



## Late Medieval Women's Communities in Conflict with the Secular Authorities: The Case of the Convent of Wienhausen

Item Type	text; Electronic Thesis
Authors	Koehler-Curry, Sabine
Citation	Koehler-Curry, Sabine. (2009). Late Medieval Women's Communities in Conflict with the Secular Authorities: The Case of the Convent of Wienhausen [Bachelor's thesis, University of Arizona, Tucson, USA].
Publisher	The University of Arizona.
Rights	Copyright © is held by the author. Digital access to this material is made possible by the University Libraries, University of Arizona. Further transmission, reproduction or presentation (such as public display or performance) of protected items is prohibited except with permission of the author.
Download date	03/11/2023 07:21:21
Item License	<a href="http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC/1.0/">http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC/1.0/</a>
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10150/192329">http://hdl.handle.net/10150/192329</a>

*Women's*  
**Late Medieval Communities in Conflict with the Secular Authority:<sup>ies</sup>  
The Case of the Convent of Wienhausen**

By

Sabine Koehler-Curry

A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelor's degree  
With Honors in

German Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

May 2009

Approved by:

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Professor Dr. Albrecht Classen  
Department of German Studies

## STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

I hereby grant to the University of Arizona Library the nonexclusive worldwide right to reproduce and distribute my thesis and abstract (herein, the "licensed materials"), in whole or in part, in any and all media of distribution and in any format in existence now or developed in the future. I represent and warrant to the University of Arizona that the licensed materials are my original work, that I am the sole owner of all rights in and to the licensed materials, and that none of the licensed materials infringe or violate the rights of others. I further represent that I have obtained all necessary rights to permit the University of Arizona Library to reproduce and distribute any nonpublic third party software necessary to access, display, run, or print my thesis. I acknowledge that University of Arizona Library may elect not to distribute my thesis in digital format if, in its reasonable judgment, it believes all such rights have not been secured.

SIGNED:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Stoulet", written over a horizontal line.

## ***STATEMENT OF INTEND AND METHODOLOGY***

When I took professor Classen's class, he mentioned to me the convent of Wienhausen. Surprisingly, expected me to know this important cultural sight, as I was born in the town of Walsrode, here one can find a convent that was related and in close contact with the convent of Wienhausen. I had to admit, that I knew of Wienhausen, but had never been there. Professor Classen was able to interest me in the convent of Wienhausen. In May 2008 I went to Germany to visit and research the convent of Wienhausen.

At that point I had no thesis, yet but was highly interested in reading the Wienhausener Chronic and the Wienhausener Liederbuch to learn more about the life of the nuns. I became further interested in the visual culture left behind by the nuns. The tapestry, the rich collections of religious artifacts and personal belongings like chests and trunks filled with status symbols of the nuns noble family was breathtaking to look at.

When I took the tour and the guide stated, that the nuns resisted to be converted from Catholicism to Luther's Protestantism and had practiced secretly the religious beliefs they thought were the only right ones, I was hooked, wanting to learn more about this form of resistance.

While being in Wienhausen, I purchased the Wienhausener Chronic and Totenbuch and the Wienhausener Liederbuch. These provided further scholarly writings about the frescoes and the tapestry. Back in Tucson, I came to realize that Professor Classen was on a sabbatical and not available to mentor me for an independent studies course. After working out the details and receiving the OK from The Honors College to take two thesis courses together, I was ready to go. Professor Classen assisted me to develop a

reading list and guided me through the process of writing and developing my thesis.

I think I have gained a better understanding of what happened six hundred years ago and why the nuns fought against male dominance and interference in their lives.

I do think, that I have still only scratched on the surface of this important point of female resistance and would like to conduct further research study, that could include the convent Walsrode, convent Derneburg, and Marienberg.

### *READING LIST*

- Apphun, Horst. Chronik und Totenbuch des Klosters Wienhausen. Celle: Schweiger & Pick Verlag Pfingsten KG, 1986.
- Becker-Cantarino. Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit. Frauen und Literatur 1500-1800. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1987.
- Classen, Albrecht. The Power of a Women's Voice in Medieval and Early Modern Literature. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007.
- Eberl, Immo. Die Zisterzienser. Geschichte eines Ordens. Ostfildern: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2007.
- Henze, Ernst. Kommt und Sehet. Zwölf Bildbetrachtungen zu Fresken des Klosters Wienhausen. Hildesheim: Druckerei Gerstenberg.
- Holborn, Hajo. A History of Modern Germany. The Reformation. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982
- Kaufhold, Peter. Das Wienhäuser Liederbuch. Wienhausen: Teske Druck, 2002.
- Klueting, Edeltraud. Fromme Frauen unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosentum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006.
- Michler, Wiebke. Kloster Wienhausen. Die Wandmalereien im Nonnenchor. Publisher Kloster Wienhausen. Celle: Teske Druck
- Parker, Noel. Revolutions and History. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.
- Pauler, Roland. Leben im Mittelalter. Ein Lexikon. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag: 2007.
- Riggert, Ida-Christine. Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster. Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1996
- Schmidt, Hans-Joachim. „Widerstand von Frauen gegen Reformen“. In Fromme Frauen Unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosetum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006.
- Wilhem, Pia. Kloster Wienhausen. Die Bildteppiche. Celle: Teske Druck.

