
CAROLIN GLUCHOWSKI*

[REVIEW]: *THE LADIES ON THE HILL: THE FEMALE MONASTIC COMMUNITIES AT THE ARISTOCRATIC MONASTERIES OF KLOSTERNEUBURG AND ST. GEORGE'S IN PRAGUE*, ED. BY J. F. HAMBURGER, E. SCHLOTHEUBER, BÖHLAU, WIEN 2024, PP. 372.

The recent volume *The Ladies on the Hill: the Female Monastic Communities at the Aristocratic Monasteries of Klosterneuburg and St. George's in Prague*, edited by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Eva Schlotheuber, offers a significant and timely contribution to the expanding field of late medieval monastic studies, with a particular emphasis on women's religious communities. At the heart of the volume are two prominent aristocratic female monastic communities: the Augustinian Abbey of Klosterneuburg in Lower Austria and the Benedictine Convent of St George at Prague Castle in Bohemia. Reflecting a broader scholarly shift away from earlier frameworks that viewed female convents primarily as *Versorgungsanstalten* – institutions designed chiefly to provide care or containment for noble daughters – this collection advances the understanding of women's houses as dynamic centres of spiritual, intellectual, and cultural agency. It achieves this by focusing on the inner-conventual production of meaning, as expressed through devotional literature, liturgy, art, music, and administrative documents.

Originating from two international workshops held in 2021, the volume brings together fourteen essays by scholars from diverse disciplines. Written in both English and German, it spans over 370 pages and is richly illustrated with more than 100 images, alongside numerous charts and tables. A comprehensive index further enhances the volume's accessibility and ease of navigation. The essays are loosely organized around themes that

* Carolin Gluchowski – Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Hamburg, Faculty of Humanities, Hamburg, Germany; e-mail: carolin.gluchowski@uni-hamburg.de; ORCID: 0000-0002-9795-9992.

explore the institutional frameworks, manuscript cultures, liturgical practices, and devotional life characterizing Klosterneuburg and St George's from the twelfth to the early sixteenth centuries.

Prefacing the volume is a clear and programmatic introduction, co-authored by the editors J. F. Hamburger and E. Schlotheuber. In this opening essay, they set out the rationale for their comparative study, situating the surviving material culture – manuscripts, financial records, liturgical books, and artefacts – within wider historical, and devotional frameworks. They demonstrate how, despite being governed by distinct monastic rules (Augustinian and Benedictine), both communities occupied pivotal roles within the political, religious, and cultural networks of their regions. Crucially, the volume challenges the prevailing biographical exceptionalism often reserved for a select few highly educated nuns, instead aiming to turn attention to the broader manuscript traditions, liturgical practices, and institutional cultures that shaped the everyday lived experience of these communities. The editors' comparative methodology is both innovative and compelling, providing fresh insights into the cultural productions and liturgical life of these two elite female monastic institutions.

The volume opens with J. F. Hamburger's richly illustrated essay on the visual and textual representations of the rule in (female) monastic communities. As the essential framework for monastic life, every religious house required at least one copy of the rule specific to its order. While images accompanying these rules were rare, Hamburger demonstrates that they were not as uncommon as generally assumed. Such illuminations offered communities the opportunity to depict themselves in ways that served both as a mirror of their present identity and as a model of their spiritual ideals. Locating these images, however, requires looking beyond standalone copies of the rule to manuscripts from other genres – most notably chapter office books – that were regularly consulted for guidance on the rule's observance. Using the nine surviving examples of rules from Klosterneuburg as a starting point, Hamburger explores the rich iconographic traditions associated with Benedictine, Augustinian, and female monastic rules. A detailed appendix listing seventy-eight decorated copies of monastic rules – often embedded in composite manuscripts – provides an invaluable resource for future research.

Karel Pacovský contributes two essays that illuminate the institutional and ceremonial entanglements of St George's Convent with the ecclesiastical and political life of medieval Bohemia. His first essay turns to the role of the abbesses in the coronations of Bohemian queens, drawing on the Coronation Ordo of Emperor Charles IV (1316–1378) to chart the evolution of their involvement from a largely attendant role to one of greater ceremonial prominence. Pacovský's careful disentangling of the evidence dispels earlier claims of extraordinary privileges granted by Charles IV, instead situating the abbesses' participation within the convent's enduring proximity to, and integration with, the royal court's ritual and political sphere. In his study of the canons attached to St George's, he reconstructs the functions of this male clerical body – established by the thirteenth century to enhance the liturgical life of both the abbey church and the convent's own chapel – and traces its gradual marginalisation following Archbishop Arnošt of Pardubice's (circa 1300–1364) mid-fourteenth-century reforms and the losses sustained during the Hussite wars, culminating in its disappearance by the late fifteenth century.

Sarah Deichstetter and Sabine Miesgang deliver an indispensable overview of the institutional history and economic organization of the Augustinian canonesses at Klosterneuburg, tracing developments from 1445 to 1533. Their essay offers a comprehensive assessment of the convent's evolving structures by synthesizing administrative practices with broader economic contexts. One of the major contributions of their essay is the detailed survey of the surviving account books, including a meticulous analysis of their contents, which will undoubtedly serve as a catalyst for future research. In close methodological conversation, Maria Magdalena Rückert and Annette Kehnel provide a nuanced, data-driven reconstruction of fifteenth-century financial administration by examining a continuous series of Klosterneuburg's account books. Their analysis foregrounds the practical agency exercised by the nuns in managing daily expenses – food, clothing, medical care, and household items – while delineating the persisting authority retained by male canons over large-scale financial decisions. Taken together, these essays significantly deepen our understanding of gendered economic responsibility within late medieval double monasteries and highlight how female religious communities navigated institutional autonomy through meticulous fiscal stewardship.

