens. My suggestion that the later twelfth-century instances of staff notation might reflect the use of Zwiefalten and Prüfening's nuns is mitigated by the variety of techniques used for entering staves and identifying pitch levels among these sources, and I know of nothing further that ties these scattered manuscripts and fragments to any of the women enclosed within any of the houses. But, given the independence shown by the canonesses of Klosterneuburg in both their liturgical and musical practices, we might be cautiously optimistic that the shadows cast by these scattered notational remnants may reveal similar practices elsewhere. Indeed, staff notation may have been but a notational experiment that the monks and canons found no compelling reasons to retain, useful perhaps for describing music theoretical principles or for introducing new music. But placing neumes on staves for liturgical use was expensive, and for the monks and canons of the region, efficiency may have won out over clarity. Women housed within double monasteries, though, might have seen this differently. Many women turned to the religious life as adults and may not have benefited from the training in liturgy and chant offered to young male novices. For these women, reading neumes on a staff could provide a means for gaining rapid proficiency in liturgical performance, thus opting for practicality over efficiency and tradition.[116] We can see one instance of such practicality in what I might call the 'user-friendly' hymnals produced by the canonesses at Klosterneuburg, where much parchment was wasted in the repetition of melodies for each verse (see Figs 6a–b).

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116 Similar arguments are offered in Norton and Carr 2011, 125–126 and Klugseder 2023, 163.

4 Conclusion

In recovering the liturgy of the canonesses of Klosterneuburg, we learned not only that the canonesses charted their own course in their celebration of the liturgical year, but that their liturgical celebration was dynamic, changing over time to meet new requirements and to adapt to new sensibilities. We learned also that the liturgy of the canonesses was rendered with a form of musical notation that set their liturgical expression apart from that of the canons next door. There were likely poets among the canonesses as well, the authors of three hymns and perhaps more. Given the distinct character of both textual and musical palaeography, we might suspect that canonesses served also as scribes for their liturgical texts and music.

While the means adopted at Klosterneuburg to circumvent strict claustration were surely replicated elsewhere, the extent to which other cloistered women maintained their liturgical independence remains unsettled. We know that cloistered women were actively involved in the preparation and creation of manuscripts, and we know that some manuscripts were destined for liturgical use on their behalf. But outside of Klosterneuburg, evidence that liturgical manuscripts were used by the nuns and canonesses themselves is scanty.[117] Yet, it seems inconceivable that the women enclosed within the double monasteries of the German-speaking south would not have found ways to assert their voices in whatever ways they could, whether in their liturgy, in their musical notation, or otherwise. I suggested earlier that our inability to discern such liturgical independence was driven by a lack of manuscript evidence. But it may also be that the deficiencies lie within ourselves and in the boundaries that we construct to constrain our inquiries. While the dots we have before us may ultimately confirm that the nuns and canonesses of the German-speaking south asserted little control over their liturgical and notational practices, the missing dots, the invisible dots, should they ever come into view, might paint an altogether different picture. There are surely other institutions yet to consider, other facets yet to explore, and other repositories yet to plough. If

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117 In her presentation, 'Chant Tradition in Women's Monasteries of the Hirsau Reforms', given at the symposium Women's Voices in the Era of Monastic Reforms: Liturgy and Chant in Female Religious Communities in Medieval Germany (Universität Würzburg, 30 June 2023), Hanna Zühlke listed the following manuscripts that were associated with the nuns of Hirsau double monasteries: Stuttgart Cod. Brev.123 (Zwiefalten); Admont, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. 18 and Klagenfurt, Landesarchiv, Cod. GV 6/7 (Admont); Salzburg, Stiftsbibliothek St. Peter, a V 24 and a IX 11 (Salzburg, Petersfrauen); and London, British Library, Arundel 340 (Göttweig). I thank Hanna Zühlke for allowing me access to her unpublished presentation.

there is one lesson that I take from this endeavour, it is the importance of assuming nothing and looking at everything – to welcome the unexpected and to embrace the invisible obvious.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

CAO = Catalogue numbers given in Hesbert 1963–1979.
CCl = *Codex Claustroneoburgensis*, Klosterneuburg, Stiftsbibliothek (A-KN).
Clm = *Codices latini monacenses*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (D-Mbs).
Graz = Graz, Universitätsbibliothek (A-Gu).
Karlsruhe = Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek (D-KA).
LOO = Catalogue numbers given in Lipphardt 1976–1990.
Prague = Prague, Národní knihovna České republiky (CZ-Pu).
StiAK = Klosterneuburg, Stiftsarchiv.
Stuttgart = Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek (D-Sl).
Vienna = Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (A-Wn).

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Patricia Stoop

Monastic Book Production in the Late Medieval Low Countries: The Sister Scribes of Jericho and the Building of their Manuscript Collection

Abstract: Numerous women living in religious communities in medieval and early modern Europe participated actively in book culture, both in the vernacular and Latin, to support their devotional and intellectual lives. Female religious houses functioned as 'textual communities' and 'communities of learning', in which literature and knowledge were produced, consumed, shared and exchanged. Thus, they contributed importantly to premodern literary, religious and intellectual culture. The Augustinian convent of Jericho in Brussels was one of the major centres of manuscript production in the late medieval Low Countries. This article studies the canonesses as skilled and diligent book producers and investigates what the manuscripts they produced looked like. It explores the development of the manuscript collection and considers what incentives drove its formation. Additionally, it focuses on the nature of the extant collection, and the ways the books may have been used, by whom and in what spaces. Thus, this article highlights Jericho as an important community of literacy and learning and the significant role the canonesses played in building a rich text culture to support their individual as well as the community's devotional, literary and intellectual aspirations.

1 Introduction

Thousands of Christian women living in religious communities in the European Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period engaged actively in book culture, as owners, commissioners, readers, copyists, illuminators, translators, compilers and authors. Despite the restrictions imposed on them by the ecclesiastical authorities and their exclusion from hegemonic centres of learning and knowledge (Latin and cathedral schools, universities), female religious interacted with (para)liturgical

books and devotional texts in both the vernacular and Latin, the language of the clergy, in support of their devotional and intellectual lives.[1]

Female religious houses functioned as 'textual communities' in the sense of 'places or social circles where manuscript texts are or were produced, read, and circulated by and for a certain group' and 'communities of learning', in which literature and knowledge were produced, consumed, shared, and exchanged internally and externally.[2] Women in many convents in several regions in Europe spared no effort to build a rich book collection. As a result, convent libraries functioned as a mirror of women's spirituality, and reflected the multiple levels of their literacy and learning. Texts and manuscripts – and, after the establishment of the printing press, early printed books – were often obtained from elsewhere (through, for example, bequests, purchases and donations), and, in many cases, the female inhabitants of religious communities also produced – often collectively and collaboratively – the books they needed or wanted for themselves, or even for third parties outside the convent walls. Women not only copied books but also compiled them, and even composed new, original texts. Thus, they played a large role in shaping literary, religious and intellectual culture.

Although some promising studies have been published recently, the richness of book collections in female convents is still vastly understudied.[3] As a consequence, it is still largely unknown what books women religious owned and used. In this article, I will examine the late-fifteenth-century manuscript collection of Onze Lieve Vrouw ter Rosen Gheplant in Jericho, a convent of canonesses regular of the order of St Augustine, which was founded in 1456 from the merging of two other convents – the convent of St Catherine (located just outside the second city rampart of Brussels at the Oude Graanmarkt) and Onze Lieve Vrouw ter Cluysen in Braine l'Alleud (Fôret de Soignes). The new community was housed in the buildings of the convent of St Catherine.[4]

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1 Several important publications in recent decades have provided insights into women's literary production. Substantial projects include Beach 2004; Lowe 2004; Scheepsma 2004; Winston-Allen 2004; Cyrus 2009; Moreton 2013; Carmassi, Schlotheuber and Breitenbach (eds) 2014; Blanton, O'Mara and Stoop (eds) 2015; Blanton, O'Mara and Stoop (eds) 2017; Brown and Legaré (eds) 2016; Hamburger et al. 2017; Schlotheuber and Lähnemann 2023; Stoop and Blanton forthcoming.
2 Beal 2008; see also Mews and Crossley 2011.
3 Stooker and Verbeij 1997, especially vol. 1, 123–186; Hamburger et al. 2017; Kienhorst and Poirters 2023. Hans Kienhorst and Ad Poirters importantly highlight the multilayered nature of book collections as they developed and changed over time, and have remained in use for centuries in (women's) convents. They propose a stratification model to study them.
4 Stoop 2013, 43–54.
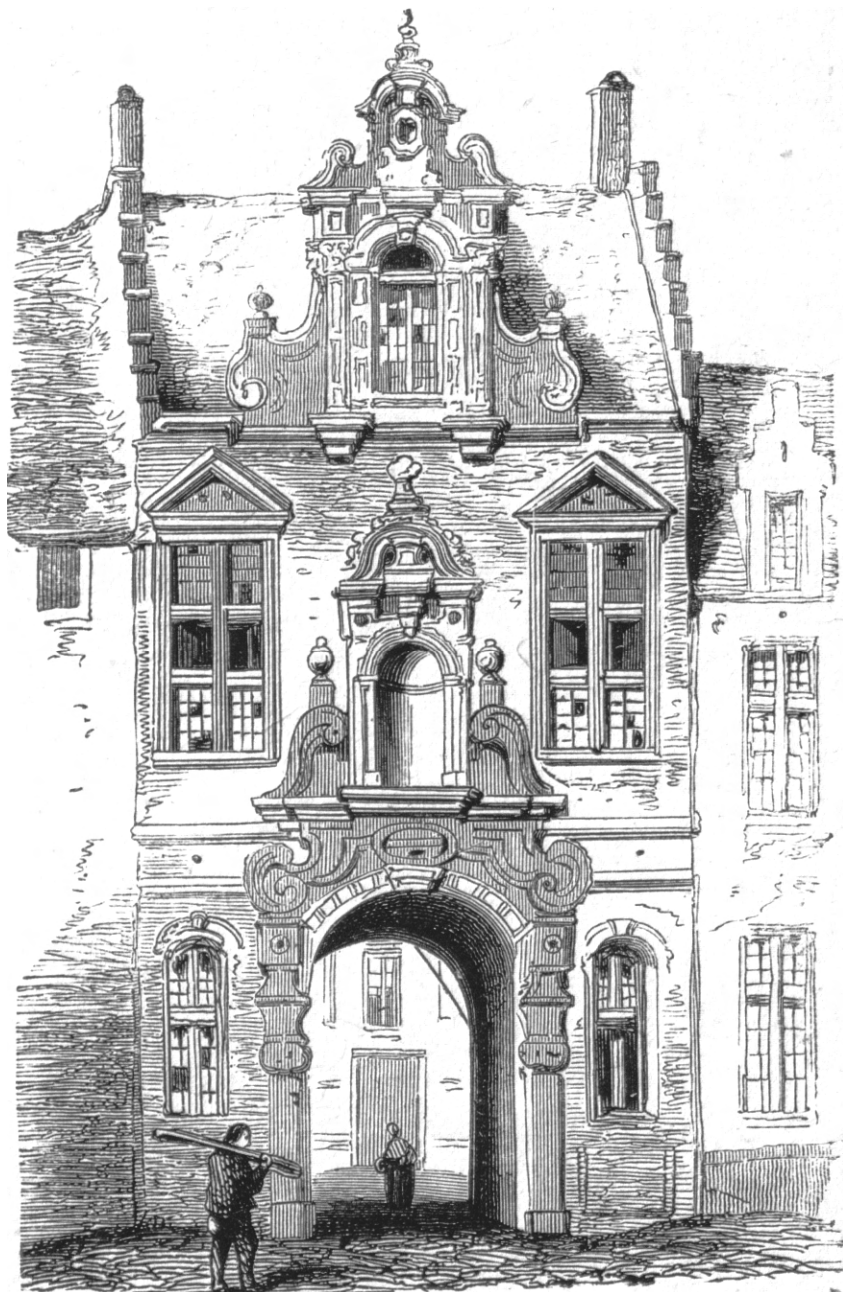
Fig. 1: Engraving of the entrance gate of Jericho at the Oude Graanmarkt. Brussels, Archief van de Stad Brussel, Iconografische collectie, D. 231. Reproduced with permission.

