

Abbesses and Their Fighting Men: From the Carolingian Capitularies to the *Libri Feudorum*

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Abstract – The position of male ecclesiastical princes – bishops and abbots – as integral elements of Carolingian military organisation is well established. Less investigated is the corresponding role of female ecclesiastical princes, the abbesses. This article demonstrates that the function of abbesses was not materially different to that of their male colleagues-in-office, tracks the legal and political development into the High Middle Ages, and considers some ramifications of the findings. In particular, this article concludes that convents were politically powerful and integrated into the secular military organisation, but within the context of the secular polity played a power-neutralising and stabilising role.

Keywords – Abbeys, Abbesses, Ecclesiastical Princes, Medieval Military, Carolingians, Ottonians, *libri feudorum*, *miles*, Zurich

I. INTRODUCTION

I.1. The Carolingian Background

It may seem strange to refer to medieval abbesses in a military context; technically, abbesses should be twice removed from military matters, firstly as clerics, and secondly as women. Indeed, literature on the subject is scarce. The military role of bishops is fairly well covered, and the literature is *faute de mieux* referenced here; abbots and (male) abbeys too have not found much attention, though the occasional article or contribution can be found every now and then, but there is hardly anything on the military role of abbesses.

This article is not about a military function of the individuals in clerical status – that would be a short article indeed.¹ Rather, the question is about a military role of lay individuals connected to a female monastic house; that such a population existed is beyond doubt, as will here be shown. However, many questions will necessarily remain unanswered. I shall also not delve into the differences between nuns proper and sisters, or canonesses regular and secular – the concepts change over time and place, and the relevant sources,

¹ For the military function of bishops and abbots, see Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg im früheren Mittelalter*; Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus'; Reuter, 'The Prelate as Warrior'; Nakashian, *Warrior Churchmen of Medieval England*; Arnold, 'German bishops.'

scarce as they are, do not suggest that the distinctions are relevant to the subject-matter or even clear enough at any given time.

Our modern view of medieval abbesses as cloistered women presiding over nuns virtually removed from appearance in secular life is a product of the Late Middle Ages or even Early Modern times. In Merovingian times, the primacy of the Catholic Church was not yet established, and the Popes expanded their authority only gradually, with Charlemagne's coronation being a turning point. The effort to extricate clerics and eventually also prelates from active participation in warfare as well as secular entanglements generally gained increased traction from the ninth century on.²

In Carolingian times, though, the elites were not specialised; senior clerical appointments, both male and female, were drawn from the royal families and the aristocracy. There was no siloing of careers; an aristocrat might move from a court office to an ecclesiastical office (often as a lay appointee) and back to a secular office.³ In one of the key aspects of rule, in military matters, the capitularies lump in bishops, abbots and abbesses with counts and other lay magnates in the same breath. This element particularly will form the subject-matter of this article.

I.2. The Nature of the Carolingian Feudal Order

'Feudal' has become a problematical term since Elizabeth Brown's 'The Tyranny of a Construct', and especially Susan Reynolds' *Fiefs and Vassals*.⁴ It needs to be borne in mind, though, that both Brown and Reynolds merely questioned the identification between land tenure and military service obligation, and of a deterministic *Begriffsjurisprudenz* in deducing consequences from terminology. Neither denied that the legal nature of land holdings was peculiar and difficult to grasp at any given stage – a situation for which the term 'feudal' might as well be applied, if only for want of a better one.⁵

The situation is made more complicated by the fact that the first legal statements on the nature of feudal tenure only date from the High Middle Ages, some two to three centuries after the initial focus period for this article. Still, some core principles can probably be safely projected onto Carolingian times – one of them must surely be that while senior clerics (here 'ecclesiastical princes') had the power to hold and award fiefs in the same manner as senior lay nobles, ordinary *clerici* were excluded from holding fiefs.⁶

² Leyser, 'Canon Law and Knighthood', pp. 553-54; Duggan, 'Evolution of Latin Canon Law', pp. 506-11 – with exceptions, see references in the previous footnote.

³ Werner, 'Formation et carrière des jeunes aristocrates', 302-304 – no mention there of women.

⁴ Brown, 'Tyranny of a Construct'; Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*.

⁵ Haack, *Krieger der Karolinger*, pp. 5-7 and *passim*.

⁶ See Section III below.

Two factors need to be borne in mind; the first is that, as Reynolds points out, we rarely have the actual deeds. For the most part, we must rely on summary ledger entries recorded by ecclesiastical lawyers, sometimes decades after the fact. In doing so, they may well have given the transaction a gloss favourable to their employer.⁷

The other is that the precise legal nature of the tenure was relatively unimportant so long as the economy did not run on money – so long as there was no active buying and selling of fiefs, and there was no opportunity to mobilise the value of the fief through pledge or mortgage.⁸

1.3. *Servitium, Militia* and the Feudal Order

It is undisputed that senior individuals had the right to call for services to be provided to them by those beholden to them; these *servitia* included some or all of: economic support in the guise of accommodating the seniors, their entourage and their animals on their incessant travels (*hospitium, gistum, mansio, fodrum*); contributions to the senior's household, initially in kind (*dona* – pigs, wine, cattle, horses, etc.), but later increasingly in cash; military (*hospiticum* or *militia*), of which more later; personal or political services (*consilium et auxilium*), usually involving attendance at the senior's court or on diplomatic missions; and, in the case of clerics, spiritual (*orationes*).⁹

As with many articles on the subject, the focus here is on the military aspect, often equated with *militia*. To an unknown but probably large extent, that is misleading: *militia* at least in the early Carolingian context refers to service generally, not strictly military service.¹⁰

⁷ Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, p. 477; Goosmann, 'Aristocratic Exploitation', p. 29; Gaillard, 'Fondations d'abbayes féminines', p. 5.

⁸ Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp. 64-65; somewhat differently but to the same effect Goosmann, 'Aristocratic Exploitation', p. 31.

⁹ Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', Part 2 pp. 335-37; Bernhardt, *Itinerant Kingship*, pp. 75-86. Bernhardt focuses on the Ottonian and Salian imperial courts and the imperial monasteries and convents, where the emperors' practice of 'management by walking around' between their *Pfalzen* placed great logistical burdens on their hosts; but there is no reason to assume that the same principles did not apply on a magnate level, albeit at a correspondingly more modest scale.

