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The Ortliebians (Ortlbarii, Ortolevi, Ortodeni, Ortoleti) were one of the chief heretical 
sects in Germany during the thirteenth century. They supposedly were followers of Ortlieb 
of Strasbourg, whose identity remains elusive. According to Albert the Great, he was con­ 
demned by Pope Innocent III for holding that man must keep himself from all external 
things and follow the spirit within him.

The reports about the beliefs of his followers are more detailed. What were the charac­
teristic features of the Ortliebian heresy? The exploration of that question is the chief 
concern of Amalie Fössel's book, which was submitted as a Ph.D. thesis to the University 
of Bayreuth in 1992 and which does not seem to have been shortened or revised for the 
present edition. For her study of the Ortliebians Fössel was allowed to peruse the yet un­
published critical edition of the so-called Anonymous of Passau treatise, which is being 
prepared by Alexander Patschovsky for the Monumenta Germaniae Historica.

The Anonymous of Passau treatise is a miscellaneous compilation of texts, such as the 
Summa de Catharis by Rainerius Sacconi, who for some time was considered to be re­ 
sponsible for the entire compilation, and the Determinatio by Albert the Great concerning 
the articles of the heresy found in the Ries (Swabia), an important source for views later 
associated with the heresy of the Free Spirit. It also contains, however, firsthand accounts 
and two treatises about the views of the Ortliebians, the so-called Ortliebian Treatises I 
and II. These are closely related in that both are derived from a common but unknown 
source and complement each other. Treatise I is shorter than Treatise II. Both are written 
in the item dicunt format, but neither derives its information about the sect from personal 
observation. Together they provide a consistent picture of the views attributed to the Ort­
liebians.

Since the study by Wilhelm Preger (1874) it has been recognized that the Anonymous of 
Passau treatise is the most important source for our knowledge of the ideas of the Ortlie­
bians. However, its nature, its extremely complicated textual tradition, and its probable 
date of compilation were not unraveled until 1968 by Patschovsky. Patschovsky's conclu­
sions have been generally accepted as accurate and constitute the basis of Fössel's study of 
the views of the Ortliebians.

The Anonymous of Passau treatise exists in two recensions. The shorter recension must 
have been compiled between 1260 and 1266, by an anonymous Dominican engaged in the 
inquisition in the diocese of Passau (Austria and part of Bavaria); the longer version origi­
nated some time after 1270–73. Its redactor is unknown. The treatise is aimed against the 
enemies of the church, in particular the Jews and heretics, among them the Ortliebians, 
"the third sect in Germany." Only copies of the longer recension contain both Ortliebian 
treatises. Some more guidance for readers not familiar with the A, B, W, and ß versions of 
the treatise would have been helpful.

No doubt, the edition of the two Ortliebian treatises to which Fössel had access is far 
more accurate than the one published in 1613 by Jacob Gretser, which has been used until 
the present in studies about the Ortliebians. The text published by Gretser represents only 
one specific branch of the Anonymous of Passau tradition, known as the Pseudo-Reinerius 
treatise, a shortened version of the longer Anonymous of Passau recension. Any revisions 
in our picture of the thought of the Ortliebians, however, are not due to the use of this 
more accurate edition but rather to the fact that now, for the first time, Treatises I and II 
have been systematically explored in their entirety.

The main thesis of Fössel's monograph is that the Ortliebians were among the moderni 
haeretici of the thirteenth century, that is, they not only flourished (and died out) in the
thirteenth century, but they were also concerned with themes that, according to Fössel, were
typical of the thirteenth century: the Trinity, the mystical interpretation of the articles of
faith, and the eternity of the world.

Most prominent in the Ortliebian treatises is their Trinitarian speculation. According to
Fössel, their ideas about the Trinity and their trinitarian organization distinguished the
Ortliebians from other heretical sects. The Ortliebians proclaimed that they were sons of
God (filii dei). In the older scholarly literature this belief has been mistaken for the belief
in their own deification. The Ortliebians, however, did not believe that they were united
with God but that they had become children of God by submitting themselves to the Word
(verbam praedicationis). As children of God they were equivalent to the Father, to the Son,
or to the Holy Spirit and in this way constituted earthly trinities (trinitates in terris). This
trinitarian order manifested itself especially in praying and preaching. During prayers the
“Father” stood in the middle, flanked by the “Son” and the “Holy Spirit” on the right and
the left sides respectively. Furthermore, the Father and the Son played a crucial role in
disseminating Ortliebian ideas outside the sect through preaching. New followers were
incorporated as members of a terrestrial trinity. Depending on whether they had been
converted by a Father or a Son, they became a Son or a Holy Spirit respectively.

Ortliebians were convinced that they were chosen. Not the Roman church, but their
community was to be identified with the Ark of Noah, which survived the Flood and which,
after a time of decline, was revived by Jesus Christ. Only those who belonged to the ter-
restrial trinities of the Ortliebians would be saved and would enter the kingdom of heaven.
The Last Judgment would arrive when the pope and the emperor became Ortliebians.

These views had important implications for their attitude toward the sacraments. Ac-
cording to Treatise II, the Ortliebians “erred in all the sacraments.” Moreover, they were
ant clerical. They abolished, for instance, the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist.
Penance, in their view, had become obsolete since life itself was penance. Only matrimony
was considered good, though not the “acts of the flesh” (opus carnale) that were supposed
to accompany marriage. Real life was bestowed only by spiritual generation through
preaching. The Ortliebians did, however, confess to all the truths of faith. Yet these were
understood in a mystical way. The consequence of the Ortliebians’ ideas about spiritual
perfection was ascetism rather than license.

Fössel believes that the Ortliebians were a sect in their own right. This point is brought
out by comparing Ortliebian views with those of contemporaneous heretical sects. Her
eagerness in providing context for the itemized views recorded in the Ortliebian treatises
sometimes results in lengthy digressions that border on the irrelevant. One example is the
section on the introduction of Aristotle’s libri naturales and the discussion of the world’s
eternity at the University of Paris (pp. 180–214). The section does not shed further light
on the thesis attributed to the Ortliebians that the world is eternal, that is, without begin-
ing and not created. No scholastic at the University of Paris ever defended such a thesis,
nor are there any indications that the Ortliebians ever used scholastic arguments in support
of their view.

The merit of the book is that it provides a consistent and exhaustive picture of all there
is to know about Ortlieb of Strasbourg, the Ortliebians, and their views. Given the nature
of the records, especially when compared with the information available on the heretical
sects of France and Italy, this is an admirable achievement. The conclusion that emerges
from Fössel’s book, although it is not made very explicit, is that all previous attempts in
the scholarly literature to classify the Ortliebians as a German branch of the Amalricians,
Waldensians, Free Spirits, or Cathars are inadequate. The Ortliebians were a sect who in
their own fashion developed themes that were of common concern to various heretical
groups in the thirteenth century.

J. M. M. H. Thijsse n, University of Nijmegen