Previous research has shown that Jericho was an important literary hub in Brabant. Its extant manuscript collection is the third largest in the Low Countries, and the majority of the books were produced by the convent's sisters.[5] In the current article, I will investigate how the women – individually and communally – built their book collection and consider the incentives that drove its creation.[6] My main focus will be on the sisters as able and diligent book producers and the manuscripts that they created. In the final part of my article, I will focus on the nature of the extant collection and the ways the books may have been used by whom and in what spaces. Thus, this article highlights Jericho as an important community of literacy and learning in which women played a pivotal role in building a rich text culture to support their individual as well as the community's devotional, literary and intellectual aspirations.

2 Late medieval book production in Jericho

The writing activities in Jericho reached their pinnacle in the period between November 1465 and 1500. Over three-quarters of the forty-one manuscripts that have survived were written during this period, and the production of manuscripts for people and institutions outside the convent walls – in many cases for pay (*pro pretio*) – also peaked during this period.[7] A scriptorium was installed and furnished in the autumn of 1466 to make all this scribal activity possible.[8] The majority of the

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5 Stoop 2012a; 2014; and 2021.

6 The research underpinning this article is published in a more extensive form in Stoop 2013, 111–153.

7 In Stoop 2013, 366–426, I offered extensive descriptions of thirty still extant medieval manuscripts, six post-Tridentine codices and four manuscripts which still existed at the beginning of the twentieth century, but are now lost. I recently discovered another manuscript that should be added to this list: Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek (hereafter KBR), 5014, with a collection of texts on St Catherina of Alexandria, belonged to Clara Wafelaerts. Although both Prosper Verheyden (1935, 165) and Herman Mulder (Deschamps and Mulder 2005, 6–8) suspected that the manuscript belonged to Jericho, neither of them were able to conclusively attribute the manuscript to the Brussels convent. The eighteenth-century list of Jericho's inhabitants that has been preserved in Brussels, KBR, Fonds Goethals, ms. 1610 (*Beschrijvinge*), however, mentions Clara as the 133rd professed canoness on fol. 8[r]. She passed away in 1586. Cf. Stoop 2013, 433. For the three incunabula that are thus far known from Jericho, see Dlabačová and Stoop 2021, 223–224, 228–229, and 241.

8 Maria van Pee noted several expenditures related to the scriptorium in her account books of the period between 1 November 1464 and the same date in 1481 (Brussels, Rijksarchief, Archives écclesiastique de Belgique (AEB), 12.779; 12.780, fols 101[r]–161[r]; and 12.781, fols 40[r]–190[r]). These included

manuscripts created within the convent walls were probably produced in that room, even if it is conceivable that some sisters also carried out scribal work in places outside the scriptorium, for example, in their cells. Jericho, in fact, is not the only female convent affiliated with the Chapter of Windesheim that had a scriptorium: Sint-Agnes in Dordrecht, Bethanië in Arnhem, Bethanië in Mechelen, Diepenveen, and Facons in Antwerp also had their own scriptoria. In some convents, however, the scribes had to share a space with sisters who were engaged in needlework. In the Barberendal convent in Tienen, for example, 'a bequame plaats for scriverssen ende de nayerssen' ('a convenient space for the scribes and seamstresses') was provided.[9]

In all probability, the production of new manuscripts was at least partially driven by the convent's desire to adhere to the regulations of the Windesheim chapter, the monastic branch of the *Devotio moderna* that was committed to religious reform in the Low Countries from the late fourteenth century onwards.[10] Additionally, scribal activities were an important kind of handicraft – in line with the Benedictine adage *ora et labora*, men and women in religious communities were supposed to spend part of their day in prayer, and the other part in manual labour.[11] Writing was held in high esteem in many convents, not only because the scribes helped build their own library, but because they also engaged in spiritual literature during their working hours, thus, combining 'physical activity with spiritual edification'.[12]

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the installation of a stained-glass window and a sink (respectively Brussels, AEB, 12.779, fol. 4[r] and AEB, 12.780, fol. 104[v]).

9 Persoons 1980, 79. Cf. also Lingier 1993, 289–293; Scheepsma 2004, 69. An interesting introduction to manuscript production in medieval monasteries (in the Low Countries) and the functioning of scriptoria is Kienhorst 2011.

10 Dlabačová and Hofman 2018. Also cf. Scheepsma 2004; Van Engen 2008. On the relationship between literary production and monastic reform (especially in Germany), see Williams-Krapp 1986–1987; Williams-Krapp 1994; Williams-Krapp 2020; Heinzle 1995; Willing 2004. For the significant contribution of women religious in the production of such literature, see e.g. Winston-Allen 2004; Cyrus 2009; Schiewer 2013; Voltmer 2022. On the Chapter of Windesheim, see Scheepsma 2004, especially Chap. 1. Eventually, Jericho was not allowed to become a formal member of the Windesheim Congregation. After 8 November 1436, the chapter did not accept any new female convents (the number stayed limited to thirteen), in order not to overburden the male communities that were responsible for the *cura monialium*.

11 The majority of canonesses would spend their working time on needlework. In Jericho, an average of five out of the fifty canonesses were involved in scribal activities per year.

12 Gumbert 1990, 56. See also Scheepsma 2004, 65–66; Mertens 2024. On reading and writing as meditative, spiritual activities, see e.g. Carruthers 1998; Newman 2005.

Presumably, however, part of the explanation for the strong impetus for writing activities in Jericho after 1465 must also be sought in the sphere of interest of the convent's leaders. It is no coincidence that the heyday of the book production in Jericho concurs with the rectorate of Jan Storm (between 1457 and his death on 3 May 1488), of whom 121 sermons were written down, as well as the leadership positions of precisely those sisters who were also involved in the noting down of his sermons, which they heard over the course of twenty-two years (between 1459 and 1481) within their convent: Maria van Pee (*c.* 1435–1511), the convent's first long-serving prioress between 21 November 1465 and the end of 1480, Elisabeth van Poylc (d. 1499) and Janne Colijns (1453/1454–1491).[13] These women, like their rector and confessor, clearly had an intellectual profile, which is evidenced not only by the fact that they held managerial positions and redacted the sermons preached by their confessors, but also by the fact that the latter two also worked in the scriptorium themselves.[14] This is similarly true of Barbara Cuyermans (d. 1507), who, as the convent's 'meerstersse van scrijven' ('writing instructor'), obviously played an important role in the scribal activities.[15] It seems very likely that these women, through their own interest in books and spiritual texts, determined the convent's 'literary' course in the second half of the fifteenth century.[16]

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13 Biographies of these sermon redactors can be found in Stoop 2013, 85–110. On women and leadership, see Kerby-Fulton, Bugyis and Van Engen (eds) 2020.

14 For the books they produced for Jericho, see below on pp. 280–282. Janne is also involved in five writing projects for pay in the period between 1473/1474 and 1488/1489. Three of these were destined for male religious, *in casu* Mark van der Straeten, prior of the Norbertine abbey in Grimbergen from 1477 to 1489, Friar Thomas from Groenendaal (was he the same person as Reverend Thomas Monincx who is mentioned below?) and the Dominican Friar Dyonys. Cf. Stoop 2013, 96–96, 163–164.

15 Barbara Cuyermans, who was professed in Ter Cluysen and one of the more senior canonesses of Jericho, is mentioned as such in the prologue to Janne Colijns's sermon collection (Brussels, KBR, II 298, fol. 5ʳ): 'Ende die andere [i.e. Storm's sermons] sijn uutghecopieert van sijnre gheestelijker dochter ende religioeser suster ons cloesters van Jericho, met namen suster Barbara Cuyermans, die, in den heere ghestorven, voertijts mijn meerstersse van scrijven gheweest is' ('And the others have been copied out by his spiritual daughter and religious sister of our cloister of Jericho, namely, sister Barbara Cuyermans, who, having died in the Lord, used to be my writing instructor'). Barbara also wrote a few books *pro pretio*. She copied a booklet on the Passion of Christ, a Book of Hours (which she also illuminated), and, in 1496/1497, an unspecified book for Maria van Pee, who at that moment was the mater of the convent of Vredenberg in Breda. The fact that in 1480/1481 Barbara wrote a collection of sermons intended for Park Abbey in Heverlee near Louvain is highly noteworthy. Cf. Stoop 2013, 106.

16 When the leadership positions were taken over by Philips Niclaes and Janne van den Velde (d. 1509), the writing activity decreased markedly.

3 The sisters' literary training

As has been mentioned above, the zenith of scribal activities within the convent walls of Jericho – both for the production of books for the sisters' own use as well as for people and institutions outside the convent walls – is situated between 1466 and 1491 with a run-out to the end of the fifteenth century. The manuscripts and the account books kept by the prioresses mention the names of no fewer than forty-three scribes. Many of them had presumably learned this skill within the convent walls.[17] That a writing instructor was present in the convent to this end has already been mentioned. Barbara probably not only taught the students the mechanical side of writing – scribes often mastered more than one type of script – but also the three classical components of text composition: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric (the elements of the *trivium*, the linguistic dimensions of the *artes liberales*).

The teaching most probably took place in the school which, as Maria van Pee's account book shows, had been set up in a separate room. A sink was installed in that room (as in the scriptorium) in 1465/1466, and a new ceiling was constructed in 1472/1473.[18] Unfortunately, the sources nowhere provide any concrete details about what kind of training was given in the school. However, the account books by Katheline Tscraven (d. 1488), who was the convent's procuratrix between All Saints' Day 1475 and the same day in 1478, attest that education was given to young girls who, although they were not yet novices or postulants (for which girls had to be 12 years old), lived in the convent. Janne Colijns, for example, was only 7 or 8 years old when she entered the convent on 29 May 1461. This seems to imply that the girls

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17 Eight sisters were only involved in copying manuscripts for Jericho itself; twenty-one sisters wrote only for third parties, and thirteen others worked both for their own convent and for others.

18 See, respectively, 'item om twee gootsteens, een in tscrijfcamer ende enen in tscole tstuc 2 denieren' ('item for two sinks, one in the writing chamber and one in the school, 2 pennies each'; Brussels, AEB, 12.780, fol. 104ᵛ); and 'item Jan den timmerman van VI dagen den solder int scole te legghen 6 schellingen' ('item paid 6 shillings to Jan the carpenter for six days for installing the ceiling in the school'; Brussels, AEB, 12.780, fol. 143ʳ). Other convents also had schools: Diepenveen had a school in the mid fifteenth century where education was given to future canonesses; a few decades later, Sister Daya Dierkens (d. 1491) taught 'kinderen' ('children') there. Cf. Scheepsma 2004, 44. Although women religious were among the most highly educated women of their time, not much is known about the level of their education and formation. Relevant preliminary information for the Low Countries can be found in Lingier 1993, 283–286; de Hemptinne 2004, especially 49–52; Scheepsma 2004, 41–47; Corbellini 2017.

received most of their formal literary and intellectual training within the convent and learned how to read and write there. What implications this had for their scribal hands and, hence, for what books from Jericho looked like, will be discussed later.

Other women will have been adequately educated before entering the convent. After all, noblewomen – and quite a few of them lived in convents of canonesses regular in the Low Countries – learned to read with the help of the (Latin) psalter.[19] Thus, they already had a certain level of familiarity with reading and writing, and reading Latin, although the mastery of that language will also have depended on the intellectual capacities of the individual sister. Regarding most enclosed women – especially the choir nuns – we can assume that they knew enough Latin to use the Latin choir books for the liturgy and sing the liturgical texts appropriately.[20] Whether and to what extent they could also read other Latin texts and communicate and write in that language is the question. There is no doubt, however, that some sisters in Jericho had an excellent command of Latin. Maria van Pee and Janne Colijns, for instance, both independently translated the tenth *lectio* from the *Speculum beatae Mariae virginis* by the Franciscan author Conrad of Saxony (d. 1279).[21] Moreover, their Middle Dutch sermon collections and the ones written by their colleagues contain Latin citations from the Bible as well as other *auctoritates*.[22]

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19 Scheepsma 2004, 42–43.

