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Henrike Lähnemann

From Medingen to Michigan A Detective Story



The personal prayer book belonging to a nun from the Heidekloster Medingen has appeared at Western Michigan University. The trail to it encompasses a 19th century German poet, a 20th century American Cistercian monk and, finally, the digitalisation initiatives of our day and age.

The manuscripts were originally written around 1500 by the nuns in Medingen and are now scattered to all the four corners of the Earth. Those that were not removed from the convent during the Lutheran Reformation have either been given away or sold over the centuries. As a result, the small, colourful prayer books can now be found not just in nearby Lüne or in Hildesheim, but also in Trier and Gotha, Copenhagen and even the UK. When I began to compile a catalogue of all the Medingen manuscripts ten years ago, I expected to find them in various European libraries, but did not anticipate my detective work leading me to Western Michigan University and to Manuscript 23 of the Obrecht Collection in the Institute of Cistercian Studies. The discovery of this manuscript is the result of a series of happy coincidences that form a bridge between a German poet in the 19th century, the curiosity of a Cistercian monk in the 20th century and the digitalisation programme of an American university in the 21st century.

In late 2011, I was busy reviewing my preliminary list of Medingen manuscripts prior to applying to the EU for funding to digitize the complete inventory of – at that point – 44 prayer books, library books and liturgical manuscripts from Medingen fully digitalised. I also wanted to try and locate a manuscript which Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben had described in 1857 and which is now regarded as missing. On pp. 164-167 of the second issue of the then recently launched periodical 'Germania', he edited a "Low German Easter poem" he had found in "a parchment manuscript from the 15th century, in private ownership in Hanover, 217 pages in octavo format". Hoffmann was a passionate hunter of manuscripts throughout his life; in his voluminous autobiography *Aus meinem Leben*, he tells (though unintentionally) amusingly, of how, during the gold-rush days of early German Studies, he tried to stay one step ahead of other academics and tiresome colleagues in the search for fragments from the German Middle Ages. Being from the Electorate of Brunswick-Lüneburg, a fact he himself emphasised by appending, on his own initiative, "von Fallersleben" (near Wolfsburg) to his name, he had an advantage over the majority of southern German manuscript collectors because he was familiar with Dutch and Low German. In 1837, twenty years before the publication of the Easter poem, he had requested that manuscript No. 75 from the library in Hanover be sent to him in Breslau, where he was the librarian – a perfectly acceptable form of interlibrary loan in those days! As the list of those who have consulted the manuscript in the royal library shows, the manuscript mentioned above has also been described by Borchling in his "Reiseberichten" I, p. 196, as a "Latin Easter breviary with a great many Low German rhymes and parts of Low German sacred songs scattered throughout it". The short article does not reveal whether he also requested the privately-owned manuscript to be sent to him in 1857, or whether he went to look at it in Hanover, or who the owner was and how this owner acquired the manuscript, what it looked like or whether it contained any illustrations.

The question I now faced was how to ascertain if the manuscript recorded by Lipphardt as "missing" had by now turned up again somewhere – perhaps in an auction catalogue, a manuscript collection or a museum. One thing that the description, for all its brevity, does mention is the "Schreiberverse", i.e. the text at the end of a manuscript or text that summarise its content. In the days before the title

pages, this was often the only way of finding out when how and by whom a text was written down. Hoffmann had therefore noted down the lines found on page 158 of the manuscript that conclude the section detailing the Easter festival:

Expliciunt Oraciones festiue.
 Necnon gloriose et diuine.
 De quibus graciaram
 fiunt uene.
 Omnium deliciarum
 habundancijs plene.
 Tibi decus et imperium.
 Tibi laus tibi gloria
 Tibi gratiarum actio.
 per infinita seculorum secula.

("Here end the festal prayers, glorious and divine, from which flow forth streams of graces, overflowing with all joys. To thee be honour and dominion, to thee be praise and glory, to thee the event of grace, world without end.")

2 Ms, f. 241v: Expliciunt oraciones festiue
 necnon gloriose et diuine
 de quibus graciaram fluunt uene

Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell (OCSO): The Vidi Aquam and the Easter Morning Procession: Pages from the Prayer book of a Fifteenth-Century Cistercian Nun, in: *Liturgy* 21/3 (1987), p. 3-56, footnote 2.