## *TABLE OF CONTENTS*

1. Introduction
2. Convent Wienhausen
3. The Reforms of Duke Otto der Siegreiche and the rebellion of Katharina von Hoya, 1469.
4. The Lutheran Reformation and the revolt of Katharina von Remstede 1529 .
5. Conclusion

## *LIST OF FIGURES*

*Figure 1*

*Tristan Tapestry, Wienhausen, ca. 1330*

*Embroidered Wool on Linen*

Kloster Wienhausen Band III – Die Bildteppiche

Page 6.

By Pia Wilhem. Published by Kloster Wienhausen.

*Fig. 2*

*Convent Wienhausen in 2008*

Page 8

*Fig. 3.*

*The Resurrected Christ, ca 1290 (Der auferstandene Christus, ca. 1290)* Page 20.

*In Das Wienhäuser Liederbuch*

*Fig. 4*

*Wienhäuser Madonna, ca. 1290*

Page 22

*In Das Wienhäuser Liederbuch*

*Fig. 5*

*The Convents Nunnery*

Page 23

*Kloster Wienhausen. Die Wandmalereien im Nonnenchor.*



### ***ACKNOWLEDGMENTS***

I would like to thank undergraduate advisor of the German Studies Department at the University of Arizona, Professor Dr. Classen for being a dedicated wonderful guide through the jungle of the university system. His dedicated involvement in the success of all the students within the department, regardless if these students are short term, fulfilling their language requirement or long term members, from minors or majors in German Studies is greatly appreciated. Professor Classen's advice and assistance could be almost compared to a hospital like 24-7 helpline and is deeply respected by his students. Professor Classen's passionate and dedicated teaching style stays vividly present in his student's mind, long after they graduated, even if they just took one of his General Education classes. As for me, he sparked an interest in medieval life in the northern region of Germany, which includes the field of visual cultural heritage left behind by nuns. The journey from the world-famous Tristan tapestry that can be viewed at the monastery Wienhausen once a year, to the fascinating heroic rebellious acts the women conducted represented a short one. As I discovered and explored this rich visual cultural treasure, I also learned about the heroic acts of the nuns and their resistance against the ruling authority and major reforms that were forced on them. In seconds had this almost 600 year old act of rebellion and resistance against oppression overthrown my interest in the arts.

*Thank you for allowing me to blow away the dust covering up these important aspects of cultural, social and feminist heritage !*

I also would like to thank Dr. Laura Berry of the Honors College and her staff for working with me and allowing me to take honors classes by contract when my work schedule and my personal interest demanded and needed it. This flexibility and openness allowed me to combine my individual interest with traditional art history classes like in ARH 410, an introductory course to African American Art. I was allowed through an honors contract to research the vernacular of Afro German Art and present my findings to the class. As a member of the Honors College I was able to take a close

look into the college community. I learned how aspects of networking and interdisciplinary contact can be organized to benefit the entire campus community, with the additional enjoyment of the Honors College luncheon speaker series.



Fig. 1 *Tristan Tapestry II*: left and right fragment, ca. 1330

## ***GLOSSARY***

**Johannes Busch:** clerical official, superintendent, born 1399 in Hildesheim, died in 1479.

**Klosterstich:** stitching technique practices mostly by nuns during the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century.

**Lüneburg:** free city of the Hanseatic League. Capital of the duchy Brunswick-Lüneburg.

**Logament:** a room, where the nuns in Wienhausen ate during the winter time

**Otto der Siegreiche (Otto II. , Duke of Braunschweig-Calenberg):** Ruled 1464 - 1471

**Probst:** Superintendent of a cloister, convent.

**Treasure of Wienhausen:** discovered in 1953 during a renovation of the wooden floor in the nunnery: ca 1000 reading classes dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century

**Wienhauser Eigengut:** text created by the nuns of the convent Wienhausen.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The visual art today on display at the convent Wienhausen is unique and important as it serves as evidence of the importance of artistic expressions in the life of people and nuns during the Middle Ages. This suggests a necessity of humans to have a different outlet for sorrows, expression of joy, beauty, and problems presented only by verbal communication amongst each other. In the spotlight of attention, we find the *Tristan tapestry* and the fresco in the north chapel of the convent. Scholars have written and analyzed the art and crafts that can be found in forms of paintings, chests, frescoes and religious text for songs. The visual expressions are without question beautiful, and from an artistic esthetic point of view, rare and unique in quality and quantity. These expressions have a historical and cultural value and are therefore important to art historians, and Germanists, since the treasures of Wienhausen can be found in visual the artistic expression, the architecture of the monastery and the literature of texts left behind. But of a higher importance are the writings left behind by the nuns. These texts are evidence of how they understood the world, their political and religious opinions and how they interacted with the world outside the convent.. The reformation of *Otto der Siegreiche* in 1469 and the Lutheran Reformation in 1529 along with the devastating thirty-years war, passed by the monastery almost as it was touched by a fairy, a magical creature who made the structure and its inhabitants invisible and untouchable. Almost not recognized by scholars and residents in the surrounding villages and cities for almost 600 years the fairy tale spell was lifted with the discovery of the Wienhausen treasure in 1953. This coincided with the over 1000 reading glasses, some being over 400 years old, that corrected reading disabilities being found in the nunnery. Suddenly attention was drawn to the Gothic frescoes, which are vivid and bright in color, as if they were painted on the ceiling plaster just yesterday. The collection of nine tapestries telling secular and religious stories, originally used to keep the rooms warm during the winter, today are