20 Monica Hedlund draws a positive image of the Latin literacy of women religious (in particular of the Vadstena Birgittines) in her groundbreaking essay 'Nuns and Latin, with Special Reference to the Birgittines of Vadstena'. She quite bluntly states: 'As I see it, only a total blockhead could have avoided learning quite an amount of Latin just by listening to it several hours a day, provided someone said what it was about. We have absolutely no reason nor right to assume that there were many blockheads among the Vadstena sisters – quite the opposite', Hedlund 2013, 105. Cf. also Churchill, Brown and Jeffrey (eds) 2002.

21 Stoop 2016.

22 Cf. Stoop 2013, 169–353 (Chaps 4 and 5). The following publications in English deal with the late medieval sermon collections from Jericho (in addition to Stoop 2016): Stoop 2007; Stoop 2010; Stoop 2012b; Stoop 2015; Stoop and Mertens 2015.
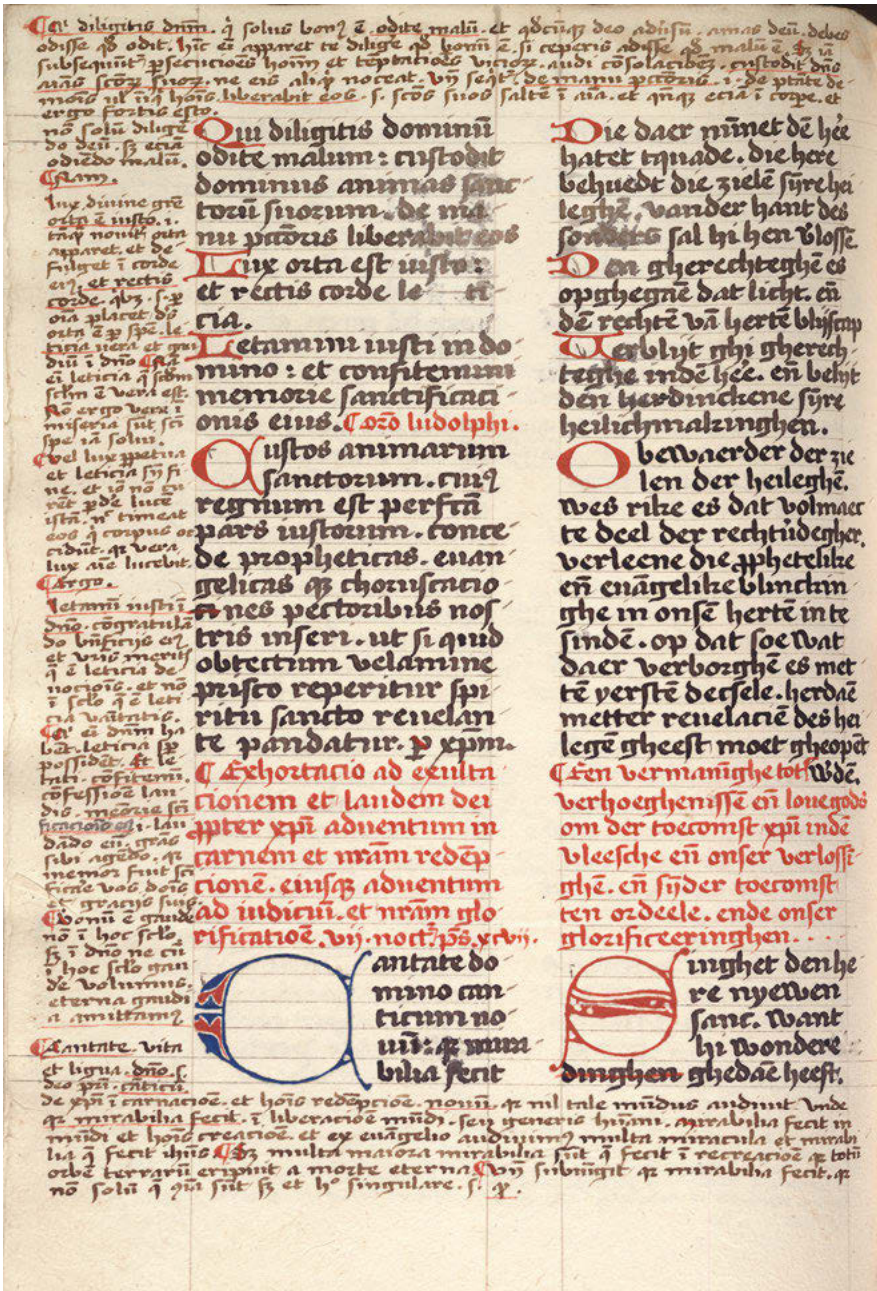
Fig. 2: Bilingual psalter with Latin commentary, written by Sister Elisabeth Mols. The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 133 C 1, fol. 129ᵛ. Reproduced with permission.

Additionally, Elisabeth Mols (d. 1538) wrote a psalter, 'in den tijt dat sij aen die schive diende' ('in the time that she served at the *rota*'), in both Latin and Middle Dutch (The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 133 C 1).[23] The psalms are accompanied by a prayer in Latin and Middle Dutch and by a commentary, written only in Latin and taken from Ludolf van Saxony's (*c.* 1295–1378) *Ennaratio in psalmos sive expositio super psalterium*. Since Elisabeth assembled and copied the texts from various sources (and possibly translated parts of the texts herself), she must have had good fluency in Latin. Incidentally, Elisabeth noted in the colophon that she wished that the book should always be near the prioress in the choir at the disposal of anyone who wished to consult it:

> Desen boeck heft ghescreven ende met groeten aerbeyt vergadert onse gheminde medesuster suster Lijsbeth Mols ende dat in den tijt dat sij aen die schive diende. Ende sij heeft begheert dat desen boeck altoes op den choer sal ligghen omtrint oft voer die priorinne op dat een yeghelijc daer in mach vinden na sijn beliefte. Ende sij bidt ende begheert zeere oetmoedelijc uwer alder devoet ghebet voer haer arm ziele die oec wilen in den last der priorinscap onweerdich ghedient heeft (fol. 3ʳ).

> Our dear fellow sister Elisabeth Mols has written this book and assembled it with great labour and she did this while she was serving at the *rota*. And she desired that this book should always lie in the choir next to or in front of the prioress, so that everyone may find something according to their need in it. And she, who also unworthily served in the office of prioress, asks and requests humbly for your pious prayer for her poor soul.

Maria and Janne's sermons as well as Elisabeth's psalter prove that there is a clear correlation between these women's advanced levels of literacy and their leadership positions. All three sisters, who showed in their writings that they had mastered Latin superbly, became prioresses in later stages of their lives. The books they produced also prove – as they were used by the members of the community – that a substantial group of sisters, even if not all, had at least some passive knowledge of Latin.

Reading Middle Dutch would not have posed major problems for most choir sisters, even if they may not have been able to write (reading and writing skills do not necessarily go hand in hand in the late Middle Ages).[24] Because all women in the community, including converses, novices and postulants, were supposed to be able to understand what was said or read, the vernacular was of great importance in

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23 The *rota* is the wheel which connected the enclosed sisters to the outside world. It was typically used to receive messages from the outside world.

24 Clanchy 1979, 183; Mertens 2024, 240, n. 83.

female communities to complement the Latin that was used during the liturgy.[25] For this reason, the majority of texts were produced in Middle Dutch; this way, all books and texts, in principle, were accessible to all community members.[26] This is also reflected in Jericho's book collections. Of the thirty-one extant manuscripts up till 1510, only five contain texts in Latin; the rest are written in the vernacular.[27]

4 Writing in collaboration

The majority of scribes in Jericho were – as to be expected – professed canonesses.[28] This applied to the sisters who were involved in book production for their own house as well as in the writing *pro pretio* for their external contacts. Of the forty-three scribes known by name, twenty-three can be connected to extant books from Jericho.[29] The names of Maria van Pee, Elisabeth van Poylc and Janne Colijns have already been mentioned. Before they took on their leadership positions, they were all involved in redacting sermons that were preached within the convent walls. The same applies to Barbara Cuyermans. Maria's redaction of sermons by Jan Storm found their way into Brussels, KBR, 4367–68 (dated 1466–1467) – and into a later copy, written around 1486 (Brussels, KBR, IV 402). The older codex was written by four hands, which makes it a bit unclear whether and to what extent Maria van Pee actually produced the extant codex.[30] Did she write the lion's share of the book?

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25 Van Engen 2020, 259: 'Latin and the vernacular could often prove complementary rather than adversarial and were not gendered strictly male and female. Circumstances and cases always count, for women as for men'.

26 Stooker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 1, 128; Scheepsma 2004, 229.

27 I would like to add a caveat to this observation without implying that the vernacular was not the dominant book language for women: the provenance records of Latin manuscripts in library collections in the Netherlands and Belgium (and elsewhere) are poorly inventoried. Consequently, in all likelihood, many Latin manuscripts from female convents remain hidden from our view. The same applies to the collection of early printed books women's institutions may have owned. Cf. Dlabačová and Stoop 2021, 221–222.

28 *Conversae* Mergriete van Steenberghen and Liesbeth Vlieghe are the exceptions to this rule. Their work is discussed below.