Renata Modráková supplies a richly textured exploration of the manuscript culture at St George's under the leadership of Abbess Kunigunde of Kolowrat (circa 1350–1401). She demonstrates how the convent's library – possibly the largest surviving medieval female monastic collection in the Czech lands – was shaped by Kunigunde's devotional preferences, particularly her reverence for the Virgin Mary and the cult of St Ludmila. Through careful codicological and liturgical analysis, Modráková situates these manuscripts within both familial dynastic frameworks and broader Bohemian devotional sensibilities, illuminating the ways in which Kunigunde deployed book production as a means to assert liturgical identity and institutional cohesion.

Anna Lukas offers a compelling, if brief, intervention into the vernacular devotional practices of Klosterneuburg through her analysis of a unique parchment fragment once forming part of a larger roll. This piece, containing prayers for healing female ailments and likely functioning as a *Schutzbrief*, sheds rare light on the embodied devotional strategies pursued by women in vernacular rather than Latin contexts. Lukas's insights open promising new lines of inquiry into the porous boundaries between textual genres and the physical forms of gendered spiritual authorship within female monastic settings.

Both Gionata Brusa and Anna Záková offer illuminating studies of the *liber ordinarius* – those critical liturgical guides – through which the two featured convents articulated their spiritual and institutional identities. Brusa's comparison of three fourteenth-century *libri ordinarii* from Klosterneuburg, alongside a circa-1506 version, reveals the dynamics of liturgical continuity and change over time. His analysis highlights structural revisions, rubric enhancements, and linguistic clarifications, as well as the integration of musical influences from regional centres such as Passau and Salzburg, particularly reflected in Holy Week responsories – underscoring Klosterneuburg's synthesis of local tradition and external currents. In parallel, Anna Záková's examination of the mid-fourteenth-century *liber ordinarius* of St George's situates the manuscript within the broader liturgical reforms sweeping through Bohemia, notably the Hirsau movement. She deftly argues that this manuscript, with its distinctive sanctorale and musical cues, may have been crafted either to assert the convent's liturgical autonomy amid tensions with episcopal authority or to codify its complex rites for ecclesiastical inspection. Záková's readings suggest a specifically

female liturgical perspective embedded in its structure, offering poignant insight into how nuns themselves shaped their communal prayer life. Taken together, these chapters make a compelling case for the *liber ordinarius* as a dynamic locus for both liturgical innovation and monastic self-definition across these two royal convents.

Margot Fassler turns our attention to the Office of St Mary Magdalene at St George's, deploying the concept of 'liturgical imagination' to decipher how nuns themselves actively shaped devotional content and enactment. Fassler reveals how the office not only reflects the burgeoning cult of the Magdalene but also served as a spiritual mirror for both abbess and sisters, particularly in the Easter season. Her synthesis connecting the office to the abbey's Passional, Easter dramas, and ritual enactments such as the Maundy Thursday Mandatum underscores the depth at which liturgy served as a dynamic medium for female spiritual subjectivity and institutional self-fashioning.

Lucie Podroužková, Samuel Skoviera, and David Eben contribute a comparative study of three antiphoners used in St George's during the autumn portion of the sanctorale – spanning Pentecost to year's end. Their analysis draws attention to subtle shifts in liturgical repertoire, revealing the fluidity of manuscript production as a means of adapting communal tradition. These shifts indicate both internal development and external influence – most notably from South German centres like Regensburg – thus positioning St George's as a node in a wide devotional network marked by the reforms of Hirsau. The study stands as a testament to the convent's engagement with – and adaptation within – a vibrant European liturgical culture.

Maria Theisen offers a compelling art-historical and institutional portrait of Abbess Kunigunde through her analysis of three illuminated codices – a pair of breviaries and a psalter – from St George's. Situated against the backdrop of Kunigunde's contentious election in 1386, Theisen argues that these richly illuminated manuscripts serve not merely as devotional objects but as instruments of political affirmation and identity formation. At a moment marked by internal factional strife and shifting power dynamics within the convent, these codices emerge as visual assertions of abbess-led authority and institutional continuity. Theisen's study thus demonstrates how material culture and visual patronage intersected with ecclesiastical governance and familial patronage during a volatile period.

In her analysis of the *Passional* associated with Abbess Kunigunde, Jennifer Vlček Schurr explores the manuscript's dual role as a personal devotional book and an expression of institutional identity. Through detailed examination of its compilation and thematic design, she demonstrates that the *Passional* was consciously crafted to reflect Kunigunde's spiritual commitments while simultaneously articulating her leadership and vision for the convent. Schurr's work thus highlights the interplay of manuscript form and function in articulating female monastic authority and devotional practice.

The *Ladies on the Hill* makes a significant contribution to the study of late medieval female monasticism by providing a detailed and well-documented examination of the Augustinian Abbey of Klosterneuburg and the Benedictine Convent of St George in Prague. The volume's comparative approach is a notable strength, offering valuable insights into the institutional cultures of two important Central European convents. The interdisciplinary methodology – combining codicology, liturgy, art history, and economic history – effectively highlights the complexity of monastic life. Some technical improvements would enhance usability, such as a consolidated list of images with consistent credits and more uniform formatting of tables and charts. Additionally, a concluding synthesis drawing together the volume's key findings would have further strengthened the overall coherence and provided clearer direction for future research.

Overall, *The Ladies on the Hill* is an important and valuable resource for scholars interested in medieval female monasticism, manuscript culture, liturgy, and monastic economy. It fills important gaps in the field and will serve as a useful reference for future studies.