evidence of a rich cultural life in the convent. These tapestries have become another attraction today, celebrated during the convent's annual *Tapestry Week* when the nuns take out the tapestries to present them to the public. Art historians found that only small parts of the monastery were purposely destroyed, in order to oppress the nuns to accept reforms, with almost no art work being destroyed due to the resistance and rebellion of the nuns, along with their wisdom and values. This treasure of German cultural heritage was sleeping under the fairies touch, only to be awakened in 1953 when the treasure of Wienhausen was found and scholars started to show interest in the old religious artifacts and literature text. What makes the nuns from the convent of Wienhausen such an outstanding and interesting example of taking control over their own lives results from their religious, political, social, and individual life in relation to the secular world outside the convent. All this becomes crystal clear when their relation to the secular world and changes within the political and religious paradigm are being analyzed. This puts the convent of Wienhausen directly in the center of the debate of female resistance and rebellion against oppression brought to them by the male rulers and their authority. This paper will examine the heroic acts of the Wienhausen nuns against changes and reforms and will analyze the struggle between the nuns who reserved the right to disobey the male patriarchal role that thinks, guides and acts for females and the secular authority. These women in their convent disobeyed rules, orders, reserved the rights to leave the convent when they pleased. They did not stop when demands for religious reforms were dumped on them. They followed their own visions and interest of their spiritual, religious and social path during a time when their actions and opinions easily could have brought them the death sentence for conspiracy against God and the King, with the result to burn at the stake. Today we look at these heroic rebellions and acts of resistance with the eyes of the enlightened individual, one that is used to be independent, free of oppression. When needed the emancipated individual takes the law book or a good lawyer placing them on their side. But even when our emancipated eyes look at the beauty of Wienhausen, trying to imagine how a life behind the thick walls of the convent was like on a day to day basis. Certainly we do

not recognize that these women never received credit for their fights for freedom and the right to have individual rights of expression and beliefs. Neither Katharina von Hoya, nor Katharina von Remstedte have, in the history of rebellion and revolution, been given the recognition they deserve for their resistance against oppression and their struggle with male authorities in their fight for the right to have an individual voice. These women's actions need to be examined under the importance of the long term results and influence of the German visual culture and social construct of gender. The actions of Catharina von Hoya and Catharina von Remstedte are examined under a secular and feminist aspect and are understood as revolutionary and purposely rebellious.





The Convent of Wienhausen how it looks today.  
Photo taken by author in 2008



## ***2. LIFE AND A HINT OF RESISTANCE AT THE CONVENT WIENHAUSEN***

“Revolutions demand enormous sacrifices and, at the same time, create a new need to change the world again.”

Friedrich Dürrenmatt

The convent Wienhausen was founded in by *Herzogin Agnes* in 1221. Ten years later the convent Wienhausen was moved by Agnes from the village of *Neuen Hagen* to the village of Wienhausen. Today the still active convent it is open during the summer month to the public. Wienhausen is known for its colorful tapestry (see Fig. 1 ) that are on display once a year. These special tapestries are stitched in a technique, that is known as the *Klosterstich*, a technique common in the 13 century and widely practiced by the nuns in the northern Lüneburger area<sup>1</sup>. Today we would look at the act of embroidery as being a craft that is practiced almost exclusively by females. Can the case of the nuns living over 700 years ago at the Wienhausen convent already be related to gender specific work that allows a sense of well being over long and lonely winter days experienced in the convents? Time off from work, as we know it today, was unknown till the 18 century <sup>2</sup>. Consider if the embroidery of tapestry was looked upon as necessary work that would generate a piece of cloth to hang on the walls to keep the rooms warm during the winter? If so, why was money spent on dying the strings in different colors? Why was the tapestry designed to tell a story? Why was this ordinary household object elevated to become a piece of art? The fact, that mostly noble women, or those from patrician families found their way to the convent Wienhausen <sup>3</sup> represented those who were either not able to find a husband equal to their noble status with proper support, or women who were looked as competition in the rank of receiving a family heritage.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pia Wilhem. Kloster Wienhausen – Band III, Die Bildteppiche. Publisher: Kloster Wienhausen, p. 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Pauler, Roland. Leben im Mittelalter. Ein Lexikon. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2007, p. 47.

<sup>3</sup> Ida-Christine Riggert. Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster. Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1996. p. 249.