29 Stoop 2013, 121–124, Table 5.

30 Cf. Stoop 2013, 373–376. On the layered authorship revealed in these sermon collections, see Stoop 2013, 169–353 (Chaps 4 and 5). We know Maria's scribal hand – that is, her hand for administrative documents – from her account books. See above, n. 8. Brussels, KBR, IV 402 is discussed below on p. 286.
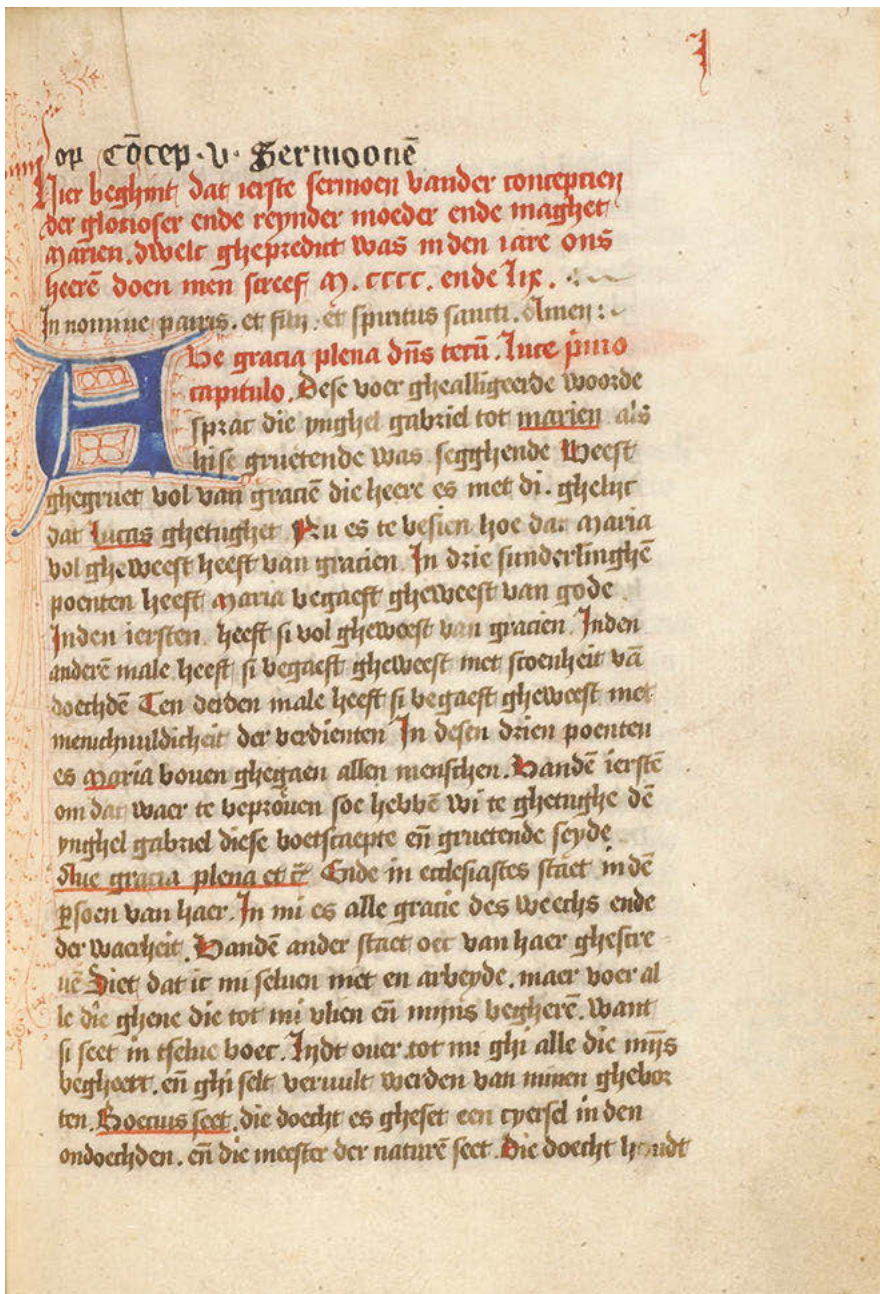
Fig. 3: Opening of Jan Storm's first sermon, as written by Maria van Pee and copied into the 1466 collection. Brussels, KBR, 4367–68, fol. 5ʳ. Reproduced with permission.
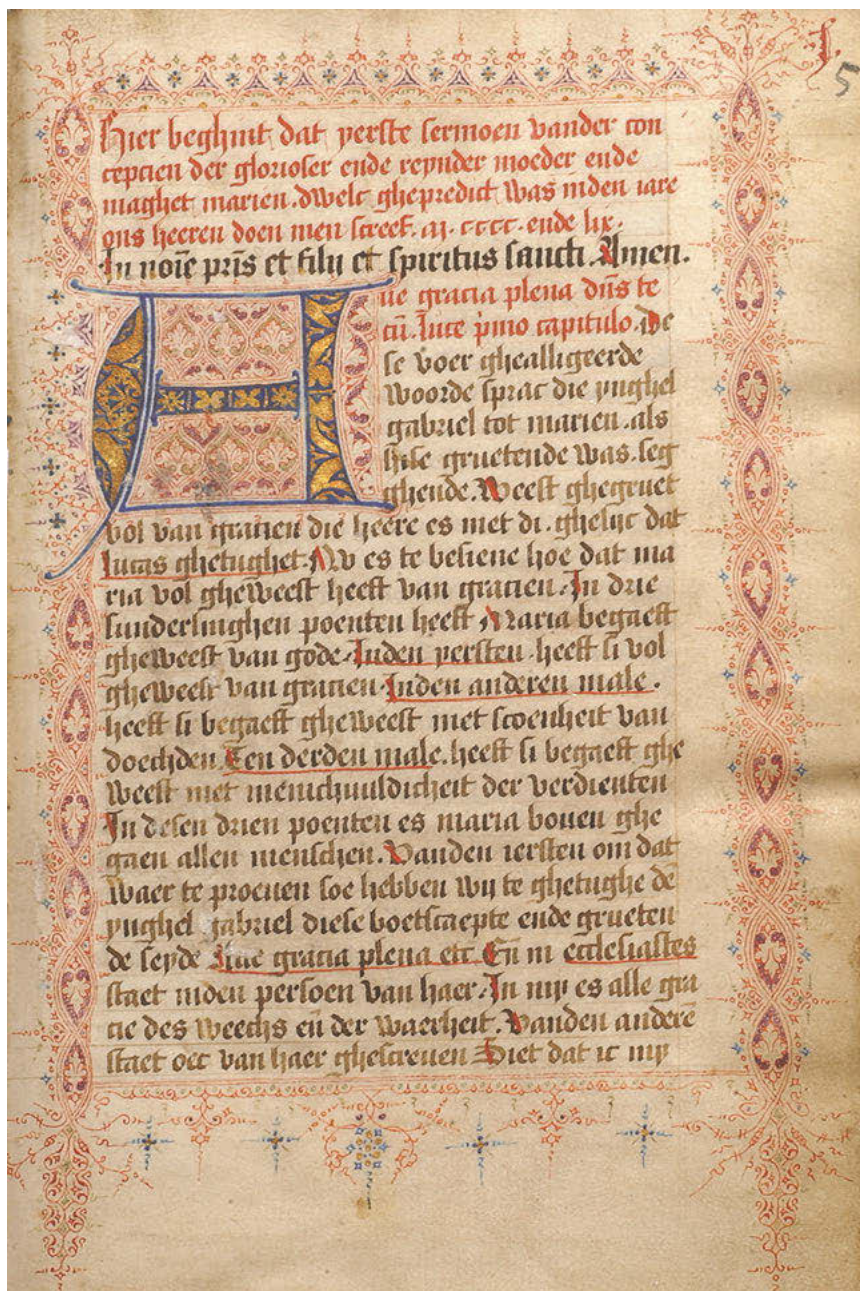
Fig. 4: Opening of Jan Storm's sermon in the 1486 collection, copied by an anonymous scribe. Brussels, KBR, IV 402, fol. 5ʳ. Reproduced with permission.

Barbara Cuyermans's book hand is not known: the four sermons she wrote down have subsequently been copied by *Conversa* Mergriete van Steenbergen (d. 1504) into Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (the same applies to the sermons by Elisabeth van Poylc), and by an anonymous scribe into Brussels, KBR, II 298.[31] This codex, which holds forty-four sermons by Jan Storm and two of his letters, was probably partially written by Janne Colijns. Folios 79ʳ–119ᵛ are, based on the watermarks of the paper, from the 1470s. The rest of the manuscript – according to the 1507 colophon also written by her – was posthumously attributed to Janne, who had passed away in 1491, but written by an anonymous scribe. The same applies to codex Brussels, KBR, 15071. This manuscript with Gregory the Great's (*c.* 540–604) *Homiliae in evangelia* is ascribed to Janne in 1510. Did the community attribute the manuscripts to her by way of honouring and memorising her for her important work as a sermon writer, and a prioress?

The last collection of twenty-five sermons that were preached by Paul van Someren in 1479 and 1480 in Jericho (Brussels, KBR, 4287) is attributed posthumously to Anne Jordaens (d. 1495): 'Dit boeck heeft ghescreven suster Anne Joerdaens zalegher ghedachten ende het hoert toe den cloester van Jericho bij sinte Katherinen' ('Sister Anne Jordaens of blessed memory has written this book and it belongs to the convent of Jericho near St Catherine'; fol. 254ᵛ). As in the previous cases, the codex was written by more than one scribe, which makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about Anne's role in the actual production of the extant book. Did she write the majority of the book and was it, therefore, attributed to her?[32]

As far as we can deduce from the surviving manuscripts, Maria van Pee, Barbara Cuyermans and Mergriete van Steenbergen were not involved in producing other books, but Elisabeth, Anne and Janne were. Around 1470, Elisabeth van Poylc copied the mystical textbook *Dat spieghel der volcomenheit* ('The Mirror of Perfection') by the well-known mystical author Hendrik Herp (*c.* 1410–1477): 'Dit boec hoert toe den cloester van Jericho binnen Bruesel bij Sinte Katherinen ende het hevet ghescreven suster Lijsbeth van Poelc' ('This book belongs to the convent of Jericho in Brussels at St Catherine's, and Sister Elisabeth van Poylc wrote it'; Brussels, KBR, 2136, fol. 155ᵛ).[33]

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31 Mergriete van Steenbergen added a prologue to the collection, in which she explained that four sermons were redacted by Barbara Cuyermans, and the rest by Elisabeth van Poylc (Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fols 1ʳ–2ʳ). An English version of the prologue can be found in Mertens 2004, 138–141 and, in a slightly revised version, in Mertens 2024, 267–268.

32 In the period between 1520 and 1550, this collection was copied by an anonymous scribe into Brussels, KBR, 15130. For Anne Jordaens, see Stoop 2013, 107–110.

33 On Hendrik Herp's *Spieghel der volcomenheit* and its transmission, see Dlabačová 2014.
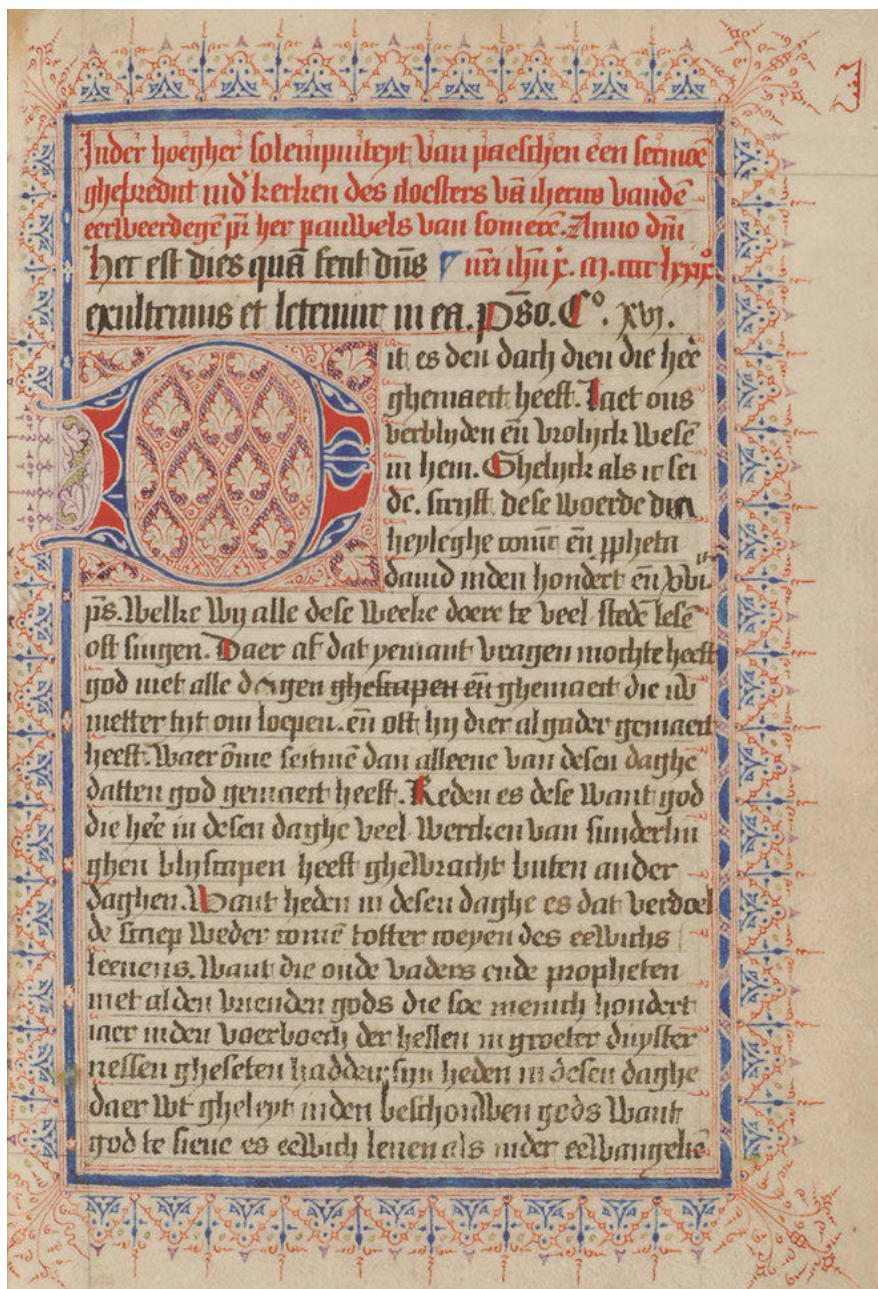
Fig. 5: Opening of Paul van Someren's sermon in the 1479 collection, probably copied by Anne Jordaens. Brussels, KBR, 4287, fol. 2ʳ. Reproduced with permission.