I decided to type the first three words of this concluding text into Google Books. The search machine spat out just a single hit, but what a promising hit it seemed to be! The concluding lines from the "prayer book of a 15th century Cistercian nun", recorded by the Trappist monk Fr. Chrysogonus Waddell in footnote 2, praise the grace-giving power of the previously-noted Easter prayer using exactly the same turn of phrase. A shadow of doubt was cast by the page number he cited, which was 241 verso rather than 158, as recorded by Hoffman. However, this could be due to a later re-numbering of the pages. The manuscript was among the possessions bequeathed by the abbot of the monastery in Gethsemani, Dom Edmond Obrecht (1825 – 1935), who was from the Elsass region. One of his life-long aims had been to create a classic medieval library for the monastery in Kentucky, which was the oldest Trappist monastery in America. In this prayer book, he had stuck a typed note



over the parchment paste-down, noting that he had received it as a present from the Danish librarian Jens Christian Bay (1871 – 1962) in Chicago. Now it again seemed entirely likely that that the manuscript viewed by Hoffman in 1857 could have reached America via an auction house or other private collectors in either Denmark or Hanover.

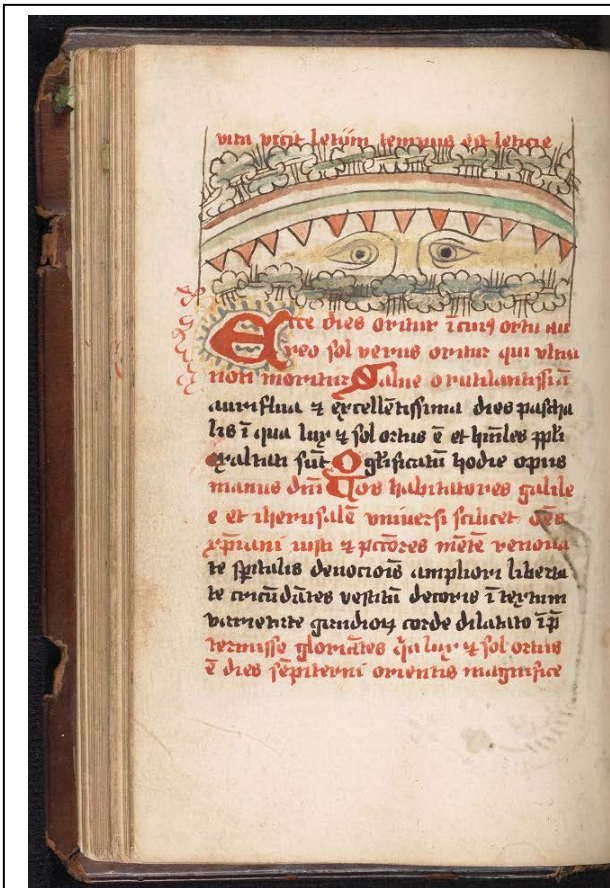
Another fact that emerged directly from the essay was that this manuscript was a source of mystery that fascinated Fr. Chrysogonus, who lived in the same monastery as both choirmaster and liturgical scholar. Of the one hundred plus medieval manuscripts and 61 incunabula in the collection bequeathed by the abbot, it was the only one that he had not donated to the Center for Cistercian Studies at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo as a permanent loan. Wanting to first completely understand the contemplative world of the nun who had written the manuscript before handing it over, he still had it 50 years after the abbot's death. Waddell was not interested in palaeographical details, for, just like Hoffman, he did not intend to categorise the manuscript but wanted to understand it in the light of his own area of interest. He

became so personally involved with the manuscript that he entered into direct dialogue with the scribe, whom he nicknamed "Sister Katrin", as she does not name herself. But then what could have happened to this manuscript since 1987?

My next search request revealed that, according to Cistopedia.org, Waddell had died in 2008. Further search requests revealed nothing about his legacy. Future work would therefore have to be based on assumptions, particularly as the manuscript lacked even a provisional signature. My initial assump-

tion was that Waddell had given the prayer book to that had so fascinated him to the collection of other manuscripts at the Institute in Kalamazoo, either whilst still alive or in his will. Opening the Institute's website to look for a contact address brought a literal moment of epiphany, for, emblazoned across the image bar on the homepage like an oversized smiley was the sun face, smiling back at me like an old friend. It is shown at the top of this article and is exactly the same sun that rises over the Medingen nuns on Easter Sunday in the Hildesheim manuscript, J29. This manuscript is also the one that Hoffmann quoted as being the parallel to the Easter poem that he copied. Although there was no information on the Institute's website about the image, I was fairly sure that this is where the manuscript that Chrysogonus Waddell had studied in 1987 had ended up, and that it was indeed one of the manuscripts from Medingen. Breathlessly, I reached for the telephone and, despite the time difference, immediately got through to the manuscript librarian, Dr. Sue Steuer. I asked her just one question: "Is the sun on your website from a prayer book that was given to the collection by Fr. Waddell?" With some astonishment but without hesitation, she answered in the affirmative. As she then explained to me, the Cistercian monk had worked on his notes to this manuscript until shortly before his death, constantly revising them. While he had not produced an edition, he had left behind copious notes that were in the safe-keeping of the Institute.

In the same telephone call we established that a digitalised version of the manuscript would be desirable. As the university's digitalisation programme prioritises manuscripts in which there is a research



Institute of Cistercian Studies, Western Michigan University, Obrecht Collection MS 23, fol. 62v:
The Easter sun rises in Michigan.



Hildesheim, Dombibliothek Ms J 29, fol. 52r: The Easter sun rises in Hildesheim, greeted by a group of Medingen nuns, lay-people and angels.

interest, my enquiry allowed the small, mysterious prayer book to move up waiting list and so it is that now, just one year later, it has been fully digitalised and can be compared with the Hildesheim manuscript.

A detailed comparison of the two manuscripts shows that the little Michigan prayer book is indeed a sister book to the one in Hildesheim. It is the same size (octavo format) and, more importantly, con-

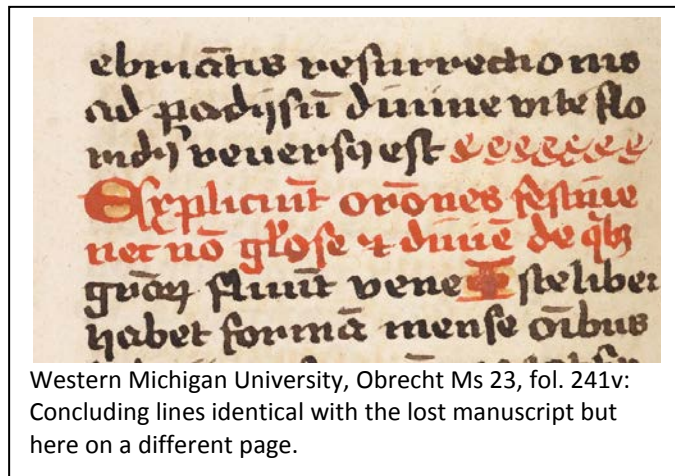
tains large stretches of identical text. In both volumes, the image of the sun is followed by the otherwise unknown Latin lines

*Ecce dies oritur
in cuius ortu aureo
sol verus (Michigan) / Christus (Hildesheim) oritur
qui ultra non moritur.*

("Lo, the day breaks, on whose golden dawn the true sun / Christ, the sun, rises, nevermore to die.")

According to this, the true sun is Christ, who is similarly greeted by angels, nuns and lay people in the Hildesheim manuscript. The Michigan manuscript expresses the Easter jubilation in more modest fashion, without any gold, additional marginal notes, richly decorated initials or parchment. This is perhaps why Abbess Margarate Stöteregegen did not bring it with the Hildesheim manuscript to safety in Hildesheim when Duke Ernst attempted to impose the Lutheran Reformation on the convents against the nuns' will. Yet the spiritual attitude of the (female) scribes and the book's original readers is the same. It is this attitude that caused the inquisitive Cistercian monk in the 20th century to find the little book so fascinating that he did not relinquish it until his death.

This fascination also shines through in his five-page essay. Despite errors of detail (among others, he locates Hildesheim in the Rhineland), it promises a rewarding read. Here are the writings of a Cistercian monk who had a living relationship with the very liturgy that forms the structure for the prayer book and who understood the Biblical imagery and quotations from the church fathers as part of his own spiritual heritage. This immediate, highly personalised reaction is further intensified by the fact that it relates to a volume from the deceased abbot's collection – an almost medieval book chain in which the manuscripts from Medingen and other convents were passed to sympathetic lay people before being bequeathed to their descendants or to other convents and monasteries.



Western Michigan University, Obrecht Ms 23, fol. 241v:
Concluding lines identical with the lost manuscript but here on a different page.

To provide an insight into both the manuscript and its interpretation by Chrysogonus Waddell, I have extracted an excerpt from the Easter Saturday meditation, in which correct preparation for the feast day is demanded. The "bride" in the text is a role that every Christian would have identified with as an *anima christiana* (Christian soul), but one with which the nuns were particularly familiar, having betrothed themselves to Christ upon their admittance to the convent as full members. With this salutation, the scribe would have been able to encourage herself through prayer to worship more intensely. Chrysogonus Waddell, who specifically looked for places in the manuscript that gave insight into the nuns' daily lives, quotes the following passage in particular. The text begins with the last section on the page (page 86r), which is written in red. Towards the middle of the page one can see that the scribe used the corrections and deletions to create a decorative pattern:

O sponsa summi regis, que pridie facta eras vidua, sponso occumbente in cruce, nunc iterum resumpta in nouam sponsam hodie, et non solum sponsa, sed et facta es regina; ideo induere nunc vestimentis glorie tue. Tali namque veste te indue, quali et ipse sponsus vestitus est, ut sis ei similis in colore, in habitu, et in vestibus: quia sic decet sponsum et sponsam, vt simili veste in nuptiis procedant. Tali veste te induis, quando roseum ac glorificatum corpus eius accipis.

"O Bride of the sovereign King, who only yesterday were made a widow as the Bridegroom sank in death upon the cross, now, on this day, you are taken back as a new Bride, and not only as Bride – for now are you become Queen. So put on the garments of your glory, that you may be like him (the Bridegroom) in color, in fashion, and in garb: for thus does it become Bridegroom and Bride to process at their nuptials in like rai-

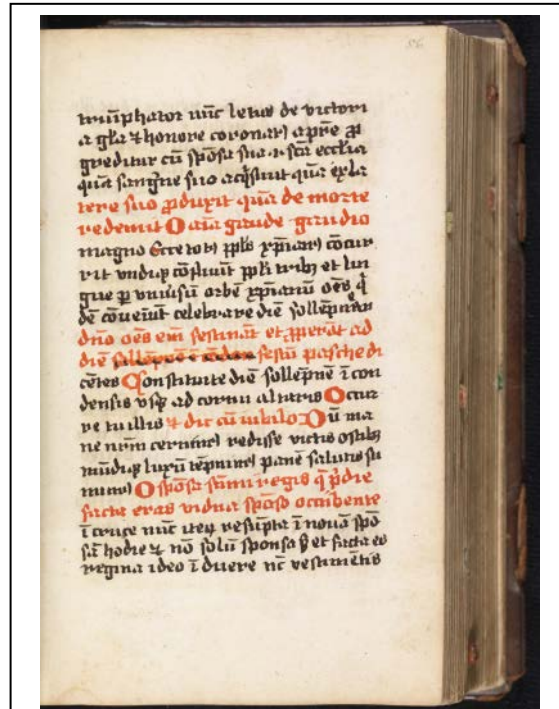
ment. (And you clothe yourself in raiment like unto his when you receive his Body, ruddy and made glorious."

At this point, Waddell comments (p. 18): "O Sister Katrin, *toujours la femme!*" and then continues: "It is obvious from this passage that the Easter parade is not of recent institution. Just the other day, on Good Friday, the Bride had been made a widow when Christ died on the cross. But today, on Easter, she is renewed in the reality of identity as Bride-and more, since she is now become Queen. This calls for a new wardrobe. The "garments of glory" line is borrowed directly from Isaiah 52:1: "Arise, arise, put on your strength, o Sion, put on the garments of your glory, o Jerusalem, the city of the Holy One" This entire passage squares wonderfully well with the present context, and deserves to be read in full. More to the present point, however, it would seem that there is a certain continuity between the medieval dress-code and contemporary fashion. From time to time, when having to travel outside the monastery, I've had occasion to note young couples dressed alike in obvious token of the fact that they are either going steady or else are already happily married, and are glad enough to proclaim the fact for all to see. It would seem from the present passage that medieval bride and groom sometimes, if not often, followed the same convention for their wedding. Here, however, it is not the bride who provides the norm for the bridegroom's wedding finery. Rather, it is just the converse: the Bride has to be dressed in the same style as the Groom as regards color, cut and material. As they take their places in their wedding cortege, their very clothes will be a sign of their common identity." (p. 18/19)

Chrysogonus Waddell then also notes that this partner look, with its reflection of everyday life, is nevertheless executed completely correctly from a dogmatic point of view, and he closes with the approving judgement: "Sr Katrin knows her sacramental theology." (p. 19). Thus the medieval nuns' unsuccessful attempt to have their convent formally included in the Cistercian order has finally found its vindication, five hundred years later and in the footnotes of one of the order's leading modern theologians!