Even more important, females in search of an independent life within the female convents, away from the ruling of a governess would find themselves an “Alternative zur patriarchalischen Familie, [ ] einen Ausweg aus der biologischen Funktion der pausenlosen Geburten in einer Ehe und sie gewährten eine soziale und wirtschaftliche abgesicherte Existenzmöglichkeit”<sup>4</sup>. To assume, that women were not able to see clearly that they lost out on wealth, status and fame is wrong, even if we consider the patriarchal structure of the society at the time. Hans-Joachim Schmidt states, that female nuns in the 15<sup>th</sup> century were quiet, and the ones who openly resisted and rebelled against reformation and changes, were looked as the wild ones and were not taken serious. These rebels did not leave any writings behind and “traten nicht als Autorinnen von Texten hervor; zu ihren Gunsten ergriffen auch andere nicht die Feder.”<sup>5</sup> Further, Schmidt argues that what is left behind about the rebellious females resisting religious and secular changes and reforms, are “Darstellungen von reformfreundlichen Personen, die den ihnen entgegenschlagenden Widerstand entweder als Verstocktheit vedammten oder als weibliche Widerspenstigkeit verniedlichten”.<sup>6</sup> He then goes on to argue that the females living in the convent Wienhausen were successfully oppressed by *Probst* Johannes Busch with the help of the secular authority in form of Otto II, Duke of Braunschweig-Calenberg. Both had the expectation that the nuns would follow their request for changes without any resistance as Johannes Busch writes.<sup>7</sup> Without any doubt, the line of arguments made by Hans-Joachim Schmidt can be analyzed as male biased. I would recommend to him a tour of the convent Wienhausen with one of their lovely female volunteer tour guides, someone who might

---

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Becker-Catarino. Der Lange Weg Zur Mündigkeit. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1987, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Joachim Schmidt. „Widerstand von Frauen gegen Reformen“. In Fromme Frauen Unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosentum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> -... ibid, p. 147.

<sup>7</sup> Hans-Joachim Schmidt. „Widerstand von Frauen gegen Reformen“. In Fromme Frauen Unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosentum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006, p. 161.

like to hear about his patriarchal, male oriented approach in explaining the reformation of 1469. He might also consider reading the Chronik und Totenbuch des Kloster Wienhausen, a document written by the nuns that serves as evidence, that females resisting the secular authority are the authors of a text talking about the oppression and unwanted changes brought to them by the secular and clerical authority. An interesting approach can be taken by looking at why women joined or had to join the female convents. The circumstance that women were pushed aside by their families for material reasons and for the reason that they simply did not fit in social norms of the time, suggests that the nuns of the convent of Wienhausen represented everything else than a quite, passive grouping of mindless women. Consider the endless conversations about themselves, their purpose of being and their relation to the outside world that these highly educated females had. A group of females sitting together with their needles in their hands, stitching the heroic stories of Tristan into the linen or spinning and dying the yarn needed for the embroidery during the endless long winter nights in northern Germany were probably everything else than the existing male driven quiet view about them. Why would these females be able to purposely choose the convent as an alternative life as suggested by Becker-Cantarion, yet suddenly stop to guide and be the ruler of their own way of life?

### ***3. THE REFORMS OF DUKE OTTO DER SIEGREICHE, 1469***

„Ein yeder abentewrlichervnd synnig man ist mir des zewg: kein manzewct kan wesen, sie sei denn gemeistert mit frauenzucht.“

**Der Ackermann** , Johannes von Tepl, ca. 1404

The Wienhausener Chronic tells a vivid story of the events in 1469. A bureaucratic enclave of secular officials that includes the ruler of the area Otto II., Herzog von Braunschweig-Calenberg, looked to bring other local nobility to back and support his cause. The clerical authority Johannes Busch was ordered by the Archbishop of Magdeburg and the Bishops of Hildesheim to implement reforms and changes that would cut the nuns off from the financial support of their noble relatives living outside the convent. Busch who had made unexpected violent experiences with reforming female convents, as he was held hostage by nuns at the convent of Derneburg<sup>8</sup>. Clearly Bush was not to be stopped, taking care that he had one professional warrior on his side, along with the Abysses of the convent of Derneburg, who was in favor of the reforms.

If we now take a closer look at the Chronic, a piece of literature text written by the nuns of the convent Wienhausen, than we find a notion of surprise, but also a notion of skepticism towards the male intruders, later turning into the resistance of Abysses Katharina von Hoya and her nuns. The Chronic states, that the horde of reformers asked the nuns to take sides. One side of the *logament* was pointed out, indicating the ones in favor of the reforms, the other side represented the nuns against the reforms. The results from the secular authority causes the

---

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Joachim Schmidt. „Widerstand von Frauen gegen Reformen“. In Fromme Frauen Unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosentum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006, p. 160.

unexpected to happens: “Das sahe wie sie alle auff der Äbtissin seite sich stellten, nicht wie, wie man meine möchte anlaß zur rebellion zu geben, sondern ihren Gehorsam gegen ihre Vorsteherin zu bezeugen, als von welcher sie weder lebendig noch todt wollten geschieden seyn“<sup>9</sup>