Anne Jordaens and Janne Colijns were both involved in the writing of Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213, which contains the *Regula ad servos* – St Augustine's rule as it was observed by the canonesses regular – followed by Hugh of St Victor's (*c.* 1096–1141), *Expositio in regulam sancti Augustini.*[34] They were part of a group of no less than twelve scribes, who each successively wrote a section of the manuscript. Their names are mentioned in the colophon on fol. 118ʳ. Interestingly – and exceptionally – Philips Niclaes (d. 1506), who succeeded Jan Storm as the rector and confessor in 1488 but was already present in the convent in 1483, participated in the copying of the manuscript:

> Dit sijn der gheender namen die dit boexsken ghescreven hebben uut caritaten. Ons eerweerdighe pater heer Philips Nycholaes – god sij sijn loen –, suster Beatrix Noeys, suster Margarete Bont,[35] suster Janne van den Velde, suster Marie van Hansbeke, suster Katherie Tymmermans, suster Maria Meerts, suster Margarete Joerdaens, suster Janne Colijns, suster Anne Joerdaens, suster Rijckmoet van Zellien, suster Maergarete van den Rade. Int boeck des levens sij haerder alder name (fol. 118ʳ).

> These are the names of those who wrote this little book out of charity. Our venerable Father Philips Niclaes – may God be his reward –, Sister Beatrix Noeys, Sister Margarete Bont, Sister Janne van den Velde, Sister Marie van Hansbeke, Sister Katherie Tymmermans, Sister Maria Meerts, Sister Margarete Joerdaens, Sister Janne Colijns, Sister Anne Joerdaens, Sister Rijckmoet van Zellien, Sister Maergarete van den Rade. May all their names be in the book of life.

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34 Cf. Webber 1976, 504–506; Stoop 2014, 400–402. Anne Jordaens probably – that is, if she actually is the main scribe of Brussels, KBR, 4287 – wrote a devotional miscellany in collaboration with Elisabeth Waelbeerts (d. 1502) (Brussels, KBR, IV 296). It included among many short treatises, (excerpts from) Ekbert of Schönau's (*c.* 1120–1184) *Sermo de vita et passione Jesu Christi* (fols 128ʳ–138ʳ), Nicholas of Strasburg's (first half of the fourteenth century), *Preek over de gulden berg* ('Sermon on the Mountain of Gold'; fols 157ʳ–158ᵛ) and a treatise on the Sacrament from Book IV of Thomas a Kempis's (1380–1471) *De imitatio Christi* (fols 161ʳ–184ᵛ). Anne copied fols 1ʳ–144ʳ and Elisabeth fols 144ᵛ–223ʳ. There was a third person involved in this project, but she could not be identified. This person wrote fols 223ᵛ–231ᵛ, the text in the margins of fols 124ᵛ–125ʳ and in a space that was left open on fol. 125ʳ⁻ᵛ. Elisabeth Waelbeerts also individually copied a collection of so-called gospel sermons around 1480 (Brussels, KBR, 1678).
35 Margarete Bont also copied a collection of sermons by Paul van Someren. The codex is mentioned in *Catalogue d'une belle et riche* 1800, 8, no. 473. Its current repository is unknown.
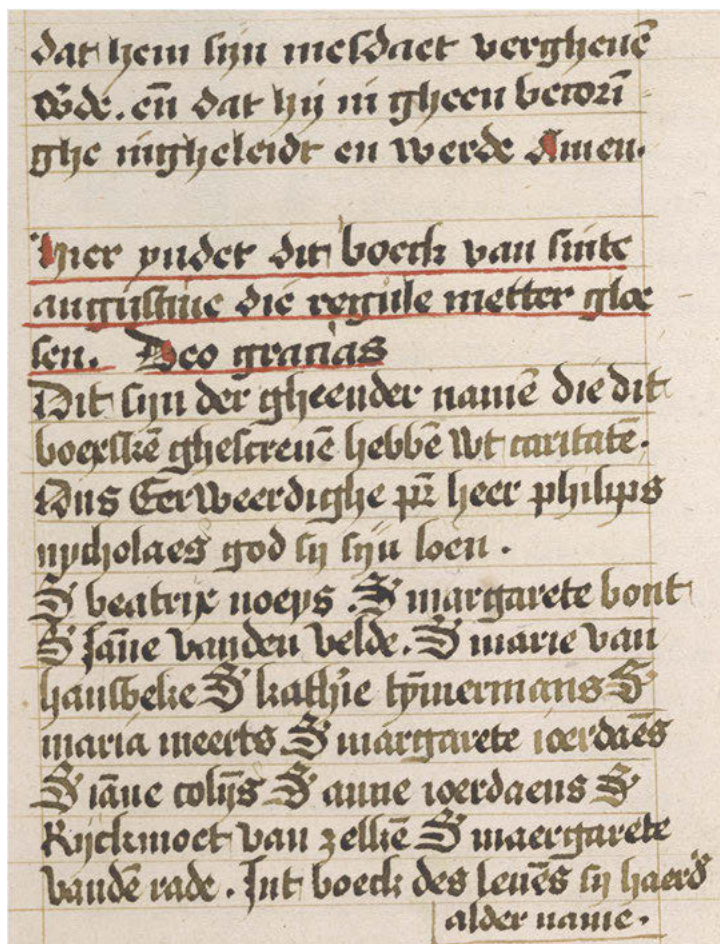
Fig. 6: Colophon demonstrating collaborative writing; Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213, fol. 118ʳ. Reproduced with permission.

Most of the books mentioned above show collaboration between scribes.[36] In many cases, this is deduced from palaeographic research, which has identified scribal hands (even though we have not been able to attribute all those hands to

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36 Only six books are copied by one scribe: Brussels, KBR, 2136 (Elisabeth van Poylc); 15071 (attributed to Janne Colijns but not written by her; cf. above, p. 280); 15130 (anonymous); 15136 (Catharina van Ghiseghem); 15139 (Liesbeth Vlieghe); and Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (Mergriete van Steenberghen).

specific sisters). In other cases, such as for the Philadelphia manuscript, collaboration is mentioned explicitly in the books' colophons. Catharina van Molenbeke (1441–1529), for example, mentioned that she finished the *Mariale* by Jacobus of Voragine (1228/1229–1298) which Sisters Lijsbeth Wijtens (d. 1491) and Magriet Raes had started over eighteen years earlier, in 1471:

> Aen dit boeck heeft ghescreven suster Lijsbeth Wijtens ende suster Magriet Raes. Ende na dat over XVIII jaer was begonnen te scriven, soe hevet suster Kathlinen van Molenbeke volscreven ende gheint op onser liever vrouwen dach XV trappen, op sinte Cecielien avont int jaer ons heeren MCCCC ende LXXXIX doen was sij out ontrint L jaer. Wilt om gode eenen Ave Marie hertelijc lesen voer hen drien op dat hen god voer haren arbeyt wil gheven glorie in der ewicheit (Brussels, KBR, 15069, fol. 192ᵛ).

> Sister Lijsbeth Wijtens and Sister Magriet Raes have contributed to this book. And more than eighteen years after it was started, Sister Catharina van Molenbeke has completed and ended it on the day of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin, on Saint Cecilia's eve in the year of Our Lord 1479, when she was about 50 years old. For the love of God read a heartfelt Ave Maria for the three of them so that God may give them glory in eternity for their labour.

Catharina van Molenbeke also participated in the writing of the first book of Gallus von Königssaal's (*fl. c.* 1370) *Malogranatum*. She wrote in the colophon on fol. 284ᵛ that she finished the project on 14 December 1485:

> Hier ynt dat yerste boeck gheheeten Malogranatum. Dat volscreven wert op sinte Nychasius dach int jaer ons heeren M CCCC ende LXXXV van suster Katherinen van Molenbeke als si out was XLIIII jaer. Dit heeft sij om die minne gods ghedaen ende tot ghemeynder stichtinghen. Waer af ons heere haer loen wil sijn in der ewicheit. Amen (Brussels, KBR, 15156, fol. 284ᵛ).

> Here ends the first book called *Malogranatum*. It was finished on St Nichasius's day in the year of Our Lord 1485 by Sister Catherine van Molenbeke, when she was 44 years old. She did this for the love of God and for general edification. May God be her reward in eternity. Amen.

The '*volscreven*' (the verbatim translation is 'to write to the end') should be understood literally here. A marginal note on fol. 114ᵛ states that Catharina van Molenbeke started her scribal work at that page: 'hier suster Molenbeke [ver]der heeft gescreven' ('here Sister Molenbeke has continued writing').

The collaborative effort has been taken quite far in some manuscripts, as is demonstrated by the Philadelphia codex. Other examples can be given. Eleven people collaborated to create a composite volume with the *vitae* of twelve (local) saints, which is nowadays appropriately kept in the Bollandist library in Brussels (shelf mark 487).

The only scribe mentioned by name is *Conversa* Liesbeth Vlieghe (1422/1423–1502).[37] The copyist herself wrote a colophon, in the third person, on fol. 30ᵛ, at the end of the *vita* of St Rombaut, the patron saint of Mechelen (fols 2ʳ–30ᵛ): 'Dese leghende heeft ghescreven suster Lijsken Vlieghe, bidt voer haer om gode' ('This legend has written Liesbeth Vlieghe, pray for her for the love of God'; fol. 30ᵛ). Liesbeth's name is mentioned again at the end of the *vita* of St Gummarus (fols 41ʳ–50ᵛ), the patron saint of the neighbouring town of Lier: 'Dit boeck heeft ghescreven suster Lijsbeth Vlieghe conversinne profes int cloester Ter Clusen. Bidt voer haer om gods wille' ('This book has written Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe, professed *conversa* in the convent

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37 Liesbeth was a prolific scribe. In addition to the parts of Brussels, Bollandisten, 487, she copied a codex (Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0904) with Middle Dutch texts on St Jerome (including the so-called *Sinte Jheronimus sterfboeck*, consisting of Pseudo-Eusebius's *Epistola de morte Hieronymi*, Pseudo-Augustine's *Epistola de magnificentiis beati Hieronymi* and Pseudo-Cyrille's *Epistola de miraculis Hieronymi*): 'Dit boeck van sinte Jheronimus es volscreven int jaer ons heren M IIIIᶜ ende LX op onser liever vrouwen avont nativitas op den sondach van suster Lijsken Vlieghe. Ghedinct harer' ('This book on St Jerome was completed in the year of Our Lord 1460 on the eve of Our Lady's Nativity, on the Sunday, by Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe'; fol. 173ʳ). At a later stage, a quire with a 'Leeringhe om te comenne int eewighe leven' ('Lesson to come to eternal life') was added to the codex (fols 177ʳ–184ʳ). This quire was also written by Sister Vlieghe. Fourteen years later, on 27 October 1474, Liesbeth completed the first part of Brussels, KBR, 15139, containing a Middle Dutch translation of the *Stimulus amoris* of the thirteenth-century Franciscan James of Milan, and a socalled *Jhesuscollacie* (fols 1ʳ–74ᵛ). Again she added a colophon: 'Dit boec es volscreven op sinte Symon ende Yuden avont int jaer ons heren M CCCC ende LXXIIII van suster Lijsbeth Vliechs doen si out was LI jaer. Bidt voer haer om gode. Dit boec hoert toe int cloester tot onser liever vrouwen te Yericho dat men heet te sinte Katerinen' ('This book was completed on Sts Simon and Jude's eve in the year of Our Lord 1474 by Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe when she was 51 years old. Pray for her for the love of God. This book belongs to the convent of Our Lady of Jericho, which is called "at St Catherine's"'; fol. 74ᵛ). Probably not so much later, she completed the second part of the codex with a treatise on the Lord's Prayer by Johannes Bellens (fols 77ᵛ–158ʳ), which can also be found in Brussels, KBR, 2555–58 (see below on pp. 296–297) as well as a short text on how to recognise sins (fols 158ʳ–164ᵛ). The colophon at the end of this section is written by an anonymous sister; it repeats the contents and the date of the colophon on fol. 74ᵛ (which makes the date unreliable), but also mentions Liesbeth's industry as a scribe: 'In den jaer ons heeren M CCCC ende LXXIIII soe heeft suster Lijsbeth Vlieghe desen boeck volscreven ende met groeten arbeyde op sinte Symon ende Juden avont volyndet ter eeren gods ende tot stichtinghen ende salicheit alre devoter menschen doen sij out was LI jaer. Bidt ghetrouwelijc om die minne gods voer haer, want sij seer neerstelijc ende vlietelijc vele jaren ghearbeit heeft in vele goeder boeken te scrivene' ('In the year of Our Lord 1474 Sister Liesbeth Vlieghe completed this book and she finished it with great effort at St Simon and St Jude's eve, in honour of God and for the edification and salvation of all devout people when she was 51 years old. Pray faithfully for God's love for her, because she very diligently and expeditiously spent many years of effort in writing many good books'; fol. 164ᵛ).

of Ter Cluysen. Pray for her for the love of God'; fol. 50ᵛ). The colophon was clearly not written by Liesbeth herself.[38] Palaeographical research shows that although some codicological units were written by more than one scribe, the quire boundaries coincide with the scribal hands. This implies that the different parts of the manuscript were written independently of one another, and that scribes – unlike in the case of the Philadelphia codex – may have worked on the project simultaneously.

