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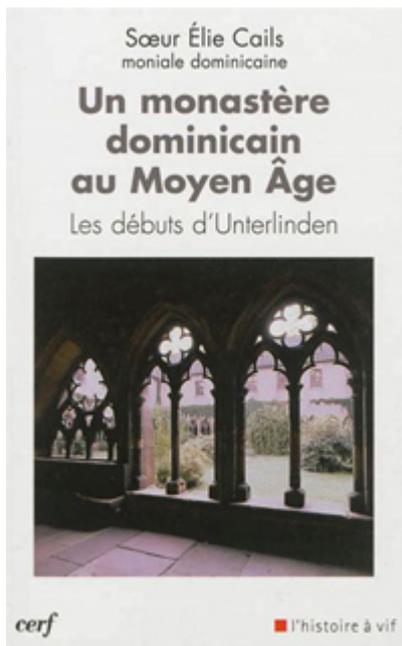
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## Sœur Élie Cails: Un monastère dominicain au Moyen Âge



Following a long mendicant tradition of history writing, Sister Élie Cails, nun and archivist of the Dominican nunnery St. John the Baptist in Orbey, took up the pen to write about her medieval predecessors who inhabited the Unterlinden nunnery in Colmar. She modestly introduces her work as "a small work" that "only relates of the beginnings of a Dominican monastery in the thirteenth century" (*Ce petit ouvrage ne relate que les tout débuts d'un monastère allemand du XIIIe siècle*, 13). Indeed, the book is just that: sister Élie's booklet has no academic pretensions, does not aspire to contribute to current historical debates, and is not dressed up around a clear argumentation.

The book contains six chapters. The first chapter offers an overview of the history of Colmar before Unterlinden was founded and the second chapter informs about the beginnings of the foundation. In some instances, a lack of academic training is visible. For example when Cails uncritically takes over the words of a papal bull from 4 September 1245, writing that the sisters went all the way to Rome "notwithstanding the fragility of their sex" (*malgré la fragilité de leur sexe*, 28) to demand their incorporation in the Dominican order, or when she writes that a "taste for the wondrous" was characteristic for "people in the Middle Ages" (*ce goût du merveilleux propre aux gens du Moyen Âge*, 33).

The next chapters concentrate on the *Vitae sororum*, its editions, and the way it is used by mostly nineteenth-century and local historians. These are the more interesting parts of the book. The *Vitae sororum*, written by Sister Katherina von Gebersweiler (fl. 1320), starts with a prologue and eight introductory chapters that describe the ideal characteristics of the Dominican life at Unterlinden, such as the perfect conversion of the sisters, the strict silence they kept, the rigour of their abstinence, and their special devotion to Mary. These introductory chapters are succeeded by 40 chapters that include the *vitae* of 42 sisters. After Katharina's explicit, a fifteenth-century continuation with five more chapters follows.

Whereas other fourteenth-century Dominican sisterbooks were written in the vernacular, the *Vitae sororum* of Unterlinden were composed in Latin. Cails notes that for her language and style, Katharina made use of Dietrich von Apolda's *Legenda Dominici*. Especially in the prologue and the eight introductory chapters of the *Vitae sororum*, the overlap is striking. Katharina literally copied common *topoi* from Apolda's prologue. Like

Apolda, she confessed her inexperience in writing and asks forgiveness for her unpolished style, and she expressed the wish that someone more experienced would rework the text. Nevertheless, she adds, she did the best she could. Cails rightly observes that this form of copying was a common practice that we should not consider anachronistically as plagiarism.

Sister Katharina consciously reused and reworked the words of Apolda to fit her audience and purpose. The eight chapters that introduce the life of the sisters at Unterlinden are taken over from Apolda as well. However, Cails notes that there are significant changes in Katharina's version. Since the enclosed nuns could not go out and preach, Katharina replaced Apolda's chapter on preaching by an account of the first prioresses of Unterlinden (48). It would be interesting to elaborate on these findings of Cails to get a better understanding of the ways in which nuns used and reworked existing Latin texts.

In her fourth chapter, Cails introduces translations and editions of the *Vitae sororum*. Following Jeanne Ancelet-Hustache, she includes Georg Epp's *De viris illustribus ordinis praedicatorum* (1506) and Conrad Zittardus's *Kurtze Chronika* (1596) among the editions, although they only reproduce a limited number of shortened notices from the *Vitae sororum*. In fact, Epp's and Zittardus's texts are reworkings of Johannes Meyer's *De viris illustribus ordinis praedicatorum* (1466), which is missing in Cails list of "editions". Meyer used the *Vitae sororum* for the sixth part of his *De viris illustribus* that concentrates on women, but reproduced greatly shortened and selective versions of the actual *vitae* written by Katharina. Epp, in turn, copied Meyer's versions literally for his own *De viris illustribus*. Cails erroneously holds that Epp's and Zittardus's works are "*actuellement introuvables*" (60). On the contrary, they do survive and are even accessible online on the site of the *Bayerische Staatsbibliothek* in Munich (respectively signature 4 H.mon.202d and 4 H.mon.660).

Cails's fifth chapter is the longest and the most informative. Here, she notes the importance of visions, revelations, and ecstasies in the *Vitae sororum*. These kinds of mystical experiences are present in 32 of the 39 *vitae* written by Katharina. The *vitae* focus on the divine grace the sisters enjoyed. The mystical experiences are considered as a way in which God acknowledged the abundant good works or virtuous acts of certain sisters, or wished to offer consolation for the suffering they endured. These experiences affected several senses: a sister could hear the voice of God the Father, feel a caress of the Christ Child, or see a vision of the Virgin Mary. The most frequent vision is of the Christ Child, sometimes accompanied by the Virgin Mary. For example, when Sister Gertrude de Brugg was praying in front of a statue of Mary and the Christ Child, the latter answered her and offered her his hand. The hand broke off and could not be reattached to the statue "up until this day" (72).

There are numerous references to the Holy Spirit as a guide of the sisters, but the sisters also have visions of saints: the apostles Peter and Paul, the recently canonized Dominican St. Peter Martyr, and St. John the Baptist, the patron saint of Unterlinden. Cails recalls that the iconography present in the convent inspired the imagination of the nuns: when relating about the vision of Peter and Paul, sister Katharina specified that they appeared to the sister "just like on the paintings that represent them" (74). Many visions took place during the Eucharistic celebration. Cails notes that there are few diabolic visions in the text, and that this is remarkable when one compares it to the contemporary *Vitae fratrum*, in which they were more common (81). The devil appeared a few times, for example in the form of a pig or a deceased sister, or, without disguise, with a terrifying face and carrying on his shoulders a dead relative of one of the nuns.

Shorter paragraphs of chapter five are dedicated to ascetic practices and mortifications, the communal life, and devotional practices at Unterlinden. Cails notes that the majority of the *vitae* makes mention of flagellation or other types of self-inflicted bodily mortification, of which she offers several examples. One sister carved the shape of the cross into her chest, another ate the waste that a sick sister spat out, and again another stayed in ice-cold water in the middle of the winter until her limbs were frozen. These practices, Cails suggests, were part of their constant "lutte contre la chair" (83). Another recurrent theme is the constant zeal for the observance of the Rule, "that St. Dominic gave them" (88).

When Cails refers to the *Vitae sororum* or translates from the text, she does not provide footnotes with the Latin or with a reference to the exact page numbers. This makes it hard to find the passages she used. Cails's comments on the *Vitae sororum* are not always well elaborated or embedded. In some very short paragraphs, such as the one on the scriptural references in the text, Cails only provides a few examples without drawing further conclusions. Cails almost exclusively used French literature, and therefore does not refer to important German or English studies that also deal with the *Vitae sororum* written in Unterlinden. [1] There is no conclusion, only an epilogue, consisting of two pages in which sister Élie summarizes the history of Colmar and Unterlinden from the Middle Ages until the suppression during the French Revolution, and the refoundation of the community in 1899. At the end of the book, there are six appendices: a short chronology, short biographies of Jean Roesselman and Venturino de Bergamo, a list of the sisters mentioned in the *Vitae sororum*, and the frequency of first names in this text.

In sum, in the parts that focus on the *Vitae sororum*, Cails makes some interesting observations that could be more fully explored. However, her book is not completely satisfactory from an academical point of view.

Note:

[1] Gertrud J. Lewis: *By women, for women, about women: The sisterbooks of fourteenth-century Germany* 1996; Susanne Bürkle: *Literatur im Kloster: Historische Funktion und rhetorische Legitimation frauenmystischer Texte des 14. Jahrhunderts*, Tübingen 1999.

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