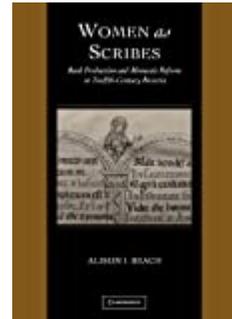




**Alison I. Beach.** *Women as Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xiv + 198 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-79243-1.



**Reviewed by** Martha Newman (Department of History, University of Texas at Austin)

**Published on** H-German (February, 2006)

This excellent study of female scribes in twelfth-century Bavaria demonstrates how careful paleographical and codicological analysis can provide important new insights into medieval women's religious lives. By investigating the various ways that male and female religious collaborated in the production of manuscripts, Alison Beach has joined the medievalists' tools for manuscript analysis to questions drawn from women's studies. This creative approach to manuscript studies makes important contributions to the scholarship on female monasticism, to the study of monastic reform in German-speaking lands and to our understanding of monastic participation in the intellectual revival of the twelfth century.

Beach's study, which began as a Columbia University dissertation, was inspired by a simple question: did medieval women copy books? Beach's answer is yes, but more interesting than this monosyllabic response are the extensions and nuances of the question. What texts did women copy? Under what conditions? For whom? Beach's answers provide glimpses of the everyday practices of monastic life and the ordinary interactions between monks and nuns in twelfth-century Bavaria.

The book begins with a discussion of pre-twelfth-century evidence for female involvement in book production, evidence that has been culled from saints' lives, monastic rules, correspondence, donor portraits and

colophons. In the process, Beach reminds us of the importance of Anglo-Saxon monastic traditions in German-speaking lands: whereas the missions of Boniface and Lul established new monasteries, the nuns who left England to colonize these new communities carried with them an Anglo-Saxon tradition of education for religious women.

The heart of Beach's book focuses on three communities in twelfth-century Bavaria—Wessobrunn, Admont, and Schäftlarn—and the female scribes associated with each community. Beach sensibly rejects an older notion that female writing can be characterized as “delicate, irregular, nervous, and light” (p. 5), and she instead relies on booklists enumerating monastic libraries, on colophons, and on detailed paleographical and codicological analyses to locate female scribes and their hands. She notes that the only way to identify a female scribe with certainty is with a contemporary colophon but remarks that colophons are rarities before the fifteenth century. She assumes, however, that hand changes within a quire written in part by a named female scribe generally provide evidence of anonymous female collaborators; in reformed houses where women lived in strict enclosure, it is unlikely that monks and nuns worked side by side, and it would have been cumbersome to pass a gathering repeatedly from the monks' scriptorium to the nuns' enclosure (p. 6). At Wessobrunn, the remarkable scribe

Dietmut is remembered by the monks as the woman who created their monastic library. Some forty codices are attributed to her; through an analysis of the fourteen that are still extant, Beach can identify at least two anonymous female scribes who worked with her. At Admont, Beach locates two named female scribes, Regilind and Irmingart, who assisted a male scribe Irmbert, and she identifies a number of anonymous scribes of whom at least two were women. At Schäftlarn, she finds three named female scribes, one of whom was certainly (and another probably) a lay sister.

Alison Beach does not just recover evidence of female scribal labor. She also compares the conditions at the three houses and demonstrates the ways that the everyday labor of male and female scribes reflected variations in twelfth-century Bavarian monastic life. Both Wessobrunn and Admont were Benedictine monasteries influenced by the reforms emanating from Gorze and Hirsau; both established female communities in the twelfth century in conjunction with their association with Hirsau. The scribe Dietmut, however, had lived as a recluse at Wessobrunn prior to the establishment of the women's house in 1138, and she probably copied a first cluster of manuscripts while still an *inclusa*. Her later manuscripts—which show signs of her declining physical abilities—provide the evidence for other female scribes at Wessobrunn, as she then began to collaborate with others. The women's community at Admont, in comparison, was founded earlier, between 1116-20, and quickly became a well-connected and well-endowed establishment. Many of its women were educated: they ran a school that prepared the nuns for the performance of the liturgy, for devotional reading and for biblical interpretation, as well as for the writing associated with the community's economic and legal needs. From a careful comparison between a medieval inventory of the monks' codices and the extant manuscripts from Admont, Beach thinks it likely that the nuns even had their own library.