Almost as many people worked on manuscript Brussels, KBR, IV 402, the copy of the collection of sermons by Jan Storm that Maria of Pee noted down. In the codex, which was completed around 1486,[39] nine (anonymous) hands can be identified, 'qui pratiquent un style d'écriture uniforme, en sorte que la différenciation des mains est malaisée'.[40] The summit of collaboration is the so-called 'Catherine Collection' (Brussels, KBR, 1683–87). This collection of sermons, *vitae*, miracles and short treatises on Mary and St Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saints of Jericho, and the *vita* of St Elisabeth of Thuringia (1207–1231), was commissioned by Prioress Elisabeth Mols (who held this office between 1504 and her death in 1538):

> Desen boeck es bleven van onser eerwerdegher priorinne suster Lijsbeth Mols, die sij in haren tijden voer dat convent [van Jherico] dede scriven ter eeren gods ende sijnder ghebenedider moeder Marien ende der heylegher glorioser maghet sinte Katherinen haerer liever patron-ersse. Requiescant [!] in pace. Amen. (fol. 208ᵛ)[41]

> This book has been left to us from our honourable prioress Sister Elisabeth Mols, which in her time she commissioned to be written for the convent [of Jericho] in honour of God, his blessed mother Mary, and the holy glorious virgin St Catherine, their beloved patroness. May she rest in peace. Amen.

No fewer than seventeen hands can be distinguished.

As is clear from the previous manuscript, book production was often a joint venture in Jericho. Women collaborated intensely to build a manuscript collection that radiated unity and coherence. The majority of the books are written in a neat

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38 Liesbeth wrote fols 2ʳ–30ᵛ, 41ʳ–50ᵛ, 83ᵛ–91ʳ (the end of the *vita* of Amelberga, the patron saint of Temse), and possibly 37ʳ–40ʳ (the end of the *vita* of St Apollonia of Alexandria). The codex consists of ten codicological units. Liesbeth copied units 2 and 4 completely, and finished the work that other scribes had begun in units 3 (scribe C and D) and 7 (scribe G). For the full division of the work, see Stoop 2013, 411–412.

39 According to the colophon, fols 1ʳ–319ᵛ were completed on 24 May 1486; the rest of the codex (fols 320ʳ–352ʳ) is undated but was probably finished shortly thereafter.

40 Wittek and Glorieux-De Gand 2005, 27, no. 619.

41 'van Jherico' has been added at a later stage.

littera hybrida (occasionally in a *littera cursiva*),[42] and even though individual differences never completely disappear, on the whole, the writing style in the books (with some notable exceptions) is remarkably uniform.[43] This makes it extremely difficult to determine the number of copyists of projects, let alone decipher which sisters were involved in which projects (especially when the manuscripts do not contain colophons). It should be added here that the handwriting of individual copyists is not always completely stable and consistent.[44]

Moreover, as has already been mentioned, some scribes have a clear command of more than one type of script. A good example of this is the sermon collection copied by Mergriete van Steenberghen. Mergriete who, in her own words, 'desen boeck ghescreven ende vergadert [hevet] met aerbeyde, in cleynen gherieve ende in groter tribulacien' ('undertook the arduous task of writing and compiling this book with little [bodily] comfort and great tribulations'; Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fol. 2ʳ), started her writing in the usual neat *littera hybrida* (see Fig. 7). However, on fol. 228ʳ – at the start of the thirty-ninth sermon in the collection by the observant friar minor Hendrick Berrinck (*c.* 1396–1492) – she shifted to a cursive script. Instead of the normal black-brown ink she also used a pink ink here (Fig. 8).

42 A *littera cursiva* is used in the following manuscripts: Brussels, Bollandisten, 487 (fols 98ʳ–110ᵛ); Brussels, KBR, 2555–58 (fols 72ʳ–111ᵛ); 15130 (full manuscript); II 293 (fols 9ʳ–14ᵛ); Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (fols 228ʳ–233ᵛ); and London, British Library, Egerton 677 (fols 126ʳ–210ᵛ). The *cursiva* in Brussels, KBR, 2555–58 and 15130 was written by the same woman. The *cursiva* in London, British Library, Egerton 677, is the same as that in Brussels, KBR, II 293. The one in Ghent, Universiteitsibibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, was written by Mergriete van Steenbergen, who copied the rest of the manuscript into a *littera hybrida* (see below).

43 Hedström 2013, 264, suggests that 'The odd occurrences of unusual scribal hands in the sisters' manuscripts (in collaboration with known Vadstena sisters) perhaps indicate that there were a number of sisters who could already write before they entered the convent, and who brought their own scribal conventions with them. Perhaps they kept their own conventions throughout their life in Vadstena, or maybe they were re-trained to follow the convent's standards and subsequently changed their writings later in life.' The renowned Dutch palaeographer Johan P. Gumbert stated earlier that if hands of copyists can be quite easily distinguished, that this can be explained from the fact that they entered as adult women 'with fully developed handwriting'. Cf. Gumbert 1990, 58. In Jericho, this could have been the case regarding Liesbeth Vlieghe, whose script clearly differs from that of the other scribes.

44 Wittek et al. 1982, 61, no. 518: 'les religieuses de Jéricho ne sont pas toujours constantes dans leur écriture, tout en pratiquant un style commun'. Exemplarily, from fol. 98ʳ onwards in the oldest manuscript with Paul van Someren's sermons (Brussels, KBR, 4287), the scribe added diacritics to some letters (u/v), for no apparent reason. These marks disappear after fol. 111ᵛ as suddenly as they appeared.

Fig. 7: Mergriete van Steenberghen's *littera hybrida*. Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fol. 5ʳ. Reproduced with permission.

Fig. 8: Mergriete van Steenberghen's *littera cursiva*, in purple ink. Written on a knee in a great hurry. Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902, fol. 228ʳ. Reproduced with permission.

The scribe explains the reason for this uncommon behaviour in a note in the lower margin – in green ink (which is normally only used for the penwork in initials): 'Dit was aldus ghescreven om dat ic gheenen ynct en hadde ende anxt dat mi den boeck ontgaen soude. Met groter haesten op eenen knye. God hebs lof' ('This was written this way because I did not have ink and had fear that the book would escape from me. In a great hurry on a knee. God be praised'). Mergriete's fear that the book would escape from her is quite peculiar. It seems to imply that she had only temporary access to the sermon she wanted to copy into the manuscript, even if – as far as we know – the sermon was preached within Jericho's convent walls. When Mergriete had finished the copying of Berrinck's sermon (on fol. 233ᵛ), she switched back and finished the last five lines of the page in the black-brown ink and the *littera hybrida* and continued as if nothing had ever happened.

5 Embellishing the manuscripts

Uniformity was the goal for illumination as it was for writing.[45] Over time, the style developed. The oldest manuscripts (e.g. Brussels, KBR, 4367–68 and Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0904) contain rather plain initials, which were decorated with basic penwork (see Fig. 3). The initials become more ornate in the 1470s. They are now provided with decorative recesses and the penwork – both in the interior of and around the letters as well as in the margins of the page – becomes more elaborate, as is shown in the opening initial from manuscript Brussels, KBR, 15136, written by Catherine of Ghiseghem between 29 June 1472 and 4 April 1473 (Fig. 9).

We encounter initials in Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0902 (second half of the 1470s; cf. Figs 7 and 8) in their full glory for the first time. The body of the initial is painted in a highly developed *littera duplex* style in red and blue, with 'the two colours interlocking but separated by a blank space'.[46] The interior of this type of initial is decorated with floral motives or foliage in red and blue, and – for the more subtle details – pink and green ink. The pen flourishing in these later manuscripts stretches out into the four margins of the page.

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45 I will focus here on the initials that appear at the openings of manuscripts or the beginnings of texts and codicological units, as they are typically more elaborate than those that occur elsewhere in codices.

46 Derolez 2003, 41.
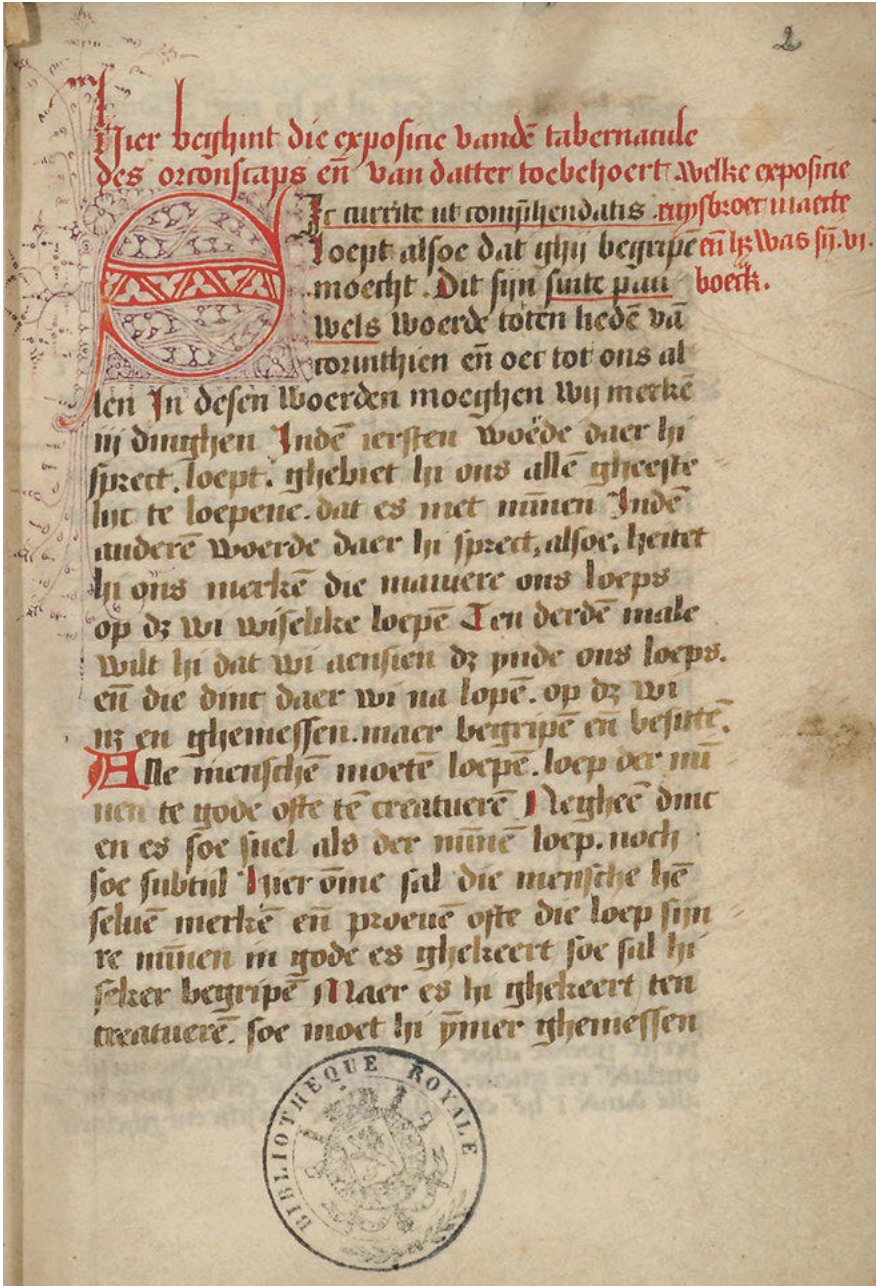
Fig. 9: Opening initial of Jan van Ruusbroec's (1293–1381) *Van den gheesteliken tabernakel* ('Spiritual Tabernacle') in Brussels, KBR, 15136, fol. 2ʳ. Reproduced with permission.

Comparable decoration is found in the manuscripts Brussels, KBR, 4287 (between 1480 and 1495) and IV 402 (completed in 1486) (Figs 5 and 4, respectively), the two collections of sermons that we have encountered before. Again, the opening initials are duplex letters. Both codices feature abundant four-colour pen flourishing in and around the initials, which continues in all margins in both manuscripts. The illumination in manuscript Brussels, KBR, IV 402 differs from that in Brussels, KBR, 4287, in that the red in the body of the initial has been replaced by gold leaf.

And this very element brings us to the latest manuscripts. Although initials with simple penwork still occur in these codices, the opening initials are much more exuberant. Gold leaf is present in all initials, and the decoration of the eyes of the initials no longer consists of mere penwork (flowers or foliage), such as in manuscript Brussels, KBR, 4287, but parts are coloured with green ink and sometimes even a drawing is added. The penwork in the borders is also extraordinarily exuberant. Interestingly – and in contrast with the older books – some of these early sixteenth-century manuscripts contain miniatures. St Elisabeth of Thuringia is depicted at the beginning of her *vita* on fol. 172^r in manuscript Brussels, KBR, 1683–87, which was commissioned by Prioress Elisabeth Mols.

Who applied these decorations is not known. The prioresses' account books that offer us a glimpse into the manuscript production for individuals and institutions outside the convent walls mention that Janne van den Velde (d. 1509) and Liesbeth Wijtens not only wrote manuscripts – Janne was one of the twelve scribes of Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213 and Liesbeth Wijtens copied Jacobus of Voragine's *Mariale* together with Catharina van Molenbeke and Magriet Raes (Brussels, KBR, 15069) – but from the early 1480s onwards, also illuminated them.[47] Janne, in particular, must have been a very talented illuminator, as she was very regularly called in to decorate codices. She was also capable of working with lapis lazuli and gold leaf.[48] Is she the very capable illuminator of the late – and perhaps even earlier – manuscripts from Jericho?

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47 In 1480/1481, Maria van Pee registered two payments from illumination and penwork ('verlichten ende floreren') executed jointly by Janne en Lijsbeth (Brussels, AEB, 12.781, fol. 132^v); in 1482/1483, Janne embellished a book (?) for 'meester van Ghyleymus' (Brussels, AEB, 12.785, fol. 27^r). In 1486/1487, she illuminated several quires that Maria van Hansbeke had written for a priest ('her Jacob'), and, in the same year, she collaborated with Elisabeth van Poylc on a project (Brussels, AEB, 12.788, fol. 4^r). The last time that Janne's name is mentioned as an illuminator is 1499/1500 (Brussels, AEB, 12.797, fol. 88^r).

48 'Item ontfaen van mijnder suster Van der Beke voer een ghetijtde dat suster Janne van den Velde haer scref ende verlijchte met gouwe ende lazuer tsame der aen verdient ende van te floreren 1 pond 17 schellingen' ('Item received from my sister Van der Beke for a Book of Hours which Sister Janne van den Velde wrote for her and illuminated with gold and lapis lazuli. Earned on this and on penwork together 1 pound 17 shillings'; Brussels, AEB, 12.788, fol. 14^r).

Fig. 10: Miniature of St Elisabeth of Thuringia in Brussels, KBR, 1683–87, fol. 172ʳ. Reproduced with permission.

6 Book production as a community marker

The surviving late medieval manuscripts from Jericho – as well as the few books they produced for other religious institutions known to date – show that the women were trained to produce meticulous manuscripts and adopt a communal style of writing and illumination.[49] This was not uncommon in other (female) convents either. Monica Hedlund points out, for example, that many nuns in the southern Swedish Birgittine motherhouse of Vadstena learned to write a very uniform *hybrida* for vernacular texts, making it often very difficult to distinguish their hands.[50] The use of a collective book style, by the way, is not new in the fifteenth century. The twelfth-century Benedictine nuns of Admont (Austria) also tried hard to produce books that reflected the identity of their monastery. Their manuscripts have 'thanks to careful coordination of parchment, ruling, and script, [...] a remarkably unified appearance'.[51]

There is also further evidence regarding the Low Countries that religious institutions developed a house style. Gouda, Stadsbibliotheek, 159, for example, which originates from the convent of Sint-Margaretha, a community of canonesses regular of the order of St Augustine in Gouda, was written by seven sisters:

> Explicit collectarius scriptus per manus septem monialium scilicet Marie Johannis, Geze Yzenoudi, Ave Trici, Jacobe Gerardi, Agathe Nycolai, Marie Martini et Marie Gerardi. Finitus anno domini millesimo quadringentesimo quinquagesimo quarto ipso die sancti Odulphi confessoris (fol. 238ᵛ).

> Here ends the collectarius which was written by hand by seven *moniales*, namely Marie Johannis, Geze Yzenoudi, Ave Trici, Jacobe Gerardi, Agathe Nycolai, Marie Martine, and Marie Gerardi. It was ended in the year of the Lord 1454, on the day of St Odulphus confessor [12 June].[52]

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49 The script and penwork in a *collectionaire* that belonged to the Cistercian convent in Muizen near Mechelen shows that it was produced in Jericho. The Jericho sisters also illuminated a Latin convolute with a collection of glossed sermons and a world chronicle, that can be located in Tienen (Tirlemont), a small town about 19 km east of Louvain. Cf. Stoop 2014, 402–405.

50 Hedlund 2003, 39; Hedström 2010, 172–175; Hedström 2013, 264.

51 Beach 2005, 188. For an example from Medingen in northern Germany, cf. Lähnemann 2018.

52 Five of these scribes – Ave Trici (Aef Dircsdochter), Jacobe Gerardi (Jacoba Gherijtsdochter), Agathe Nycolai (Aechte Claesdochter), Marie Martine (Maria Martijnsdochter) and

The distinction between the hands is very difficult to make.[53] Jan-Willem Klein has pointed out that the constitutions of the Brethren of the Common Life and the houses and monasteries inspired by them also regulated the book production, and especially the writing *pro pretio*. Contracts often included the provision that another scribe would complete the work 'in alia manu equivalenti' ('in another, equivalent hand') if the original copyist fell ill or was unable to complete his work for some other reason.[54]

The scribes at Jericho and their supervisors clearly cared deeply about producing a book collection in their own unique, recognisable style. There is no concrete evidence regarding how the community went about producing their book collection in its evidently standardised form. Whether the sisters were 'all following the lead – but each quite uniquely – of a model scribe', as Philip Webber suggests in his description of the Philadelphia codex, or that they participated in writing training – whether or not collectively – as Karl Stooker and Theo Verbeij propose, we may assume that the presence of the convent school and the writing instructor in Jericho was paramount in this.[55] Perhaps, then, we can think of the manuscripts on which many copyists collaborated as exercise projects, in which, of course, it was a bonus that the students *en passant* were introduced to, respectively, the stories of the patron saints of their community (Brussels, KBR, 1683–87), the sermons of their own superior (Brussels, KBR, IV 402) and their own monastic rule (Philadelphia, Free Library, Rare Book Department, Lewis European 213).

Marie Gerardi (Maria Gherijtsdochter) – copied Jan van Ruusbroec's *Van den gheesteliken tabernakel* ('Spiritual Tabernacle') in 1460 (The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliotheek, 129 G 4; cf. Stooker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 2, 163–164, no. 481). Moreover, Geza Yzenoudi and Ave Trici jointly copied a Latin codex with the *Vitae patrum et verba seniorum* ('Lives and Sayings of the Fathers') in 1449 (London, British Library, Add. 22562). Cf. Watson 1979, vol. 1, no. 266. These few examples show that collaborative scribal activity was probably not uncommon at all.

53 Noordzij 1975, 58.

54 Klein 1995, 13.

55 Webber 1976, 506; Stooker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 1, 157, n. 178. For the suggested role of a scribal school in the homogeneity of convents books collections, also see Hedström 2013, 264.

7 Jericho's manuscript collection

As we have seen, the majority of the late medieval manuscripts we know from Jericho were produced by the convent's own sisters.[56] There are six (partial) exceptions. Two of the surviving manuscripts were produced before the foundation of Jericho on 10 May 1456. The oldest (Brussels, KBR, II 2111) contains a commentary on the Songs of Songs (*Bedudinghe op Cantica canticorum*, Chaps 4:1–5:16) and was finished by an anonymous scribe on Maundy Thursday 1429 (1430 n.s.).[57] The second, Brussels, KBR, II 1300, containing a Middle Dutch translation of the *Meditationes de passione Christi* by the Augustinian hermit Jordanus van Quedlinburg (1299–1380) is dated 28 June 1446. Perhaps both manuscripts originally came from Ter Cluysen in Eigenbrakel or from the convent of St Catherine and were included in the new library when these two convents merged. In any case, the manuscript containing Jordanus's *Meditationes* was given a new first quire, which brought the book more in line with the rest of the book collection in terms of style. Where the two codices containing Jordanus's *Opus postillarum et sermonum de tempore* (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 11.898 and Cod. Series nova 12.753) were written is not clear. Of the two following manuscripts, it is known.

The first codicological unit of Brussels, KBR, 2555–58, a composite volume, contains a treatise on the Paternoster by Johannes Bellens (fols 1ʳ–63ʳ) and two short treatises on the Passion (fols 64ʳ–68ʳ). According to a (later?) note, Bellens wrote the treatise himself and gave it to the canonesses of Jericho at the request of Katheline van Limborch (d. 1497), who was the convent's procuratrix in the period from 1447 to All Saints' 1461 and sub-prioress in 1486/1487:

> Item desen pater noster heeft ghemaect, ghescreven ende ons ghegheven die eerwerdeghe pater Bellens, ter beden van suster van Limborch. Een weerdich vader van onser ordenen. Bidt ghetrouwelijc voer sijn ziele (flyleaf at the front, verso).[58]

56 This also applies to two now lost Middle Dutch manuscripts. Margareta Bont and (probably) Catharina van Ghiseghem, the scribes of *olim* Du Bois de Schoondorp, no. 8 (cf. n. 34) and *olim* Louvain, Universiteitsbibliotheek, 87, were both professed canonesses in Jericho.

57 This commentary to Song of Songs is extensively analysed in Schepers 2006. It is based on the *Glossa Tripartita super Cantica*, an anonymous Franciscan scholastic commentary on Song of Songs from around the year 1300.

58 Father Bellens can most likely be identified as the regular canon Johannes Bellens (d. 1483), who was prior of the Windesheim convent of canons of Bois-Seigneur-Isaac in Ophain (Fôret de Soignes) between 1450 and 1458 and later rector of the convent of canonesses regular of Sint-Agnes

> Item this Paternoster has made, written and been given to us the venerable Father Bellens, at the request of Sister Van Limborch. He is a worthy father of our order. Pray faithfully for his soul.

At a later stage, Bellens's work was bound together with two other codicological units that actually were copied within the convent walls.

The last codex written outside Jericho is Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, 1016. The canonesses received it from Thomas Monincx, prior of Groenendaal (Fôret de Soignes) between 1467 and 1483:

> Dit boeck hoert toe den cloester van Jherico bij sinte Katherinen. Dwelc ons es bleven van prior van Gruenendale her Thoemaes Moenens zalegher ghedachten. Bidt voer hem om gode (fol. 216ᵛ).

> This book belongs to the convent of Jericho near St Catherine. We have received it from the late Reverend Thomas Monincx. Pray for him to God.

The codex contains the story of Christ's Passion taken from the four gospels (a *passieharmonie*) followed by a commentary. Whether Thomas Monincx was involved in the production of the manuscript is not clear. That he donated the book to Jericho is not surprising; the priors of Groenendaal were *visitatores* of the convent in Brussels, and, therefore, partly responsible for the pastoral care of the sisters. There is no doubt that a *passieharmonie* was considered appropriate to support their spiritual lives.

