

Klára Beneovská / Tanja Michalsky / Daniela Rywиковá u.a. (eds.): *Royal Nunneries at the Center of Medieval Europe*

Royal nunneries have served as bastions of dynastic familial memory since the early Middle Ages. However, such foundations were much more than that; they were cultural and political hubs and had a significant place in transregional cultural and artistic networks. Better integration of these foundations into cultural history on a global scale remains a great desideratum, and this volume aims to contribute to this effort. It gathers a selection of papers presented at the international conference *The Royal Nunneries at the Center of Medieval Europe. Art, Architecture, Aesthetics (11th-14th centuries)*, co-organized by the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Science, the University of Ostrava, and the Bibliotheca Hertziana, and held on July 1-3, 2021.

As the editors and contributors to this volume underline, the major shortcomings of current research in this type of religious foundations are: the historiographical imbalance between territories, the lack of better integration of these foundations into cultural and art historical scholarship, and the absence of a transregional comparative inquiry. Many studies remain spatially and chronologically confined, partly due to linguistic barriers and epistemological boundaries set by national historiographical traditions. To these reasons, I would add the still-existing assumptions about the enclosure of nuns, even though studies in recent decades have demonstrated its fluidity or permeability.

Building on the recent upsurge of scholarly interest in convent networks, this volume brings to the fore the overlapping interaction of networks, namely royal or aristocratic networks, religious networks, and artistic networks. Several articles underline the need to be aware of the unpredictable paths of architectural and artistic development among female royal nunneries. The transnational character of the aristocratic networks facilitated connections not just between neighboring territories, such as Bohemia and Silesia (Patata, 112-134), but also unexpected connections between far-reaching territories (e.g., between Lesser Poland and the Upper Rhineland, and possibly between Sary Sącz and Santa Chiara of Naples, Adamski & Pajor, 22-37). The creation and reshaping of hagiographic narratives and their dissemination also took place through these interlinked networks (Konrad, 126-153). Royal convents in territories not considered in this volume, such as the kingdom of Castile, could well be integrated into this comparative dialogue, shedding light on intriguing objects (from reliquaries to altarpieces-tabernacles) from these foundations.

Such an approach aims to recompose not only the traditional center-periphery dichotomy into a more multipolar interpretative frame but also the limits of national historiographical schools and underlying prejudices regarding medieval art made by or for nuns. Better-known monasteries, such as Königsfelden, the Neapolitan foundations, Santa Clara-a-Nova in Coimbra, or Santa Maria de Pedralbes, are placed at the same level as lesser-known foundations such as Odivelas (Rossi Vairo, 76-91), the Polish royal Clarissan foundations of Sary Sącz (Adamski & Pajor), and Breslau (Patała, 112-134), or the baronial convents in Medieval Latium (Federici, 92-111).

Federici's contribution provides a counterpoint to the rest, as it is not focused on royal foundations but on the neglected female monasteries founded by the baronial clans in Rome and Latium. It shows the necessity to adopt a holistic "bottom-up, top-down" approach for their study, due to the loss of a significant number of convents and the radical overhauls suffered by the existing ones. This article also sets a point of contrast as it does not focus on a single religious order, but rather on a *Klosterlandschaft*, a concept that is not explicitly considered in this volume. Examples such as those provided by Federici show that, without denying the existence of specific aspects of each order, a comparative vision that encompasses several religious orders in a monastic landscape provides a more accurate picture.

From the opposite perspective, Michaela Zöschg (56-75) proposes a transregional analysis of the female patronage patterns of different royal widows for the *ordo Sanctae Clarae* across Europe. Combining both analyses - of transregional networks and monastic landscapes - would allow a better-contextualized understanding of different phenomena. For instance, to show that the existence of small communities of resident friars living alongside the nuns was not only typical of the Poor Clare foundations, but that they were present in many Dominican nunneries, such as the one on the Isle of Hares in Hungary discussed here (Konrad, 138), in San Sisto in Rome, in Prouillan monasteries, or royal foundations such as Poissy or Madrid. They existed also in Cistercian nunneries, as the examples of Odivelas, studied here by Rossi Vairo, or Las Huelgas in Burgos show. In this respect, further cross-references between some of the articles included here would have been appreciated.


This volume combines the analysis of convent buildings with that of various objects of material culture (panel paintings of different sizes and formats, sculptures, textiles, stained glass windows, reliquaries, manuscripts, and other types of *ornamenta sacra*). Some of these objects, or some sources describing them, such as the inventory of objects donated by Agnes of Austria to Königsfelden, had not been studied until now (Marti, 38-55). The study of their materiality and function is combined with that of their staging in the liturgical celebration, raising a debate on the visibility, exhibition, and ephemerality of the objects. Further comparisons could be drawn with other hitherto little-known women, such as Catarina d'Eça, abbess of Lorvão, currently the subject of scholarly debate. Like Agnes of Austria, she donated various sacred ornaments in which heraldic imagery merged with religious ambitions.

While the volume seeks to explore exchanges set in a broad geographical framework (albeit always Western-centered), the opposite is true concerning chronology, set between the 13th and 14th centuries. However, several of the studies here collected go beyond this chronological framework, as the available sources and the need to explain the late medieval and post-medieval renovations often make it necessary to adopt a *longue durée* perspective.

This conference on medieval royal nunneries was held online, but it was originally planned to take place in Prague's *Na Františku*. This location was chosen because the conference also aimed to better integrate the Bohemian and Moravian royal nunneries into international scholarship on female monasticism. Whereas Hungarian royal women are present all over this volume, further research on the transregional networks in which they

participated "represents a great *desideratum*" (16), a consideration that can be extended to nunneries in the territories here considered and others. This transregional approach should be combined with transdisciplinary collaboration, which, as stated by Klára Benešová "has already resulted in breaking down some established clichés" (162). In fact, this complementary approach was proposed by another scientific meeting held in Prague in July 2022 (originally scheduled for July 2020 but postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Organized by Jeffrey Hamburger and Eva Schlottheuber and sponsored by the Humboldt Foundation, it offered a transdisciplinary approach to one single royal nunnery, the Convent of St. George in Prague. We can see the two events together as a call to continue exploring the intersections of micro and macro levels in monastic studies. Extending the geographical framework to territories that have not been considered here and approaching them from the perspective of the *longue durée* would expand the potential of this analysis even further.

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