



Universität
Basel

Research Project

Powerful Piety. Practices of Female Abbatial Authority in Medieval Europe

Project funded by own resources

Project title Powerful Piety. Practices of Female Abbatial Authority in Medieval Europe

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Organisation / Research unit

Departement Geschichte

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This project revises historiographical notions of female agency through a socio-cultural history of nunneries, their abbesses, and their practices of power in later medieval Europe. The project's focus will lie on Benedictines and Canonesses in modern-day Germany, France, Switzerland, and Belgium whose convents were richly endowed, not only in terms of land, but also in terms of legal and religious rights. In the Holy Roman Empire, the heads of imperial abbacies possessed far-ranging powers, including suffrage in the Imperial Diet. In France, female houses grew trans-regionally and formed monastic orders with numerous filiations. Abbesses in France and the Empire administrated vast lands where they oversaw agricultural labor, manufacturing, and trade; they exercised low, middle, and even high justice (either directly or via delegates), and appointed priests to the parish churches under their jurisdiction. Being elected to the head of a nunnery meant frequent interactions with the world beyond the cloister, a world in which these abbesses habitually practiced power and thus contributed to shaping it. Scholars of medieval Europe have underestimated the active roles of women religious in shaping their world both within and beyond the cloister. The findings of this project will allow us to reassess not only the role of women religious in medieval Europe, but also the fundamentals of medieval society itself, in which (aristocratic) women religious enjoyed far greater independent social, political and religious influence than scholarship has hitherto allowed.

Keywords monasticism, feudal age, culture of medieval Europe

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