¹⁰ Haack, *Die Krieger der Karolinger*, pp. 101-04; on the shifting meaning of *miles* Sarti, 'Fränkischer *miles*'; on pp. 101-03 and 109-11, Sarti traces the usage for *miles/militare/militia* in the Merovingian sources, where the term – when it refers to a person in arms – means a gaoler. Leyser ('Canon Law and Knighthood', p. 558) disagrees, but see *ibid.* p. 559 referring to the *castra militaria*. Prinz (*Klerus und Krieg*, p. 169) points out that the term *militia* appears in the ninth century; earlier documents referred to the *homines* of an ecclesiastical magnate. It does appear that the meaning of *militia* (and *miles*) shifted to the strictly military from the later ninth century – Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 2 pp. 50-51. For the military entourages of German bishops see Arnold, 'German bishops', pp. 172-77, and Auer, *passim*.

Furthermore, the classification of ‘military’ presupposes a situation where the military can be categorically differentiated from other applications of sovereign power. In Carolingian times, this categorical differentiation was missing – there was, for example, no dedicated police force that would have been charged with the monopoly of state violence internally, as opposed to the ‘military’ function of exercising the monopoly of state violence externally. Keeping the peace was a communal effort, undertaken by the largely self-governing towns and villages as well as the lay and ecclesiastical princely powers.

The sources yield several references to these police, *gendarmérie*, or paramilitary roles – securing the highways, armed escorts for the transportation of goods by road or ship, escorts and messenger services, guard duty, etc.¹¹ The *Capitulare Bononiense* of 811 seems to address the following situation: A count who has to deliver to the emperor’s *missus* a certain *heribannum* (military tax) may not do so by dragooning his subjects to render sentry, escort, guarding, or similar services, nor may he resort to confiscation of land or slaves; the tax must be delivered in specie, or in arms, animals, supplies, or similarly useful contributions in kind.¹²

There was no differentiation between the force-application aspects in matters as diverse as tax collection, market supervision, health and safety (for instance, waste water management from butchers or tanneries, or open fires within towns), or judicial enforcement. So if *militia* referred to the right and obligation to mediate sovereign power, then that position intrinsically included the right and obligation to use violence to enforce that exercise of sovereign power.

In that sense, the vexing question whether the individuals rendering *militia*, the *milites*, were professional fighters, is side-stepped; their *militia* may or may not have been their full-time occupation, but even where it was full-time, it was not necessarily military service in the modern sense of the word. On the other hand, even where it was part-time, the individual exercising it had to have the training, equipment, and maybe entourage, to

¹¹ See also Planitz, ‘Scharmanner’, esp. pp. 60-62 – for Planitz, the *scararii* listed in the late ninth-century polyptych of the monastery at Prüm were peasants tasked with these functions; similarly Siegrist, ‘Pfarrei Schöftland’, pp. 69 and 95-97, on the *centena* in the northern Aargau belonging to the Fraumünster in Zurich. In the c. 810 *Brevium Exempla* (MGH – *Capit.* I, No. 128, §8, p. 252), some of the free landholders are obliged to *scaram facere*; in Charles the Bald’s 877 *Capitulare Carisiacense* (MGH – *Capit.* II, No. 281 / pp. 357-58, §7 and *responsio*), *scara* evidently implies fighting or at least armed protection. Renard (‘Les *herescarii*, guerriers ou paysans?’), too, believes ‘*herescarii*’ in the St. Bertin polyptych from the mid-ninth century probably referred to armed peasants, and points out that the ‘coast guards’ instituted by Charlemagne likewise constituted an armed local force that was not normally called up for campaigns (*ibid.*, p. 269); also Renard, ‘Politique militaire’, p. 19. See also the services owed by the royal yeomen of Emmen to the monastery of Lucerne: Siegrist, ‘Pfarrei Schöftland’, pp. 94-95: *iter exercitiale* (*Heerfahrt*, military service), *scara* and *navigii* (messenger, ferry, cart, and other transportation services), accommodation (*mansionaticus*), etc.

¹² Renaud, ‘Politique militaire’, p. 14; MGH – *Capit.* I, No. 74, §2, p. 166.

effectively enforce. Of course, whether the *militia* was full-time or part-time, the *miles* had to have the economic ‘leisure’ to render it – either because the service was somehow remunerated, or because the individual was given access to additional sources of income, or was independently wealthy.

Another question that need not be decided is whether the status of *miles* was a prerequisite for the performance of *militia*, or whether any individual rendering *militia* is therefore a *miles*; very likely, either could apply, with probably a bit of both being true. Similarly, there is no need to decide whether the classification as *miles* implied nobility, or to differentiate between vassals and ministerials.

But while it is here proposed that *militia* always included at least the potential obligation to render the service in a military setting, not every (para-)military service constituted the performing individual as a *miles*.¹³

Whether the above propositions can be shown in the sources will be addressed in this article.

I.4. Translations and Other Conventions

Translations are mine unless otherwise stated. In some instances, I use cognate words, e.g. vassal for *vassus* – no defined meaning should be attached to the choice; similarly, to avoid associations, I shall refer to a *miles* or to *milites* instead of knight.

II. THE ABBEY, ABBOTS AND ABBESSES

II.1. The Abbey

Early and high medieval abbeys were important centres in various respects¹⁴: in addition to the religious aspects, their intellectual production (school, library and scriptorium), and social care (pilgrim accommodation, poorhouse, hospital), they were also administrative nuclei and centres for technical know-how, manufacturing, and crafts. The St Gall monastery plan includes references to each of these activities.¹⁵

¹³ Generally also Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp. 17-47; see here also the article by Planitz, ‘Scharmannen’; Planitz speculates that some of Prüm’s twelfth-century *ministeriales* in knightly rank may have risen out of the peasant *Scharmannen* listed in the ninth-century polyptych.

¹⁴ Chantinne, ‘Place des laïcs’, p. 1 (para 1) and *passim*; L. Bourgeois, ‘Fortification des abbayes’, p. 205; Gaillard, ‘Fondations d’abbayes féminines’, p. 14.

¹⁵ See Schwind, ‘Zu karolingerzeitlichen Klöstern’; Henning, ‘Early European Towns’, pp. 17-21; Chantinne, ‘Fonctions militaires des abbayes’, p. 2 (para 6).

Among the manufacturing, arms production too featured, and the *Capitulare Bononiense* of 811 clearly suggests that at least part of the production was for own use:¹⁶

10. Constitutum est, ut nullus episcopus aut abbas aut abbatissa vel quislibet rector aut custos aecclesiae bruniam vel gladium sine nostro permissu cuilibet homini extraneo aut dare aut venundare praesumat, nisi tantum vassallis suis. Et si evenerit, ut in qualibet ecclesia vel sancto loco plures brunias habeant quam ad homines rectoris eiusdem ecclesiae sufficiant, tunc principem idem rector ecclesiae interroget, quid de his fieri debeat.¹⁷

The bulk of both the sources and the secondary literature referenced in this article relates to imperial or royal abbeys; it should not be overlooked that regional monasteries and convents, founded by families of ducal or at least comital rank, were of crucial importance in building the territorial assemblies that developed after the collapse of Carolingian central control, and that subsequent kings and emperors had to struggle to again subject to central oversight.¹⁸

¹⁶ Charlemagne's early ninth-century marching orders to (lay) Abbot Fulrad of St. Quentin specify the arms and tools to be carried (*MGH – Capit. I*, No. 75, p. 168); Henning, 'Early European Towns', p. 19; Kind, 'Kloster Fulda', p. 397; Schwind, 'Zu karolingerzeitlichen Klöstern', pp. 108, 15. Among the arms-producing craftsmen were smiths, sword-polishers, and shield-makers – the shield-makers were also called upon to furnish the binding covers for the monastery's books. In a letter from the 850s to Odo, Abbot of Corbie, Loup of Ferrières refers to a consignment of iron he wanted delivered (*MGH – Epp* Vol. 6, No. 111, p. 96).

¹⁷ *Capitulare Bononiense* (*MGH – Capit. I*, No. 74, §10, p. 167): 'It is held that no bishop nor abbot or abbess or any leader of a church shall presume to give or sell a hauberk or a sword to any outside man, except only their vassals. And if it should happen that in any church or holy place they should have more hauberks than are sufficient for the men of the leader of that church, then that church leader shall ask the prince what he instructs to be done with them.' Virtually the same in the *Capitularium Ansegisi* (*MGH – Capit. I*, III §75, p. 433); Chantinne, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes', p. 2 (para 6). Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, p. 76. Carolingian ferrous metals working technology was advanced, and weapons sought after outside the Empire: Henning, 'Early European Towns', pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 1; Mériaux, 'Comtes et abbayes'; L. Bourgeois, 'Fortifications des abbayes', pp. 201, 204; Chantinne, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes', pp. 10-11 (para 26-27). For a history of the development of a fortified village in the south of France linked to convent, initially a foundation of the counts of Toulouse, see G. Bourgeois, 'Formation et structure d'un village médiéval en Rouergue.' An attempt to even identify the convents in the south of France in Verdon, 'Monastères féminins.'

II.2. Abbeys and Their *Militia*

Abbeys were often situated at strategically interesting locations, and were also built to be militarily defensible.¹⁹ In 985, King Lothair instructed Adalbert, Archbishop of Rheims, to slight the wall he had had built at the monastery of Saint-Paul de Verdun, much to the chagrin of his secretary Gerbert of Aurillac, the later Pope Sylvester II.²⁰

Abbeys were an integral element of the Carolingian military organisation,²¹ and not just since the Carolingians proper.²² In the capitularies, *abbates* and *abbatissae* are regularly mentioned with bishops and counts in connection with *militia* matters, and external sources confirm this.²³ Abbot Loup of Ferrières in an 845 letter to a fellow abbot complains that the king's exactions in supplies, combined with the previous years' campaign losses, had left his house destitute, and unable to provide victuals or men until the next harvest unless he stripped the altar and starved his monks.²⁴

¹⁹ L. Bourgeois, 'Fortification des abbayes' – the fortification drive coincides with the Viking, Norman and Hungarian raids, but ambitious abbots also used their bases in much the same way as lay princes: *ibid.*, pp. 202-203; Chantinne, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes'; Kind, 'Kloster Fulda', p. 370; Mériaux, 'Comtes et abbayes', para 10; Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 1 *passim*; Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 63-64.

²⁰ Chantinne, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes', pp. 1-2 (para 2).

²¹ Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 77; Pöschl, *Bischofsgut*, p. 151; *Capitulare Tusiacense* (865): *Et missi nostri de ipso missatico providentiam habeant, qualiter unusquisque episcopus vel abbas seu abbatissa cum omni plenitudine et necessario hostili apparatu et ad tempus suos homines illuc transmiserit cum guntfanonario...* (And our *missi* shall take care to ascertain from their interlocutors, how each bishop or abbot or abbess will send, under the standard-bearer, their men in all their number, with the required military equipment, and on time, to the [appointed place]...; *MGH – Capit. II*, No. 274, §13, p. 331). Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 1, p. 325-26; Kind, 'Kloster Fulda', p. 397; Chantinne, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes', p. 2 (para 5); Nelson, 'Women and the Word', p. 64.

²² A capitulary of Pippin from 744 instructs: [*ut*] *abbati legitimi ostem non faciant, nisi tantum hominis eorum transmittant* (loyal abbots shall not assemble a force unless it is merely to deliver their men) – *Pippini principis capitulare Suessionense*, *MGH – LL* Vol. 1, §2, p. 21; Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', p. 320. Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, p. 10, reads *abbati legitimi* as 'proper abbots', i.e. not lay abbots; I prefer to see *abbati legitimi* as contrast to the rebellious magnates of which the capitulary treats, and as the term is used there in other contexts.

²³ See the following references and footnotes – an 817 letter from Archbishop Hetti of Treves to his suffragan in Toul on behalf of Emperor Louis the Pious instructs the suffragan to immediately mobilise all effectives of abbots, abbesses, counts, royal vassals and all the people of the parish who owe royal service (... *ut ... studeas cum summa festinatione omnibus abbatibus, abbatissis, comitibus, vassis dominicis vel cuncto populo parrochie tuae, quibus convenit miliciam regiae potestati exhibere, quatenus omnes praeparati sint...*) – *MGH – Epp* Vol 5, No. 2, pp. 277-78; Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 90; Haack, *Krieger der Karolinger*, pp. 219-20.

²⁴ Loup of Ferrières, *MGH – Epp*. Vol 6. No. 32, pp. 40-41; Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', p. 480-81; Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, p. 121.

The argument that a house's troops were overextended, either through previous years' service or because they were needed at home, is a common one. The *Capitulare missorum* of 819 of Louis the Pious set out the following:

27. Ut vassi nostri et vassi episcoporum, abbatum, abbatissarum et comitum, qui in anno praesente in hoste non fuerunt, heribannum rewadiant; exceptis his qui propter necessarias causas et a domno ac genitore nostro Karolo constitutas domi dimissi fuerunt, id est qui a comite propter pacem conservandam et propter coniugem ac domum eius custodiendam, et ab episcopo vel abbate vel abbatissa similiter propter pacem conservandam et propter fruges colligendas et familiam constringendam et missos recipiendos dimissi fuerunt.²⁵

Heads of houses seeking to keep their senior management on their jobs too seems to have been common; a survey commissioned by Charlemagne on the excuses given for not obeying a summons reports:

4. Quod episcopi et abbates sive comites dimittunt eorum liberos homines ad casam in nomine ministerialium, similiter et abbatissae: hi sunt falconarii, venatores, telonearii, praepositi, decani et alii qui missos recipiunt et eorum sequentes.²⁶

The sources clearly suggest that abbesses too had ministerials who were subject to call-up, since paragraph ten of the *Edictum Bononiense* specifically says that each *senior* was allowed to exempt two senior staff;²⁷ possibly, the other ministerials might have been

²⁵ *Capitulare Missorum*, MGH – *Capit. I*, No. 141, §27, p. 291: 'That our vassals and the vassals of the bishops, abbots, abbesses and counts, who in this year have not been in active service, should join the call-up; except those, who for reasons of necessity and as laid down by our lord and father Charlemagne were sent home, that is those who were dismissed by the count to keep the peace and to protect their spouse and home, and by the bishop or abbot or abess likewise for keeping the peace and to collect the harvest and keep the subjects in line and to receive our inspectors.' See also the *Capitulare missorum de exercitu promovendo* of 808 (MGH – *Capit. I*, No. 50, §§4-5, p. 137), though abbesses are here not mentioned. *Obiter* Verdon, 'Monastères féminins', p. 137.

²⁶ *Capitula de rebus exercitalibus in placito tractanda* of 811 (MGH – *Capit. I*, No. 73, §4, p. 165): 'That the bishops and abbots or counts are releasing their free men to go home as essential officials, as are abbesses: these are falconers, hunters, harbour fees collectors, supervisors, deacons and others who deal with the Emperor's officials, as well as those in their service.' Renard, 'Une élite paysanne', p. 323. *Praepositi* supervised the work of lay servants and serfs in the agricultural activities and workshops of monasteries (Henning, 'Early European Towns', p. 20) and had the right to award fiefs. On other specialised 'essential staff' see *Capitulare Aquisgranense* of 801-813 (MGH – *Capit. I*, No. 77, §8, p. 171), where two dedicated wolf-hunters have to be appointed, and are normally exempt from call-up.

²⁷ *Capitulare Bononiense* of 811, MGH – *Capit. I*, No. 74, §10, p. 167. On the other side are the individuals who apparently transferred their lands to the abbey and then took the same back as

obliged to respond to a call-up as individuals on the basis of other allegiances, and not as part of an abbey contingent.

However, details are lacking; the first problem is that *militia*, in Carolingian usage, referred to service generally, not specifically to military service. In the 817 *Notitia de servitio monasteriorum*, three categories of monastery are listed: Those who owe both *militia* and *dona* (gifts, more properly tribute), those who owe *dona* but no *militia*, and those who are only asked to offer prayers. It is clear that the list is not an exhaustive one, but why the monasteries in question were listed here, is not known.²⁸ Two of them (if they are correctly identified) are convents: Notre-Dame de Soissons²⁹ is listed in the first category, owing *dona et militia*, Baume-les-Dames in the second part, owing *dona* only.³⁰

Henry II in 1005 exempted the convent of Essen from military service:

... neque theloneum sive parafredos in aliquibus eiusdem monasterii locis ab hominibus sui iuris exigere aut homines ipsius ecclesiae servos litos vel liberos alias ad placitum vocare presumat aut in militiam sive hostem ire constringat, nisi abbatissa vel advocatus, quem abbatissa et congregatione eiusdem loci in hoc opus elegerit.³¹

Emperor Louis II the German's 853 grant of the Fraumünster Abbey to his eldest daughter Hildegard has a very similar though less extensive passage, granting the command of the abbey's *familia militans* to the abbess. Interestingly, while Henry II's diploma protects the abbey from any *index publicus aut exactor aut quislibet in iudiciaria potestate*, Louis II's diploma says that no *index publicus nec comes vel quislibet in iudiciaria potestate* may interfere; it is not clear whether the replacement of *comes* with *exactor* is deliberate and explained by the changed circumstances a century and a half later, or due to the (forged) Henry II diploma having been intentionally adulterated, or because the relevant passage

dependents, all in order to avoid military service: Renard, 'Une élite paysanne', p. 324-25; Haack, *Krieger der Karolinger*, 152-53. Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 96-97, points to another dynamic: That ecclesiastical magnates would call up a landowner so often that he became so impoverished that he had no choice but to surrender his land to the church.

²⁸ In detail on the *notitia* Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', especially Part 3.

²⁹ For a history of this important abbey: Müller, 'Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Soissons.'

³⁰ Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', Part 3 pp. 481-82 and 490-91.

³¹ '... and that [no-one in secular authority – see next fn 32] shall exact any fee or palfrey in any of that monastery's locations from free men or otherwise presume to call up the men belonging to the church, whether serfs or free men, or constrains them into *militia* or to join the army, unless [so ordered] by the abbess or by the advocate, whom the abbess and the congregation may elect for this purpose' – *MGH – DD H II* No. 39^b, p. 46; Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 2 pp. 48-49.

begins with references to debt enforcement, and grammatically the subject of the sentence simply carries over to the next subclause, beginning lines later.³²

Another relevant document, an Imperial chancery memo known as the *Indiculus loricatorum* from 981, lists eleven monasteries, in this case in respect of 422 mounted reinforcements to be sent to Emperor Otto II, then on campaign in Italy.³³ This document clearly refers to military service; apart of course from the gap in time and the different territorial focus, only one house (Lorsch) is listed in the first category of the *Notitia*; three further ones (Hersfeld, Fulda and Kempten) figure in the *Notitia*'s second category, but none of them is a female house. Another remarkable feature of the *Indiculus* is that the relevant abbeys for military purposes were subordinated to the secular *regna*, which might have been different from their administrative home in the ecclesiastical organisation.³⁴

There are several possibilities to resolve the apparent gaps; on one hand, as also suggested by the capitularies, any individual attached to a convent who is eligible for military service would report to the relevant count, and would not be part of an abbey contingent.³⁵

Another possible solution – albeit one for which there is no direct evidence in the sources – is that infantry and cavalry were called up differently; that the call-up of the infantry occurred via the counts, regardless of whether an individual belonged to a monastery; and that the call-up of abbatial cavalry was via the abbeys, but convents did not field cavalry.

³² For Henry II's diploma, see previous fn. 31; the text of Louis II's diploma, in the original and with translation, can be found in Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 35-38. Henry II's diploma, literally translated, is addressed to any 'public judge or bailiff or anyone from the judicial branch'. In Louis II's diploma, *exactor* (a bailiff, tax collector or debt collector) is replaced with *comes* (count). The constitutional meaning of *index* cannot be explored here, but the mention of *comes* in Louis II's diploma, in connection with that of the abbey's *familia militans*, is striking. Louis' phrase is found again in Otto I's 952 confirmation and expansion of the abbey's possessions: Otto I – *MGH – DD – O I* No. 146, p. 227.

³³ Gassmann, 'Combat Training', pp. 84-86.

³⁴ Werner, 'Heeresorganisation', pp. 805-08; Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 1 pp. 372-82; Chantinne, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes', p. 10 (para 26).

³⁵ Bearing in mind that much comital land consisted of secularised church land – see Pöschl, *Bischofsgut*, p. 130-36; also Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', Part 3 p. 471 and 474; L. Bourgeois, 'Fortification des abbayes', p. 204. Note also the language in *Capitulare Tusiense* (865): ...*fideles nostri, tam episcopi, quam abbates et comites et abbatissarum homines...* (...those true to us, alike bishops as abbots and counts and the men of abbesses...; *MGH – Capit. II*, No. 274, §13, p. 331). Comital troops might also man an abbey's military defences – L. Bourgeois, 'Fortifications des abbayes', pp. 200-201. In time, especially from Otto III onwards, bishops and abbots (but probably not abbesses) in the HRE acquired comital rights – Mordini, *Fuendo ecclesiastico*, pp. 189-90; in France, the development was different – Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 166-71; also Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', p. 321.

II.3. Abbots and Abbesses

In the Early Middle Ages, the office of abbess was, within the structure of the Carolingian and Ottonian empires, a unique opportunity for a woman to gain a prominent formal role; women were not generally barred from prominent secular roles, but where they were princes in their own right (as with Mathilda of Tuscany or Eleanor of Aquitaine), or regents during the minority of their sons, their position was dependent on unpredictable events affecting men taking precedence over them.³⁶

On a prosopographical level, abbesses seem to have been recruited from the magnate class, usually from the family of the abbey's founders which, for royal abbeys, meant the royal families.³⁷ In this, they do not seem to differ from the bulk of their male colleagues, though the occasional meritorious social riser story in the background of an abbot is not mirrored in the case of abbesses. As with abbots, lay abbesses are also known, as evidenced by the royal abbeys of Nivelles or the Fraumünster.³⁸

Several abbesses feature prominently as royal counsellors (for example Mathilda, Abbess of Quedlinburg, sister of Otto II and aunt to Otto III³⁹) or secular and religious intellectuals. Their background suggests that they were abbesses because they had high social standing and were dynastically connected, rather than the other way around.

II.4. Dedication of the Abbey's Assets

If an abbey was obliged to provide *servitia*, then that obligation had to be satisfied from the income or, in the case of fiefs granted to *milites*, from the assets of the abbey. There was therefore always a tension between the various stakeholders.

It is accepted that the issues, and the solutions, were the same for bishoprics as well as male and female abbeys, so the question can be answered in a general sense, though I shall here refer only to the abbess.

Fundamentally, two stakeholders were involved: The congregation of the resident nuns (here referred to as the conventuals), and the abbess. The conventual costs included the board of the nuns, the maintenance of the buildings and grounds, the lighting of the church, and various other costs directly relating to the nuns themselves, such as their habits. The abbess' part paid for the maintenance of the abbess, but also any *dona* or *servitia*

³⁶ Classen, 'Agency of Female Characters', p. 228.

³⁷ Stafford, 'Powerful Women in the Early Middle Ages'; Gaillard, 'Fondations d'abbayes féminines', pp. 7-11; Nelson, 'Women and the Word', pp. 64-68; Ortenberg, 'Virgin Queens'; also Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, p. 194

³⁸ Nivelles: Chantinne, 'Place des laïcs', p. 3 (para 8); Mériaux, 'Comtes et abbayes', para 7; Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', Part 3 p. 482. Fraumünster: below Section V.

³⁹ Stafford, 'Powerful Women in the Early Middle Ages', pp. 398-99.

regis owed to the king or emperor,⁴⁰ as well as the costs of the secular administration of the abbey's domains and the satisfaction of the secular *militia* obligations related to those assets, which could include granting benefices to (lay) *milites*.

In a charter in favour of Nivelles Abbey in 1059, an abbey with both male and female houses under an abbess, Emperor Henry IV separated the abbey's holdings into three groups, the first funding the *xenodochium* (social services); the second the abbess (*in beneficium abbatisse*); and the third the conventuals (*in prebendum fratrum seu sanctimonialium*). Regarding the abbess' income, the emperor states the following: *Ad beneficium abbatisse altare sancte Gertrudis cum omni familia*, [follows a list of vineyards with attendant churches] *cum ceteris beneficiis, que tenent milites ad commune servitium abbatisse et congregationis*.⁴¹

Occasionally a division into three or four (not necessarily equal) parts is seen, by separating out the building maintenance, or the abbey's social services, such as a hostel for pilgrims, a poorhouse or asylum, a school, or a hospital.⁴² Ultimately, though, the detailed allocation within each of those pockets remained in the discretion of the abbess.

It seems to have been a fairly regular occurrence that the head of the house would short-change the conventuals to make up the abbess' part, with traces in the sources relating to

⁴⁰ In an early eighth-century letter, Eangyth, abbess in Kent, complains about the heavy burden of the services to be rendered to king and queen, bishop, prefect, the mighty and the counts (*servitium regis et reginae, episcopi et praefecti et potestatum et comitum*) – MGH – *Epp* Vol. 3, No. 14, pp. 261-62; Chantinne, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes', p. 10 (para 26); Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 2 pp. 51-52.

⁴¹ 'For the benefice of the abbess the altar of Saint Gertrude with the entire household, [follows a list of vineyards with attendant churches] with other benefices, which the *milites* hold for the common service to the abbess and the resident community.' Henry IV, MGH – *DD – H IV I*, Cap. 49, p. 64 – though the diploma cannot be confirmed to be original. Similarly, a forged diploma of Otto III ca. 996 allowed Bishop Henry of Würzburg to give lands belonging to the Abbey of Amorbach to his *milites*: *Hec omnia prenominate episcopus ex nostra ... donacione sue subegit dicioni et militibus suis in beneficia concessit* (MGH – *DD – O III*, Cap. 434, p. 870; Arnold, 'German Bishops', p. 170. Chantinne, 'Place des laïcs', p. 3 (para 9); *idem*, 'Fonctions militaires des abbayes', p. 10 (para 25); Mériaux, 'Comtes et abbayes', para 7; Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', Part 2 pp. 330-37; Gaillard, 'Fondations d'abbayes féminines', p. 17; Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 1 p. 347.

⁴² Division in three: prevalent in Iberia; division in four prevalent in Italy: Pöschl, *Bischofsgut*, p. 47: *Res ecclesiasticae sub aequa divisione distribuit in quatuor partes; primam partem pro necessariis vel ornatibus ecclesiae; secundam canonicorum comoditatibus ascripsit; tertiam vero in agmina pauperum proflua miseratione expendens; ultimae partis summulam pro suis usibus servat*. (The church's holding he by equitable division separated into four parts: The first part for the necessities and decorations of the church; the second he allocated to the comforts of the canons; the third to be spent in generous sympathy toward the struggles of the poor; and the small amount of the last part might serve for his own needs) – referring to Bishop Adalbert of Prague in the tenth century (p. 584-85). The abbey's assets were exclusively for the use of the abbey; any subordinate churches had to have their own assets to fund their maintenance and operations. See also Hincmar of Reims, *De ecclesiis et capellis*, pp. 119-20.

occasionally robust protests by the conventuals.⁴³ On one hand, beginning west of the Rhine in the ninth century, and extending to the east of the Rhine in the late tenth and strongly in the eleventh century, the kings and emperors were called upon to decree a separation of the assets, ring-fencing principally the sources of income dedicated to the conventuals. These are then regularly also exempted from any obligation of royal service. The other category of documents is the requests for reduction in the *servitium regis*, often accompanied by the veiled threat that otherwise, the demanded quota could only be achieved by dipping into the conventual allocations.

Where an allocation is decreed, it is often limited to specifying the conventual sources of income, only occasionally – maybe when a three-way allocation is required – are the abbess’ assets specified as well. Probably, chanceries focused on spelling out the extraordinary only, meaning that anything not specifically stated as exempted remained subject to the general rules, including the rules on obligations for secular *militia*.

III. THE *LIBRI FEUDORUM*

III.1. Background

Libri Feudorum refers to several academic restatements trying to make sense of the *corpus* of practices, rules, capitularies, decrees, and customs surrounding the complex of ‘feudal’ rights and obligations, primarily in relation to land. They were compiled from the twelfth century onward in Lombardy, and informed the legal discussion for centuries – initially as source of law, and since the nineteenth century as an academic subject.⁴⁴

The significance of the *Libri Feudorum* as a source for the reality of feudal practices generally should not be overemphasised. First of all, they focus on Lombardy; the Kingdom of Lombardy enjoyed a sophisticated, Roman law-based legal culture which predated the 774 Carolingian conquest and continued its distinct evolution even under Frankish rule. Reading the Lombard academic texts with a Romanist eye, one gains the impression that the Lombard lawyers were trying to shoehorn into their Romanist legal system those practices which the Frankish crown was importing into Lombardy, and in the process had to display a remarkable originality and ability to think outside the box, nowhere more so than in the structure of the ecclesiastic fief.⁴⁵

⁴³ Even at the wealthy Fraumünster: Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 92 and 107-08. In time, the conventuals would themselves form an entity with its own set of rights and privileges beside the abbess – for the Fraumünster, see *ibid.*, pp. 131, 195, 215-16.

⁴⁴ Mordini, *Libri feudorum*, pp. 9-35; *ead.*, ‘Aspetti della disciplina’, Part 1, pp. 224-32; *Libri Feudorum*, pp. 43-48; Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, p. 5 and *passim*.

⁴⁵ Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, pp. 215-225 – the gloss is mine.

It is difficult to judge the practical impact of Lombard legal thinking on the rest of the Empire; the issue is further obscured by the fact that documentary evidence for early medieval feudal practices relies on summaries, extracts and compilations that were redacted centuries later, by interested parties, and after an academised version of Roman law became more widespread in the administration of Western Europe's principalities.

The *Libri Feudorum* still merit attention since *consuetudo*, or customary practice, was an important source of law. Throughout, though, it has to be borne in mind that medieval legal texts are not necessarily a reflection of reality, but may often be just statements of policy or ambition, not always successful.

III.2. Grantors of a Fief

The *Libri Feudorum* open with the statement:

Feudum autem dare possunt archiepiscopus, episcopus, abbas, abbatissa, praepositus, si antiquitus fuerit consuetudo eorum, feudum dare. Marchio, comes, qui proprie regni vel regis capitanei dicuntur, similiter feudum dare possunt.⁴⁶

By the addition of the subclause to the first sentence, it is evident that an effort was under way to limit the granting of ecclesiastical fiefs;⁴⁷ still, the position of abbesses here is no different from that of bishops or abbots. The matter is confirmed in a further provision, where fiefs granted by bishops, abbots or abbesses after a decree by Pope Urban II of 1095 are invalidated, but confirmed for those predating the decree.⁴⁸

III.3. Grantees of a Fief

The circle of possible grantees of a fief is defined more by exclusion than positive statement; three key categories are:

- Clerics – in principle, clerics may not hold fiefs, and a *miles* who dons the habit loses any fief he holds, even if he later reverts to lay status.⁴⁹ However, if a bishop or an abbot loses his fiefs due to his own misconduct, only those that

⁴⁶ *Libri Feudorum*, Book 1, §1 (p. 83 – in the vulgate version): ‘Archbishops, bishops, abbots, abbesses and *praepositi* may grant fiefs, if since ancient time it was their custom to grant fiefs. Margrave and count, who are referred to as the military leaders of the kingdom or the king, may likewise award fiefs.’ The provision goes on to say that *capitanei* – leading vassals – may in turn subinfeudate – see also *ibidem*, Book 2, §10 (pp. 127-128).

⁴⁷ Mordini, *Fendo ecclesiastico*, pp. 37-38; *ead.*, ‘Aspetti della disciplina’, Part 1, pp. 233-38.

⁴⁸ *Libri Feudorum*, Book 1, §7 (p. 92); Mordini, *Fendo ecclesiastico*, pp. 38-43.

⁴⁹ *Libri Feudorum*, Book 2, §21 (pp. 137-138); Mordini, ‘Aspetti della disciplina’, Part 1, p. 245.

are purely personal are permanently lost, the fiefs-of-office too revert to the king but are held in trust for the benefit of the individual's successor.⁵⁰

- Women – again, in principle, women may not be granted fiefs, principally because they cannot render service. However, a woman may inherit a fief, but only if there is no male heir.⁵¹
- Individuals with physical challenges – the issue is controversial, with some authors confirming that a handicapped individual may retain a paternal fief, others denying this, on the basis that the individual, like women or clerics, is not capable of rendering service.⁵²

III.4. Objects of an Ecclesiastical Fief

One of the plum assets an ecclesiastical prince held was the parish churches under his or her supervision. Parish churches were directly subordinate to the cathedral, and privileged over chapels and other minor churches in that they were entitled to the tithes of the parish, and monopolised other lucrative sacraments. The tithe income from a parish church was commonly sufficient to maintain a mounted *miles*, formally in the role of the parish's *advocatus*, and reserving a mere third or more regularly just a quarter of the tithes for the parson and the needs of the flock. Additionally, some parish churches owned land, which could in turn be subinfeudated to more minor *milites*.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Libri Feudorum*, Book 2, §36 (p. 166): a clear differentiation is made between personal fiefs, which a bishop or abbot could lose, and a fief-of-office, which only fell into abeyance. Abbesses are not mentioned – a possible reason is that abbesses would not have been able to receive personal fiefs, only fiefs-of-office. Furthermore, the provision dates from the Diet of Roncaglia 1158, by which time the issue may no longer have been relevant, or was not relevant to the political objectives of Emperor Frederick I.

⁵¹ *Libri Feudorum*, Book 2, §17 (pp. 134-135), and *ibidem*, Book 2, §30 (p. 160).

⁵² *Libri Feudorum*, Book 2, §36 (p. 166).

⁵³ See Mordini, 'Aspetti della disciplina', Part 1, pp. 238-43; *ead.*, *Fendo ecclesiastico*, pp. 56-63. See also Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, p. 206 – though the economic expansion in the vale of Uri had diminished the relative importance of the land holdings of the abbey, the value of the church tithe rights more than made up. Some churches are specifically listed as pertaining to the abbesses' reserved assets in Henry IV's diploma for Nivelles (*MGH – DD – H IV I*, Cap. 49, p. 64, see also fn. 41). The issue was one of constant friction among the Church, ecclesiastical princes, monarchs, lay magnates, *milites*, and tithe-payers. The practice, if it extended north of the Alps, would explain the large contingents of *loricati* contributed by the bishops in the *Indiculus Loricatorum* – of the two-thousand-and-thirty mounted men dispatched, a full half came from archbishops and bishops, with the sees of Cologne, Mainz, Treves, Strasbourg, and Augsburg alone contributing one hundred each; Gassmann, 'Combat Training', p. 85.

III.5. The *Edictum de Beneficiis* of Conrad II

A frequently-cited source for feudal law rights of *militēs* is the 1037 edict issued by Emperor Conrad II, and dealing with vassal *militēs*. The key legal notion derived from the edict is the *dominium*-nature of the *miles*' feudal rights; though the vassal's title is only *dominium utile* (in the later terminology), it is capable of being asserted even against the *senior* as the holder of the superior *dominium directum*.

The *Edictum* purports to continue established legal tradition, but in reality attempts a radical revision. Conrad issued it during his siege of Milan, in Lombardy, held against him by Lombard bishops and senior lay nobility. The political objective of the edict was to weaken the ties of loyalty of the defending *militēs*; the Emperor leveraged the fact that these prelate-beholden *militēs* held fiefs over what he considered 'public' land. The passage merits consideration in full, both for its legal content and its clever framing:

Omnibus sancte ecclesie fidelibus et nostris tam presentibus quam et futuris notum esse volumus, quod nos ad reconciliandos animos seniorum et militum, ut ad invicem semper inveniuntur concordēs et ut fideliter et perseveranter nobis et suis senioribus serviant devote, precepimus et firmiter statuimus, ut nullus miles episcoporum abbatum abbatissarum aut marchionum vel comitum vel omnium, qui beneficium de nostris publicis bonis aut de ecclesiarum prediis tenet nunc aut tenuerit vel hactenus iniuste perdidit, tam de nostris maioribus vasvasoribus quam et eorum militibus sine certa et convicta culpa suum beneficium perdat, nisi secundum constitutionem antecessorum nostrorum et iudicium parium suorum.⁵⁴

He thus considered these *militēs* indirectly as Imperial vassals, though their immediate allegiance was to their lay or ecclesiastical *senior*.⁵⁵ The Imperial thinking clearly was that the Emperor had more to gain from granting the *militēs* autonomy from both Emperor and their bishops than from affirming the *militēs*' obligations to their immediate *senior*.

⁵⁴ Conrad II, *Edictum de Beneficiis*, MGH – DD – Ko II No. 244, pp. 336-337: 'To all those faithful to the holy church and to us, both presently and in the future, we wish it to be known, for the reconciliation of the minds of *seniores* and *militēs*, so that they may always be found in harmony toward each other and that they may faithfully and with perseverance serve us and their *seniores* devotedly, we decree and firmly ordain, that no *miles* of bishops, abbots or abbesses, or of margraves or counts or of anyone who now holds or in the future may hold or who has currently unjustly lost, a benefice from our public assets or of church land, whether [held] from our leading vassals or from their *militēs*, should lose [t]his benefice without clear and adjudicated fault, unless [this occurs] in accordance with the laws of our predecessors and the judgement of his peers.' Note the specific mention of abbesses.

⁵⁵ Mordini, 'Aspetti della disciplina', Part 1, pp. 220-22; Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, 199-204.

III.6. Eike von Repgow's *Sachsenspiegel*

The *Sachsenspiegel*, the first vernacular German compilation of legal customs, was authored by Eike von Repgow in the early thirteenth century. His family were *Schöffenbarfreie* (the exact meaning of the term is unclear; it seems to refer to gentry with certain judicial functions and privileges), and ministerials of the Archbishop of Magdeburg. Eike himself was probably in the service of Count Hoyer of Falkenstein, who was also *Vogt* of the Quedlinburg convent.⁵⁶

The *Sachsenspiegel* does not dwell on abbesses, but there are two intriguing references. In I 3 §2, abbesses along with bishops and abbots hold the second *Heerschild*, just after the king, but ahead of the lay princes.⁵⁷ In III 42 §2, Eike apologises for not elaborating on the legal position of ministerials, but, he says, the rights of ministerials against their bishops, abbots and abbesses are so diverse that he cannot report them.⁵⁸

Short as they are, Eike's references do confirm that abbesses were in the early thirteenth century still considered part of the Holy Roman Empire's military constitution, on a par with abbots and bishops. They were also lords of ministerials, again on a par with abbots and bishops.

IV. FIGHTING CLERGY, FIGHTING WOMEN

In the introduction to this article, I wrote that abbesses are twice removed from fighting, first as clerics, then as women. As stated, this article will not delve into the matter of fighting (male) prelates – there is sufficient literature on the subject. It bears remembering, though, that clerics of all stripes were generally allowed to use violence in self-defence.⁵⁹ As intrepid travellers, they might well have faced such situations.

Women were not expected to fight, but the notion that women assuming a fighting role was an offence to the natural order of things is also not correct. They often were left alone in charge of the family fiefs while their husbands were away on assignments or even on Crusade, and Christine de Pizan advised noble wives to study Vegetius.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Brie, 'Eike von Repgow'.

⁵⁷ Eike von Repgow, *Sachsenspiegel*, I 3 §2 (pp. 72-73); the free lords hold the fourth, the *Schöffenbare* and the free lords' men the fifth, and honourable men the sixth.

⁵⁸ Eike von Repgow, *Sachsenspiegel*, III 42 §2 (p. 223): 'Under iewelkeme biscope unde abbede unde ebbedischen hebben de denstlude sunderlik recht, dar umme ne kan ek is nicht besceden'.

⁵⁹ Duggan, 'Evolution of Latin Canon Law', pp. 508-12; Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 1 pp. 318-20; Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 11-14, 26-35; Nelson, 'Women and the Word', pp. 28-29.

⁶⁰ Verbruggen, 'Women in Medieval Armies', p. 124 and *passim* – acknowledging here that Christine is several centuries outside the time frame of this article, but the references with Verbruggen – leaving aside such obvious witnesses as Jeanne d'Arc – are copious and extend earlier.

In fiction as well, there are numerous stories where women donned armour and took up arms in defence of their city or castle, and their doing so dishonoured neither them nor the men they were substituting. Gyburc and her women take up armour and weapons in Wolfram von Eschenbach's early thirteenth-century *Willehalm* after the defence of the city is thrown upon them. The circumstances are acknowledged as exceptional, but Wolfram deals with the situation matter-of-factly – and with touching realism.⁶¹

An intriguing source in this context is MS I.33 (variously known as the *Walpurgis* or the *Tower Fechtbuch*), a fencing manual for sword and buckler written and illustrated in the Lake Constance-Würzburg region in around the late thirteenth century, and now kept in the Royal Armouries in Leeds. None of the protagonists in the illustrations are male gendered, they are either clerics (monks) or a woman (the eponymous Walpurgis), and the manual teaches combat with the then-current weapon of choice, the arming sword, accompanied by the buckler, a dinner plate-sized steel or steel-reinforced shield that is principally used to protect the sword hand, but can also be used aggressively. This is not the place to discuss the finer points of sword and buckler combat, suffice it to say the weaponry and the techniques are not mere play, recreation, or sports, but have their place in serious settings.⁶²

So women in the Middle Ages were not the ineffectual damsels in distress beloved of popular myth. That is a misogynistic image purposively developed by (male) intellectuals from the Late Middle Ages onward,⁶³ but does not yet colour the earlier sources.

V. A PORTRAIT: THE FRAUMÜNSTER ABBEY ZURICH

V.1. Outline History of the Abbey

The *Fraumünster* – properly the Convent of St. Felix and Regula, located on the left bank of the Limmat in central Zurich and today famous for the stained glass windows painted by Marc Chagall – was in 853 given by Emperor Louis II the German to his eldest daughter Hildegard as the first proprietor. Her younger sister Bertha succeeded her. Zurich was a commercially and strategically important imperial city, and Louis endowed the previously insignificant abbey with the royal manor, the Albis forest, and lands in Uri.

⁶¹ Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Willehalm*, fifth book, 226,29-227,1 (p. 146), and further until chapter 232. I am grateful to Romana Kaske for the reference, which is further elaborated in her forthcoming doctoral dissertation *Objekte des Krieges in Wolframs von Eschenbach Willehalm* (Peter Lang, 2022). See also more generally Classen, 'Agency of Female Characters'.

⁶² Cinato, 'Buckler Play'; Gräf, 'Fighting in women's clothes'; Binard, 'Collation of the first Fight book.' Historically, bucklers would have been carried by, for example, the city guard or travellers abroad.

⁶³ Nelson, 'Women and the Word', p. 53.

Additional donations followed, and in 1045 it acquired privileges of coinage, toll, and market.

The advocacy (*Schirm-* or *Kastvogtei*) over the abbey lay with the dukes of Swabia, later with the Counts of Lenzburg and the Dukes of Zähringen. The abbesses were initially lay, but the Benedictine abbey acquired immunity (and the right to elect its own abbesses) in the eleventh century. The membership was exclusive, the nuns regularly numbered only about a dozen daughters from the regional nobility, and they resisted the admission of commoners.

Emperor Frederick II raised the abbess to the rank of imperial prince (giving her *inter alia* the authority to ennoble her followers), and for a while she held the *Reichsvogtei* (imperial advocacy) over Zurich, representing the emperor to the city's governing patriciate. The abbess' influence declined in the fourteenth century and especially after the revolution of 1336, which installed a council of guild masters and knights, among them ministerials of the abbess. When Zurich joined the Reformation, the abbey was secularised.⁶⁴

V.2. The Abbey's Lands

In an era where original documents are scarce, we have a surviving register from the late ninth century, listing around a hundred farmsteads belonging to the royal *curtis* of Zurich, and thus to the abbey's assets, in the nearby northern Aargau – where a complement of paramilitary *centenarii* is recorded.⁶⁵ Some of the rents were evidently awarded out as benefices. A later addition to this *Fraumünsterrodel* lists the usurpation of various rents; the most enterprising usurper, securing the rents of fifty-three farms, was a matron referred to as Hilrpurc – a rent collector sent by the abbey was killed. It is likely in this context that King Arnulf instructed a Count Hildibald to set matters to right.⁶⁶

The abbey's holdings were extensive, and would have required a large, knowledgeable and senior staff to administer.⁶⁷ Copious records survive only after the thirteenth century, so nothing is known about the abbey's early ministerials. One abbess-beholden family that emerges at that time are the Manesse; they must have been prominent for a while before, since they are recorded as occupying the Hardturm, a fortification set on Zurich's ford across the Limmat, held extensive fiefs around Zurich, and were well connected with the

⁶⁴ Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 35-274; Steinmann, 'Fraumünster'; Kaiser, 'