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BACKGROUND, SOCIAL SITUATION AND FORM OF
LIVING OF WOMEN IN HESSIAN CLOISTERS OF
THE LATE MIDDLE AGES⁺

1. Beginning Question and Classification of the Study

The premise of my work was developed from Karl Bücher's essay written in 1882 about the situation of women in the Middle Ages ("Frauenfrage im Mittelalter"), which is still largely accepted.(1) Karl Bücher felt that he had been able to prove that there had been an excess of women in late medieval towns, a situation which would serve his explanation for the independently working women in the towns, the Beguines and women convents, which were supposed to have given the excess womenpopulation of the higher burghers and patrician families shelter.

(2)

In view of this background the questions facing the author were that of the character and social function in general of women's convents and other similar institutions in the late Middle Ages, the family background of the nuns, their situation, and mode of living in the cloisters - one particular aspect of Bücher's essay. Although there are a great number of monographs on monastic life already, they tend to be strongly influenced from the viewpoint of local history or of the history of a specific order and are thus often reduced to a re-statement of cloisterregulations mixed with a few local occurrences - especially landtenure. The moments of "moral decay" and the development of the convents into institutions designed purely to take care of unwed-daughters, stand in the forefront during the late Middle Ages, although a social- and economic-historical basis of such expositions is generally lacking.(3)

An older study concerned with the composition of social ranks in convents of the higher nobility, A. Schulte's "Nobility and Church in the German Middle Ages" ("Adel und Kirche im deutschen Mittelalter") (4), found very few successors. Only in most recent times has the social and economic-historical method of questioning been applied more often to women's convents.(5)

The theme of my work is the family background, social situation and mode of living of the women in late medieval Hessian cloisters, and other convents. In addition to the above are studies about the so-called moral decay in the convents and about daily life. A special emphasis was placed on the study of the genealogical background as a part of life in the cloisters - a method of questioning, which was suggested by more recent genealogical investigations and which lead to previously seldom known problematical facts.

Because of the goals for the thesis mentioned above, it also became necessary to include new methods in the work altogether. More than just the questioning of the sources themselves and the comprehensive analysis of the manorial tenure, the craftwork, church law and administration of the convents, the study is an attempt to demonstrate at the same time a quantitative prosopographic grasp of the cloister - a way of study that has been receiving generally more attention in medieval history.(6) In the following article this second part of the

work will be more closely considered.

The objects of study are two Cistercian and one Prémonstratensian nunneries in the vicinity of the Hessian towns of Marburg/Lahn and Frankenberg/Eder: Caldern, Georgenberg and Hachborn. They were founded at the end of the 12th and in the middle of the 13th century. They had managed to accumulate a small to middling tenureship of land, which was noticeably struck by the economic depression, especially in the 14th century. Both of the Cistercian convents also produced larger amounts of cloth for trade. All three convents were dissolved during the Reformation (1527 and later).

The dissolution of the Hessian cloisters led to a survey not only of property but also of the convents themselves through the landgrave's officials, and the individual conventuals were released with a sum related to their family position, dowry and length of stay in the cloister.(7) Few nuns left the cloister before this time and they are usually mentioned in the records of release. In these releaselists also are written down the names of many laysisters of the Cistercian convents, a group which is usually very difficult to locate, or are not mentioned in the sources at all.

In only a few exceptional cases have lists of nuns been handed down to us from the period previous to the Dissolution. Individual names are found in the documents of the cloister archives, where they are mentioned because of the owner's function as an officeholder within the convent, and in connection with dowries and appanages, or property transactions and legal processes. Other sources with references to names are account-books, rentrolls, prebendary lists, testaments and other sources in the family archives, and finally, from town archives, such as rent- and debtrrolls.

The finding of names, and their personal identification with nuns, is part of the general problem of searching for persons in the medieval period.(8) Sometimes only the Christian name or surname, or the name of a relative is mentioned, and these appear in numerous variations in a time when family names were still subject to change. A total of about 250 nuns and 140 families from which they came could be enclosed in this work.

Except for the Reformation period, it must be emphasized that the amount of names and persons thus brought together is neither representative nor complete. The data found to be in connection with the names, can only be considered as a part of or an addition to, the critical analysis of the sources and its results relating to the structure and development of the convents, as well as to comparative studies. Nevertheless the quantitative collecting of personal names, offer research possibilities that go over and beyond the results of the critical analysis of the source materials. Individual questioning and research results are now to be mentioned briefly.

2. The Local Origin of the Nuns and the Social Composition of the Convents

The information was compiled for this question for the individual nuns according to their place of origin, family, eventual offices held within the convent, dowry and/or appanage, personal property, inheritance,

their own testament and the sum reclined at their release from the convent at the time of the Dissolution. The results of the research showed differences in rank and social composition in the individual convents. Unlike the Prémonstratensian convent, which was in the hands of the lower nobility, the two Cistercian nunneries also had a large number of patrician and non-patrician townspeople. The tendency displayed in all three convents, was to go into a cloister as nearby as possible.

Lay- or converse-sisters were, despite previous conjectures, overwhelmingly from a town background; whereby great differences existed among the lay-sisters, just as among the nuns, and these differences varied in accordance to their dowry, family membership and position, and work in the cloister. The most distinguished families represented in the nunnery assured themselves of the leading positions, so that these families also gained substantial influence in the politics of the convent.

Through the compilation of the individual nuns, their personal income and independent wealth becomes evident; this is especially true since the 14th century, as the communal cloistered life was pushed more and more into the background.

3. Family Relationships and Family Politics

Not only the individual nuns, as explained above, but also their families were collated. Remarks about the geographical situation of the family holdings and the residence or place of origin of the family helped to identify its members. It was a more difficult task to determine a more exact social classification of the family; income- and propertylists have been handed down only in exceptional cases, and that only by the more wealthy families.

It was originally planned to include in this survey a compilation of the number of children, and the age-relationship between those married and those sent to a cloister, or those who held office in a convent. This proved to have too many inaccuracies and deficiencies, especially among the female family members. On the other hand the close kinship within the convent became evident, where noticeably sisters, cousins and other relatives often joined together of after another. In general a trend is to be found in which individual families show a preference for certain convents, upon which not only a dowry but also gifts were bestowed, without achieving a dirable claim to place in the cloister.

4. Marriage or Cloister

In order to answer the question why some children were meant to be married and others for the cloister, a study of inheritance and marriage practices was deemed necessary, among others. Especially to this end c. 100 marriage contracts from the mid-14th until the first third of the 16th century were evaluated. During this time the marriage contracts were generally drawn up for the nobility, but more often among town families - especially for the patricians. In addi-

tion, testaments, inheritance divisions, remarks made by the sale of family property, of by the receipt of fiefs and inheritable leases were studied.

Not only nuns but also married sisters had inheritance rights in the Hessian area studied, although it is difficult to determine to what extent their rights were. Only when this is possible can a complete picture of the inheritance be developed more.

The change occurred gradually towards the end of the 15th century, as it grew to be custom for the female familymembers at the time of their marriage, and with payment of a dowry, to renounce their inheritance rights.(9) A similar development was probable for the familymembers in convents, since they are not mentioned as having a right of inheritance. The marriage dowries are in general considerably higher than the cloister dowry, so that a reasonable conclusion could be that politics of finance and of accumulative wealth played an important part in determining some of the children for the cloistered life.

In addition to these considerations a final study was made about the life of the nuns after the Reformation. Not only the nuns but also their families, to whom several daughters or sisters were generally supposed to return (the male familymembers were able to take over religious offices), were against the Dissolution, especially the petty landed-aristocracy was interested in the continuation of the convents. Some of the former nuns married, although - as far as could be discerned - the returned cloister dowry plus the same or half the sum again had to be added by the family. Others, especially the older nuns, lived off the life-long rents from the settlement, which was actually rather small.

FOOTNOTES

- * This paper is part of an intended dissertation under the direction of Prof. Dr. Heide Wunder, Gesamthochschule Kassel.
- 1) K. Bücher, Die Frauenfrage im Mittelalter. Vortrag gehalten am 28. März 1882 im Liebig'schen Hörsaal zu München, 1882. Other than Bücher's mistaken conclusions, results of his view of women in the 19th century, especially his statistical calculations cannot be methodically justified, although they will still be cited and used for reasoning. - Q. v. B. Kroemer, Selbst ist die Frau. Frauen im Handwerk der mittelalterlichen Städte, in: Journal für Geschichte 3/81.
 - 2) K. Bücher, op. cit., p. 18.
 - 3) Q. v. also K. Elm, Verfall und Erneuerung des Ordenswesens im Spätmittelalter. Forschungen und Forschungsaufgaben, in: Untersuchungen zu Kloster und Stift (Studien zu Germania Sacra 14. Veröffentlichungen des Max-Planck-Instituts für Geschichte 68), 1980, p. 188 ff.
 - 4) A. Schulte, Der Adel und die deutsche Kirche im Mittelalter. (Kir-

chenrechtliche Abhandlungen 63./64.), 2. Ed. 1922. Among the more recent works especially: H. M. Johag, Die Beziehungen zwischen Klerus und Bürgerschaft in Köln zwischen 1250 und 1350, Diss. Bonn 1977.

- 5) Et ex M. Reichenmiller, Das ehemalige Reichsstift und Zisterziensernonnenkloster Rottenmünster. Studien zur Grundherrschaft, Gerichts- und Landesherrschaft (Veröffentlichungen der Kommission für geschichtliche Landeskunde in Baden-Württemberg, Reihe B, 28), 1964, and M. Rehfus, Das Zisterziensernonnenkloster Wald. Grundherrschaft, Gerichtsherrschaft und Verwaltung (Arbeiten zur Landeskunde Hohenzollerns 9), 1971.
- 6) Q. v. Prosopographie als Sozialgeschichte, Methoden personengeschichtlicher Erforschung des Mittelalters. Sektionsbeiträge zum 32. Deutschen Historikertag in Hamburg 1978, 1978.
- 7) A first collection of all the Hessian convents by: E. G. Franz, Die hessischen Klöster und ihre Konvente in der Reformation, in: Hessisches Jahrbuch für Landesgeschichte 19, 1969, p. 147-223.
- 8) Q. v. also U. Portmann, The Identification of Persons in the Middle Ages: Results from the First "Freiburger Bürgerbuch" (1341-1416), in: Historical Social Research 18, 1981, p. 11-26.
- 9) Similar studies about family politics of a later phase showing, however, the beginning developments in the 15th century very clearly in: H. Reif, Westfälischer Adel 1770-1860. Vom Herrschaftsstand zur regionalen Elite. Göttingen 1979.

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