

Nuns. Powerful women in the Middle Ages

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15 powerful women

15 representatives of this group will lead visitors through the exhibition 'Nuns. Powerful women in the Middle Ages'. These examples illustrate the diverse ecclesiastical paths women could take during those times, as well as the freedom of action that life as a nun offered. At the same time, they give an idea of how society worked at that time, and the general status of the female gender.

Pétronille de Chemillé (1080/90 – 1149)

The first abbess of Fontevrault led the community from 1115 to 1149. During that time Pétronille de Chemillé became a very powerful woman within France, and enlarged Fontevrault by almost 50 cloisters. As superior of the order, men were also subordinate to her, which was a rarity at that time.

Herrad of Landsberg (1125/30 – 1195)

The abbess of Hohenburg Abbey on Mont Sainte-Odile was among the most intellectual women of the Middle Ages. She co-authored the 'Hortus Deliciarum', a set of rules for nuns. It is the first encyclopaedia known to have been written by a woman.

Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179)

She was a polymath with a special gift. In addition to her extensive knowledge of medicinal and biological issues, Hildegard of Bingen had experienced visions from a very young age. Her gift as a seer was recognised by the Church. She is still considered a mystic and saint.

Elisabeth of Wetzikon (1235 – 1298)

The abbess of the Fraumünster abbey in Zurich was one of the most powerful women of her time. As mayoress and *Reichsfürstin* (princess of the Holy Roman Empire), she was extremely influential even beyond ecclesiastical circles, played hostess to the King and his delegation, and

had an impact on economic activity. Under her leadership, the abbey was at the height of its power.

Clare of Assisi (1193/94 – 1253)

The abbess of the convent of San Damiano lived in voluntary poverty. As a girl, she had left her noble family and clandestinely joined the Order of St Francis. The Pope canonised her two years after her death. She was the only woman to be granted this honour between 1200 and 1400.

Guta von Bachenstein (dates not known)

The exact dates of her life are not known, but it is known for certain that Guta von Bachenstein was abbess of the convent of Königfelden between 1318 and 1324. In this role, she was responsible not only for the smooth running of everyday life at the convent, but also for the institution's finances. She was, so to speak, the managing director of the convent. However, Queen Agnes of Hungary was in charge.

Elsbeth von Oye (ca. 1280 – ca. 1350)

Inflicting numerous torments on herself from a young age, Elsbeth von Oye wished to suffer with Jesus and get as close to him as possible. She described this suffering for Christ in texts set down in diary form, and also referred to her encounters with God.

Elsbeth Stigel (ca. 1300 – 1360)

Many convents had a scriptorium where the nuns copied and wrote books. A good illustration of this is Elsbeth Stigel, who entered the Töss convent at a young age. There, she co-authored the *Schwesternbuch* (Sister Book), a group of texts explaining to other nuns the pathway to God.

Adelheid Pfefferhart (1319 – 1382)

Even as a child, Adelheid Pfefferhart wanted to take the veil. However, her wish only came true upon the death of her father, because her parents were opposed to a life as a nun. In the St Katharinental convent, Adelheid experienced a moment of divine grace. Fellow sisters observed how she was illuminated before a sculpture of Christ and hovered above the floor.

Margaretha von Werikon (d. 1349)

In the 14th century, the plague rampaged across Switzerland. Convent walls didn't keep the disease out, and many nuns died. One of them was Margaretha von Werikon, mistress of the Engelberg convent. Her death in 1349 entered the annals of the convent. But she wasn't the only victim. In just four months, 116 sisters died at Engelberg.

Catherine of Siena (1347 – 1380)

When her mother proposed to marry her off, Catherine of Siena cut off her hair to make herself unattractive. She wanted only one thing: to live a secluded life of asceticism. She did not succeed – even though she managed to avoid marriage and was admitted to a lay order in 1363, she attracted a growing crowd of followers. Later on she met with popes, campaigned for reforms and had a say in matters of church policy.

Agnes Trüllerey (dates not known)

The mistress of the convent at Hermetschwil was a shrewd political tactician. Under her leadership from 1429 to 1460, the convent's financial and legal situation improved considerably. Agnes Trüllerey was also ready to take on powerful opponents. These included the Muri monastery, to which Hermetschwil was actually subordinate, and the Swiss Confederation. As mistress, she also encouraged the convent's writing activities and its library.

Angela Varnbühler (1441 – 1509)

Under Angela Varnbühler, the practices observed at the convent of St Catherine in St Gallen became more stringent from the autumn of 1482. Nuns were no longer allowed to leave the convent, and their only contact with the outside world was speaking through a small grille. The change to the rules was in part a reaction to the reforms in convents and monasteries demanded by many church dignitaries. Angela Varnbühler engaged in a lively correspondence with the convent of St Catherine in Nuremburg, a leader in reform matters.

Margret Zschampi (1470 – 1525)

Margret Zschampi entered Klingental convent as a child. However, her stay there was brief: at the age of ten she left the convent, together with other sisters, in protest against planned reforms. After the reforming nuns were driven out, Margret and her party returned to the convent.

Katharina von Zimmern (1478 – 1547)

The last abbess of Fraumünster had to deal with the upheaval of the Reformation. Although she was open to the new ideas, Katharina von Zimmern was forced to hand over the abbey to the City of Zurich in 1524. In return, she received a very generous compensation payment and the freedom of the City of Zurich. Katharina later married a mercenary leader and became a mother. Recently, historians have unearthed sources showing that Katharina gave birth to a daughter during her term of office. The child's father is unknown.