An interesting fact is, that the nuns write down knowingly that the Chronic is a text, something which documents their life, their actions, their problems and their behavior. The thoughts and the spirit of rebellion was present and the thought and conscious awareness of rebellion had to cross the writers mind. The sentence on page nineteen of the Chronic serves today as evidence that indeed the resistance was stronger then expected and that the entire act of the Reform of 1469 needs to be analyzed from a completely different angle allowing the nuns of the convent Wienhausen the respect and the place in the history books of rebellion and revolution they deserve. To summarize the findings so far, the nuns are living in their own autarchy, independent from secular authorities and a male ruled world. The women of the convent are able to sustain a comfortable life with family members and friends donating goods and money. The list of donations is long, just to mention a few : “17. Jan. 1496, Conradus Marnholte schenkte uns ein Pferd im Wert von sech Gulden. Die Priester Gherardus Emeke und Arnoldus Emeke schenkten uns dreißig Gulden“<sup>10</sup>.

This way of alternative living was widely criticized, the convents came under fire for not being religious enough, for their lack of self discipline and for having too many ties to the secular world. Exactly these connections to the secular world became responsible for the patrician males organized in their guilds to view the nuns as competition in the fields of weaving, yarn making and copying books, jealous of their fine craftsmanship<sup>11</sup>. Once we combine the fact, that women were

---

<sup>9</sup> Chronik und Totenbuch des Kloster Wienhausen. ,Reform 1469'. Celle: Schweiger & Pick Verlag, 1986. Publisher Kloster Wienhausen. p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> Chronik und Totenbuch des Kloster Wienhausen. ,Das Totenbuch'. Celle: Schweiger & Pick Verlag, 1986. Publisher Kloster Wienhausen. p. XXXVII.

well read, educated in Latin and 'Teutsch' and that they had contact and interest to what was going on the outside world and using connections to a secular society. Further, the form of their chosen lifestyle became a problem for the existing authorities with their power structure in the secular world. This suggests, that the secular authorities were afraid that a subculture with its own rules laws and leaders would emerge in the female convents.

The request the reformers now presented to Abyssess Katharina von Hoya asked her not just to accept the reforms, yet also follow the laws of the Cistercian. All this would not allow the usage of beautiful expensive decoration in the nunnery by looking at these objects as "Narrerey" <sup>12</sup>. In disobedience with the Cistercians rules in terms of personal belonging, clearly the nuns executed another heroic act of rebellion against the orders of the reformers. Under the pressure of a coup d' etat against Abyss Katharina von Hoya and the violent kidnapping of nineteen nuns was a vital picture given to the nuns, those who still would not follow the reforms dictates Otto II. tried to implement. The nuns were asked to hand over all their personal belongings, the treasures they used to decorate their altars and nunnery with in splendor. In addition they faced being violently taken away from their self created city state <sup>13</sup>. Following the agreement by the nuns to obey reforms, they handed in personal belongings, only to turn around to execute another act of disobedience and rebellion against the secular authority.

In order to spare the treasured relics used for religious ceremonies, the nuns had nothing better to do then to head out to hide all objects in danger of being taken away from them. These relics also faced danger of getting destroyed by the group of reformers around Otto II. and Johannes Busch <sup>14</sup>. As Hans-Joachim Schmidt

---

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Becker-Cantarina, Der Lange Weg zur Mündigkeit. Frau und Literatur 1500-1800. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, p. 74-75.

<sup>12</sup> Ida -Christine Riggert. „Reform and Reformation “. In Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster. Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1996. p. 322.

<sup>13</sup> Hans-Joachim Schmidt. ‚Widerstand von Frauen gegen Reformen‘. In Fromme Frauen Unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosetum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006. p. 162-163.

uncritical quotes, “the reformer in charge, Johannes Busch thinks, that the nuns gave up their resistance and followed the reforms. Evidence existed for Schmidt to blindly follow Johannes Busch’s beliefs, that the return of Katharina von Hoya from the convent Derneburg with the other nuns is a sign for their surrender. In fact the nuns were presented with a “undurchschaubare Szenerie, in der ihnen eine handlungsstrategische Optimierung abgeschnitten wurde“<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless it certainly looks like that the nuns knew exactly what was going on, look to the actions they took by hiding expensive religious relics and other artifacts that might have been of interest to the secular authorities. All actions serve as evidence that their action was planned, organized and deliberately done to disobey the authority while keeping the harm done to individual females as small as possible, this is accomplished by pretending their surrender.

Noel Parker explains why these actions need to be examined as rebellion and acts of resistance: “The identities of both specific individuals and collective agents are established and sustained by rational and narrative features [ ] and are subject to a certain degree of uncertainty and change”<sup>16</sup>. The convent of Wienhausen equals what Parker calls a collective agents with the nuns as the acting individuals, sharing not just a narrative but also an identity. This all is in danger of collapsing on the nuns, is in danger of being taken away from them. Their actions need to be looked at as responses to their fear of losing their fight for independence against the male authority. We need to start looking at the actions of the nuns in the convent of Wienhausen with completely different eyes and start to applaud them in their heroic act of resistance, civil disobedience and revolution against secular power abuse.

Equally dangerous for the secular authority were the gifts and presents given

---

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Joachim Schmidt. Widerstand von Frauen gegen Reformen. In Fromme Frauen Unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosetum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006. p. 162-163.

<sup>15</sup> ...- ibid, p. 164.

<sup>16</sup> Noel Parker. ‘Revolutions and Historical Change’. In Revolutions and History. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

to the nuns on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January (written before 1470) when the convent received Seven books from Herr Johannes Hessen, a priest.<sup>17</sup> This suggests, that the nuns indeed were highly educated, able to read and analyze literature. Interestingly the writer of the chronic notes a difference between the donation of a 'book' and the donation of a 'deutsches Buch'<sup>18</sup>, this suggests that the nuns knew not just Latin, but were also able to read the peasants language 'teutsch'. Further, nuns were interested in what was happening in the secular world, along with their own individual development, one striving for wisdom and knowledge. An approach representing a humanistic approach to life that is being looked as revolutionary by the authorities because it dangers their status quo. Something easily explaining the reforms of the 15 century.

To suggest like Hans-Joachim Schmidt, that the nuns surrendered is a false approach, since the questions, which should have lingered right in front of male eyes, consists of what the nuns did with their stashed away hidden treasures. This questions was never explored nor answered! Further, one of the written treasures after the intrusive invasion of the convent serves as evidence that the nuns never had an honest surrender in mind.

The appearance of the Wienhäuser Liederbuch which is dated ca. 1470 contains under its collection of text a Strafpredigt an die Nonnen. The text is called "Wienhauser Eigengut", an original written expression of one the convent members. Scholars have interpreted this text again as a stereotypical critique their for the nuns' lustful behavior. Being identified as a decadent view of life was not religious enough and closely tied to the worldly life filled with sins, sexual affairs, temptations, and religious statues against the accumulation of wealth which lead to the reforms of 1469.

Reading the Strafpredigt and die Nonnen with a different mindset, instead it

---

<sup>17</sup> Chronik und Totenbuch des Klosters Wienhausen. Totenbuch des Klosters Wienhausen. p. XXXVII.

<sup>18</sup> ...-ibid. Register der Personennamen. p.LXXIII.



can be understood as a metaphor describing Katharina von Hoya as “Eine Freche Frau”<sup>19</sup> who rebelled against Johann Busch und Otto II., one who must suffer for her heroic actions and go to prison in Derneburg “mit dem Mönch ins Gefängnis”<sup>20</sup> “Yet she does all this, not out of the sexual interest she is accused to have, instead she has independence in mind and plans rebellion, and forms an alliance with the monk and has him join in solidarity in their fight against secular oppression: “dass sie gemeinsam aufspringen”<sup>21</sup>. Both uprising together against the secular authority to fight and keep their independent status quo.

The text Die Strafpredigt an die Nonnen is written in rhyme form which suggests as Peter Kaufhold states, that it was not written to be used in a religious ceremony or a sermon. Kaufhold argues, that the text is a critique on the Abyss, living a decadent non religious lifestyle. Here I have to disagree with Peter Kaufhold and have to ask the question why would a sister that enjoys the same freedom to have sex when ever she wants, leave the convent when ever she desires to do so without any obvious reason for jealousy finally start to complain? It is necessary to take the old filter that females are always obedient and peaceful away and start to examine the literature left behind by nuns from convents like Wienhausen under a completely new light of planned resistance and rebellion against secular authority and power abuse.

---

<sup>19</sup> Peter Kaufhold. „Strafpredigt and die Nonnen“. In Das Wienhausener Liederbuch. Celle: Teske. Herausgeber Kloster Wienhausen, 2002. p. 182- 183.

<sup>20</sup> ---. Ibid, p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Kaufhold. „Strafpredigt and die Nonnen“. In Das Wienhausener Liederbuch. Celle: Teske. Herausgeber Kloster Wienhausen, 2002. p. 182- 183.



Fig. 3 **The resurrected Christ**, ca. 1290

(Der Auferstandene Christus, ca. 1290)

One of the relicts that were possibly hidden away from the reformers in 1469



Fig. 4 Wienhäuser Madonna, ca. 1290

Another one of the relicts that were possibly hidden away from the reformers in 1469

#### ***4. THE LUTHERAN REFORMATION AND THE REVOLT OF KATHARINA VON REMSTEDE 1529 .***

No one molds us again out of earth and clay,  
No one conjures our dust.  
No one.

Paul Celan, "Psalm"

Another fine example of rebellion against secular authority and resistance against changes brought from the 'worldly world' to the convent of Wienhausen, takes place during the time of the Lutheran Reformation. In 1529 the *Wienhäusener Chronic* documents, that the first Lutheran priest came to the convent ordered by Duke Ernst, to spread the Lutheran Word and to preach to the convent, in hope the nuns would convert. The nuns "haben sich nicht zu der Lehre bequemen wollen" <sup>22</sup> The consequence resulted in a secular observer being placed by the Duke within the nuns ranks. The secular and the spiritual clerical world begin to clash one more time. The Duke even took the holy mess and the 5 sacraments away in a power play.

But even the rumors that Duke Ernst and his army would violently intrude on the convent could not stop the nuns to hold on to their religious practice which they believed was a solid truth. The *Chronic* states that once the nuns heard of the rumors they had nothing better to do then run to the "Fleischer Hauß" <sup>23</sup>. The *Chronic* states further that all the nun's activities in the butchers house centered around praying and singing. religious sermons. The Duke indeed was ready to invade the convent, but left. The fact, that traveling at that time was stressful and dangerous makes it unbelievable, that the Duke is silently traveling back, just to let the nun's win this power struggle. Once we consider, that both parties had their own individual agenda, the silent surrender

---

<sup>22</sup> *Chronik und Totenbuch des Kloster Wienhausen*. „Die Geschichte von dem Fräulein Appolonia“. Celle: Schweiger & Pick. Verlag, 1986. Publisher Kloster Wienhausen. p. 71.

<sup>23</sup> ---. Ibid. P. 71.

of the Duke becomes clear. As the Patriarch, his plan centered around his goal to press his religious beliefs and power on to the nuns. But as soon as he is faced with the harmless nun's singing and praying, he leaves, he just leaves the nuns without taking any action against them. Instead he leaves them their freedom to take responsibility for their own life, he lets the females to decide to govern their own life. What a loss of face, loss of authority the Duke would have displayed here if this event would have made public.. This then leads to the speculation, that the nuns of Wienhausen, besides praying and singing in the butchers house, possibly started to use the butchers tools and sharpened the butchers knives and forks to fight back, perhaps even while they were singing and praying. The Duke scared for his life, fled the scene without telling anyone what had happen, fearing being mocked for being overthrown by women. That the nuns had to protect themselves by leaving no written evidence, not explaining or documenting a rather harmless story. This then still leaves the question open, why the nuns selected the butchers house if they were indeed not interested in a violent and revolutionary solution to their problem.

The consequences were hard and the nuns had to face further elimination of their religious procedure. Under protest and "darwieder sie sich sehr wehren" <sup>24</sup> was a pulpit for the Lutheran priest erected. About the same year, anno 1531, Abbeys Katharina Remstede left the convent and moved to Hildesheim. Here again, the notion and tone seems as if something normal had happened. But when we read between the lines, we notice, that the Abbeys had to flee. With this scenario in mind, the writings of the Chronic, are not just spiritual words, they also have resistance and rebellion in mind. Suggesting, that we can think of Katharina von Remstede being the leader of the resistance on her way into exile. At the same time financial pressure was put on the convent by Duke Ernst who wanted to eliminated the budget deficit of the duchy by requesting payments in the thousands of Gulden from the wealthy nuns. "Two nuns

---

<sup>24</sup> Chronik und Totenbuch des Kloster Wienhausen. Reform 1469. Celle: Schweiger & Pick Verlag, 1986. Publisher Kloster Wienhausen. P. 73.

protested in the name of Abbeys Katharina von Remstede in a personal audience with Duke Ernst<sup>25</sup> and returns to Wienhausen six years later, having sealed letters in her luggage that she uses against the Herzog to receive his permission to move back to Wienhausen<sup>26</sup>.

In 1530/33 when the resistance of the Lüneburger city council toward the Lutheran reformation changed to support, the resistance of the nuns in Wienhausen weakened. Further, with the secular law that forbade the religious singing and praying to the saints, the rebellion continued long after Duke Ernst had died in 1546. All this turned the resistance against the Lutheran Reformation and secular oppression into an almost twenty year long power struggle.

---

<sup>25</sup> Ida –Christine Riggert. „Reform and Reformation “. In Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster. Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1996. p. 338.

<sup>26</sup> Chronik und Totenbuch des Kloster Wienhausen. Reform 1469. Celle: Schweiger & Pick Verlag, 1986. Publisher Kloster Wienhausen. P. 74.