Another fact that only emerged from a detailed scrutiny of the prayer book, made possibly by its digitalisation, is that the Michigan manuscript is not in fact the missing Easter prayer book: aside from the mismatch in page numbers, there are other discrepancies to Hoffman's description. For example, the manuscript was not written on parchment, like the copy described in 1857, but on paper. The main difference, however, is that the majority of the text in the small Michigan prayer book is in Latin and the Low German insertions are significantly shorter than the sections quoted by Hoffmann. On the one hand, this is rather disappointing, but on the other, it is more promising, as it means that there is at least one more Medingen Manuscript!

The database of all the Medingen manuscripts has now been developed on my University website in Newcastle and can be searched in English (research.ncl.ac.uk/medingen). The website also provides further literature on all the manuscripts mentioned in this overview. The new opportunity of being able to leaf through the Michigan manuscript digitally provided the impetus for deciding to return these treasures, at least digitally, to their place of origin, namely Medingen. The Medingen convent's website accordingly now has a German overview page with links to the electronic versions of those



"O sponsa summi regis..." Matching Christ's dress (Institute of Cistercian Studies, Western Michigan University, Obrecht Collection MS 23, fol. 86r)

manuscripts that have so far been digitalised. They are therefore also accessible to German-speakers. By calling up the website [kloster-medingen.de](http://www.kloster-medingen.de) and opening the page "Medingen Handschriften" in the column "Historisches", it is now possible to gain direct access to the server in Michigan and browse through the manuscript there. This facility is to be further developed in that every manuscript that is digitalised will be linked to this site. A special presentation of one of the fundamental manuscripts from Medingen is planned for next spring. In this exhibition, the manuscript used in the late 15th century by the convent's provost to maintain an overview of the services, and which is now held in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, will be exhibited in a book presentation in the convent of Medingen and, after so many years, read aloud again in a liturgical celebration.

Until then, here is a special tip for all those who cannot travel to Oxford or Michigan: The exhibition 'Rosenkränze und Seelengärten' in the Herzog August Bibliothek will run until 25 August and displays treasures from the convents in Lower Saxony, including a small Low German alphabet book from the convent of Medingen. The manuscripts are shown in the context of everyday convent life and the wider culture of devotion. An example of this is the dress for the sculpture of an angel from the convent in Wienhausen; into its hem is sewn a fragment of Low German text. A richly-illustrated catalogue for the exhibition has been published and also contains an article on Medingen scribes between Reform and the Reformation ('Medinger Schreiberinnen zwischen Reform und Reformation') that explains how nuns and lay sisters wrote and illustrated prayer books such as the one in Michigan, and used them to pray.

P.S. Even as I write this, a new trail has appeared for the manuscript described by Hoffmann von Fallersleben: in their catalogue of 17 November, the auction house Devroe & Stubbe in Brussels listed a manuscript that they described as "rustic but thoroughly charming". This is the same mixture of "naive-simple" and "entirely charming" features found in the Michigan manuscript that so fascinated Frater Chrysogonus. It apparently contains "Easter liturgy from Westphalia", which may well simply mean that it contains Low German Easter prayers. The most convincing argument is the length of the manuscript, which is numbered as having 217 pages – exactly the same number as the missing manuscript.



Abbess Dr. Kristin Püttmann and Henrike Lähnemann planning future joint projects in the convent of Medingen.

As well as this, it apparently contains disproportionately large, gold initials. Hoffmann did not describe these, but it does tally with the Medingen manuscripts, as a look at the Hildesheim prayer book will confirm.

Upon enquiring what had become of "lot 1071", which was estimated at 8,500 EUR, I was told that it had been sold to a private owner. I am now waiting to see if the unknown buyer will contact me. Following the paths of the Medingen manuscripts around the world thus remains an exciting venture – and who knows? Perhaps the next article could be entitled "Medingen in Belgium"!

Here are some weblinks in place of footnotes:

1. The page 'Medinger Handschriften' at <http://www.kloster-medingen.de> (under 'Historisches')
2. The cataloguing project 'Medinger Handschriften' at <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/medingen> (in English)
3. The 'Center for Cistercian and Monastic Studies' at <http://www.wmich.edu/medieval> (NB since being redesigned, the site no longer shows the Medingen sun as a logo)