The libraries of Wessobrunn and Admont reflect the influence of both Gorze and Hirsau and the emphasis these reform traditions placed on devotional and meditative reading. Whether or not Dietmut herself helped shape the contents of Wessobrunn's library, about half the manuscripts she copied were patristic texts associated with the form of monastic *lectio* advocated by John of Gorze; the other half were biblical and liturgical texts. The library or libraries at Admont also contained patristic texts intended for monastic *lectio*, but they also included contemporary monastic authors and even some works of twelfth-century schoolmen such as Peter Lom-

bard and Peter Abelard. As well as copying these texts, Admont's scribes produced manuscripts of biblical exegesis composed by members of their own community. Beach thinks it likely that the nuns authored some of these works—at least two of the codices that she identifies as part of the nuns' library show women preaching and holding books. In other cases, the nuns took dictation from monastic exegetes. The codicological evidence from Admont suggests that the nuns and monks there shared this intellectual interest in biblical exegesis and collaborated closely on book production—the community had a uniform script, and the irregular size of the gatherings in many volumes suggest that units of text were allocated to the monks and nuns as piecemeal work that could later be bound into a single tome without wasting parchment. Admont's active and creative scriptorium demonstrates the way such reformed communities linked learning and piety, and it suggests that the monks and nuns formed a single community with common intellectual and religious interests.

Schäftlarn provides a very different picture of male-female relations. Initially a Benedictine monastery, Schäftlarn was transformed into a community of Premonstratensian canons around 1140. Unlike the libraries of Admont and Wessobrunn, Schäftlarn's library was intended for the training of priests and was expanded in the mid-twelfth century with this goal in mind. Despite Premonstratensian statutes designed to separate male and female communities, Schäftlarn began to accept both professed and lay sisters by mid-century; it continued to accept new women even after the 1198 papal decree prohibiting any new admission of women to Premonstratensian houses. As in other Premonstratensian female houses, however, the lives of the women of Schäftlarn were dominated by labor in service of the men; for some of them, however, this labor consisted of working with the canons in the production of books. Unlike the two Benedictine houses, where the women were strictly separated from the men, at Schäftlarn a female scribe did at times work on the same quire as male scribes: Beach can identify the hand changing from one to the other even in mid-sentence. Beach believes this collaboration with men was possible because this female scribe was a lay sister who could work in the canons' scriptorium under male supervision. Other female scribes at Schäftlarn worked separately from the men, but their work appears to have been supervised and corrected by the canons. Unlike at Admont, the women at Schäftlarn were not full participants in the intellectual life of their community, but instead helped provide

texts for the priestly training of the canons.

One important result of Alison Beach's painstaking paleographical and codicological study is that she has found a means of exploring the everyday relations between religious men and women that can supplement proscriptive statutes and regulations. If we relied only on statutes, rules, and customaries, for example, we would have no idea that a Premonstratensian lay sister could work alongside the male canons; we might also assume that the strict enclosure of the Benedictine nuns precluded their intellectual collaboration with the monks. Furthermore, by studying southern German monasticism in the twelfth century, Beach offers insights into topics that have been little studied in English: her work shows us the variations in forms of female religious life, the ideas of different kinds of monastic reform movements in Bavaria and the continued importance of monastic devotional reading in German intellectual life.

Beach concludes her study by noting that the female scribes of Schäftlarn, Admont and Wessobrunn are only a few of the many female scribes in twelfth-century

Bavaria. She does not try to apply her conclusions to other parts of Europe; rather, she offers suggestions as to why such female scribal activity might have been more prevalent in German lands. First, she points to the influence of Hirsau, which encouraged double monasteries and provided an environment in which women could have access to the libraries and schools that were a part of these reformed communities. Second, she suggests that the conservative nature of religious life in southern Germany and the fact that monasteries remained the center of intellectual life may have had positive consequences for the participation of religious women in the intellectual revival of the twelfth century. Yet, she reminds us, the example of Schäftlarn demonstrates that "neither a German context nor life in a dual-sex monastic community guaranteed women a central place in that sphere" (p. 133). Nonetheless, this book provides a model for studies of female scribal activity in other areas of Europe, and it raises important questions both about regional differences among monastic reform movements and about differences in the ways medieval women participated in the intellectual and religious developments of their time.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Martha Newman. Review of Beach, Alison I., *Women as Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11449>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).