7.1 Liturgical books

So, what does Jericho's book collection look like in terms of its contents? And what can be said about who used the books and where? Female convents needed books for all aspects of religious life and primarily liturgical books. The prioresses' account books show that the Jericho scribes almost exclusively wrote books of hours, missals, diurnals, psalters, breviaries and so on for people and convents outside their own convent. Such liturgical books were also regularly written (or bought) for the convent's own sisters.[59] We may assume that quite a few liturgical books circulated in the convent. It is likely that all the canonesses – and there were about fifty

in Gent (1458–1464 and 1469–1474) and Ten Elzen in Zichem (1483). Cf. Berlière et al. (eds) 1890–1993, vol. 4, 1051–1052, 1277; Berlière et al. (eds) 1890–1993, vol. 7, 799, 810, and 812; Stooker and Verbeij 1997, vol. 2, 80–81, no. 217.
59 Cf. Stoop 2012a.

of them on average – had some personal liturgical manuscripts.[60] Virtually no part of any of these books survived. We know of one Middle Dutch manuscript with the summer part of a lectionary (*temporale* and *sanctorale*) that may have come from Jericho. This manuscript, Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. Series nova 12.891, also contains a psalter. Presumably the lectionary and psalter were originally used as two separate books. The only other liturgical book we know of is the bilingual psalter with Latin commentary that Elisabeth Mols wrote for use in the choir.[61]

7.2 Manuscripts for communal use

The manuscripts that did survive from the monastery were probably mostly kept in the library, for private or communal use. Some of them will also have been used in the refectory. However, few traces can be found that explicitly point to the specific context of use. It is explicitly mentioned in only two manuscripts that they belonged to the *librije*. The parchment binding of Jacobus de Voragine's *Mariale*, copied by Catharina van Molenbeke, Lijsbeth Wijtens and Magriet Raes (see above), bears the following inscription: 'Van den eerbareghen love der weerdegher maghet Marien gheheeten Mariale. Librije' ('Of the honourable love of the worthy Virgin Mary called Mariale. Library'). The other is a codex with Gerard van Vliederhoven's (d. 1402) *Cordiale de quattuor novissimis* ('On the Four Last Things') and Pseudo-Bernard's *Meditationes piissimae de cognitione humanae conditionis* ('Devout Meditations on the Knowledge of the Human Condition'). This last book, written between 1460 and 1487, initially belonged to *Conversa* Geertruyt Tsofyongers (d. 1487).[62] After her demise, it was given to the library for communal use: 'Dit boecskine plac toe te behoren suster Ghertruyt Hofjongers salegher gedachte. Van nu

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60 Cf. Stoop 2013, 51–52.

61 See above, p. 276.

62 Geertruyt was one of the very few individual owners of late medieval manuscripts in Jericho. She also owned the obituary that is now part of Brussels, KBR, II 293, fols 15ʳ–20ʳ. The ownership inscription says: 'Desen boeck hoert toe suster Geertruyt Tsofyongers. Ende sij begeert van eenen yegelijken die daer in leest ende sijn profijt doet, dat sij deylechtich mach sijn der devocien die sij daer uyt crigen bi der gracien gods. Ende dien hi tot eenen deele valt na haer doot, / die wil haers gedincken ende hulpen haer uyter noet / op dat sij saen ontfangen worde daer boven in Abrahams scoet. / Met gode moeten sij leven / die daer aen hebben gescreven / op dat sij tallen tiden te samen mogen verblijden. Amen' ('This book belongs to Sister Geertruyt Tsofyongers. And she desires from everyone who reads and profits from it, that she may partake in the devotion they receive from it

voert sal toe horen int ghemeyne ende verwaert in die liberie' ('This little book used to belong to Sister Geertruyt Tsofyongers of blessed memory. From now on it shall belong to the community and be kept in the library'). Unfortunately the book that belonged to the University Library in Louvain (shelf mark 87) was burnt in 1914.

Furthermore, we can deduct from Jan Storm's second collection of sermons, attributed to Janne Colijns, that it was used during refectory readings.[63] The fact that sermon collections were ordered according to the liturgical year, made them ideally suited for that. Maria A. de la Folije (1622–1695) also refers in the prologue to her seventeenth-century sermon collection to 'boecken der homelijen ende sermoonen van onsen hijlighen vader Augustinus, Gregorius, Bernardus, Jordanus ende Thaulerus die in onsen refter ghelesen worden' ('books of homilies and sermons of our holy father Augustine, Gregory [the Great], Bernardus [of Clairvaux], Jordanus [of Quedlinburg], and [Johannes] Tauler which are read in our refectory'; Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 13.690, fol. 2ʳ).[64] This seems to imply that the manuscripts Brussels, KBR, 15071 (Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in evangelia*), 1683–1687 (Bernard of Clairvaux's *Homiliae super missus est* on fols 2ʳ–26ᵛ) and 2555–58 (Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermones super Qui habitat* on fols 117ʳ–193ᵛ) and the two codices containing Jordanus's *Opus postillarum et sermonum de tempore* (Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 11.898 and Cod. Series nova 12.753) were used in the refectory.[65] This also extends to all the collections mentioned above with sermons preached in Jericho. Obviously, refectory reading did not exclude other uses, such as private or communal reading, meditation, and religious and intellectual edification. Janne Colijns's sermon collection has several marginal annotations, explaining figures of speech, that indicate that this book was, in fact, also used in the convent school.[66]

The fact, however, that the ownership inscription of Brussels, KBR, 4287 – the oldest copy of Paul van Someren's sermon collection – seems to indicate that sermon

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through the grace of God. And she, to whom it falls after her death, should remember and help her out of her distress so that she will soon be received up there in Abraham's bosom. With God must live those who had part in writing it so that they may rejoice together at all times. Amen'; fol. 20ʳ). The only other individual owners are Beatrix Noeys (see below on p. 300) and Maria van Locquenghien (d. 1487), who owned London, British Library, Egerton 677.

63 Note in the margin of Brussels, KBR, II 298, fol. 256ʳ: 'Nota. Dit en leest men niet ten refter' ('Nota. This shall not be read in the refectory'). Why this section was not considered suitable for the refectory reading is not clear, but the very exclusion of this passage implies that the rest of the manuscript was indeed used for that purpose.

64 Stoop 2007, 292–293.

65 We do not know of collections with sermons by St Augustine or Tauler from Jericho.

66 Stoop 2013, 237–257.

collections were not exclusively intended for communal use is also interesting. Someone has noted on fol. 254ᵛ: 'Dit boec behoort toe den cloester van Jerico. Suster Beatrix Noeys' ('this book belongs to the convent of Jericho. Sister Beatrix Noeys'). Beatrix (d. 1497) was one of the scribes who collaborated in the Philadelphia manuscript and active in the writing *pro pretio* between 1484 and 1489, but why she would own a manuscript that would typically be used for the whole community is not clear. The ownership inscription in Brussels, KBR, 4367–68 – the oldest manuscript with sermons by Jan Storm and redacted by Maria van Pee – suggests, in its turn, that books could be borrowed by individuals: 'Dit boeck hoort te Bruesele der Rosen gheplant in Jherico tonser liever vrouwen. Soe wie dat ontleent oft vent, hi bewaert ende gheeft weder in rechter trouwen' ('This book belongs to Brussels, to Our Lady of the Rose Planted in Jericho. Whoever borrows or finds it, should look after it and return it reliably'; fol. 1ᵛ).

On top of sermons, the convent owned a huge variety of – some longer but more often shorter – devotional treatises and texts. I will highlight some of the most prominent and important texts and genres here. Firstly, the sisters owned some treatises by famous mystical authors. Most important for modern devout circles are Jan van Ruusbroec's *Van den gheesteliken tabernakel* and Hendrik Herp's *Dat spieghel der volcomenheit*.[67] In addition, a number of Bible commentaries are among the sisters' belongings. The *Exposicie der passien ons heren Jhesu Christi* ('Exposition on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ') with its preceding 'passieharmonie' and Ludolf van Saxony's *Ennaratio in psalmos* have been discussed above. The second part of *Bedudinghe op cantica canticorum*, the widespread commentary to Song of Songs, mentioned previously probably already belonged to the convent's book collection shortly after the foundation of the new convent. The sisters added the Middle Dutch translation of *Postilla in Apocalypsis*, a commentary on the Apocalypse by the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra (*c.* 1270–1349), to their collection in the mid-1470s. The manuscript (Brussels, KBR, 15055–56) was finished on 20 July 1475, but unfortunately the colophon does not mention by whom.

In addition to mystical texts and Bible commentaries, the sisters possessed several manuscripts with texts about saints. Manuscript Brussels, Bollandisten, 487, which contains twelve *vitae*, mostly of local saints, has been discussed earlier. Manuscript Ghent, Universiteitsbibliotheek, BHSL.HS.0904, that contains, among other

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67 The convent also owned an excerpt of Ruusbroec's *Van den kerstenen ghelove* in London, British Library, Egerton 677, fols 203ʳ–209ᵛ. Some other convents of canonesses regular, such as Nazareth in Geldern, just across the present-day border of Germany, and the convent of Sint-Agnes in Maaseik, had a much stronger interest in mystical literature. This interest is also reflected in their sermon collections. Cf. Kienhorst 2010; Costard 2020.

texts, the so-called *Sinte Jheronimus sterfboeck* and was written by Lijsbeth Vieghe, also seems to belong to this category. Two other manuscripts, already discussed in this essay, each focus on one female saint. The *Mariale* of Jacobus de Voragine, as its name implies, contains only texts about Mary, and Brussels, KBR, 1683–87 contains almost exclusively texts, including sermons, relating to St Catherine. Both, in addition to being important role models for the nuns, were patron saints of the convent.

8 Conclusion

The analysis above shows that some female communities in the Low Countries had an extraordinarily rich and diverse book culture, even if presumably only a small part of the original collection – in manuscript and print – has survived through the centuries (the inventory made at the convent's dissolution in 1783 mentions that it possessed a 'zeer groote quantiteit boeken' ['a very large quantity of books']).[68] Future comparative research will have to show to what extent something like a 'standard book collection' existed in communities of canonesses regular as well as in other religious orders, and whether Jericho's manuscript collection fits that picture. In any case, the extant number of late medieval vernacular sermon manuscripts in Jericho is unique. The *Repertorium of Middle Dutch Sermons* established with a good degree of certainty that so many sermons were copied and recorded nowhere else.[69] As many as seventeen Middle Dutch (and three later) manuscripts contain one or more sermons, and of those twenty manuscripts, thirteen almost exclusively contain sermons. Such a strong preference for collecting texts of the same genre is unprecedented. But even more unique is the fact that the sisters specialised in saving hundreds of original sermons by their confessors and visiting priests for posterity. Many of these sermons show a wide range of *auctoritates* (from the Bible, the church fathers and other religious authors, as well as from classical and philosophical sources) and literary and stylistic tools. Therefore, studying those sermons in addition to the extant book collection will help us understand the level of literacy and learning of the Jericho sisters better, and, by extension, of religious women in the Low Countries. It can also teach us many of the yet unknown facts about the extent of their participation in the book culture of the medieval Low Countries, both in manuscript and early print.

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68 Theys 1944, 75.
69 Sherwood-Smith and Stoop 2003, and Ermens and Van Dijk 2008.

Further exploratory studies are needed to map women's access to learning, knowledge and the learned culture of their day more broadly. The diverging levels of literacy and different forms of interaction with literature and knowledge of women can be highlighted by studying variables such as the heterogeneous (socio-economic) background of the women, their standing within the convent, the geographical location of convents and the religious orders to which they belonged. By shedding light on women as creative producers and disseminators of both existing and original texts, convents become visible as textual communities and centres of knowledge and learning.

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General Index

The primary aim of this general index is to assist the reader in finding concepts and terms of interest, rather than creating a concordance. This is also why terms that appear too frequently and would therefore be impractical as index headings are omitted as well as most personal and geographical names. Page numbers with an asterisk refer to illustrations.

Francesca Panini