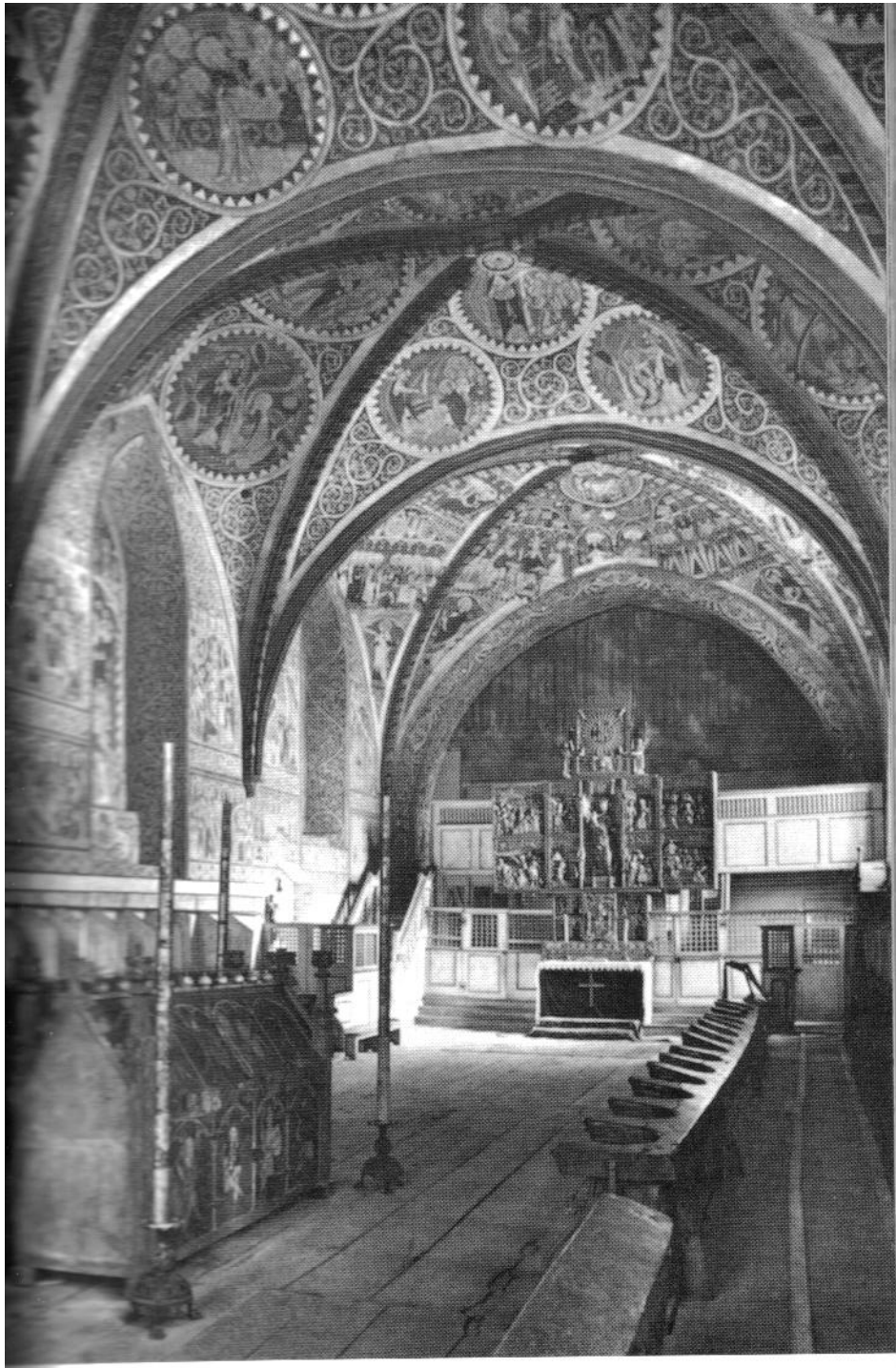


Fig. 5 The Wienhäuser Nunnery



## **6. CONCLUSION**

The intentions and reasoning of nuns in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to rebel against secular authority is much easier to understand now. Still in question is why these women resisted with such a strong will and for so many years, which included their growing interest in individual development and destiny that clashed with the patriarchal society of the medieval times? Or was it a request to create their own government and a state within the state? Why was it so explicit that the female convents resisted the reforms? The writings in the Wienhäuser Chronic and the Wienhäuser Liederbuch are evidence of a good line of communications among each other and also suggest that their actions of rebellion and revolt were well thought through and even shared then with other convents. If the reading glasses found in 1953 are being looked at another piece of evidence that the women of Wienhausen tried to hide any kind of evidence that would show their intelligence, their interest in learning and becoming enlightened human beings, that governed themselves, then the history of revolution needs to be revisited and revised. Still much needs to be done to give Katharina von Hoya and Katharina von Remstede the place in the history books they deserve as female rebels and leaders of resistance against power abuse and oppression. The nuns of the convent of Wienhausen, early humanists and feminists deserve to be honored with their own chapter in the German history books.

## ***BIBLIOGRAPHY***

Apphun, Horst. Chronik und Totenbuch des Klosters Wienhausen. Celle: Schweiger & Pick Verlag Pfingsten KG, 1986.

Becker-Cantarino. Der lange Weg zur Mündigkeit. Frauen und Literatur 1500-1800. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlerische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1987.

Kaufhold, Peter. Das Wienhäuser Liederbuch. Wienhausen: Teske Druck, 2002.

Klueting, Edeltraud. Fromme Frauen unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosentum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006.

Parker, Noel. Revolutions and History. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

Pauler, Roland. Leben im Mittelalter. Ein Lexikon. Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2007.

Riggert, Ida-Christine. Die Lüneburger Frauenklöster. Hannover: Verlag Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1996

Schmidt, Hans-Joachim. „Widerstand von Frauen gegen Reformen“. In Fromme Frauen Unbequeme Frauen? Weibliches Religiosetum im Mittelalter. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006.

Wilhem, Pia. Kloster Wienhausen. Die Bildteppiche. Celle: Teske Druck.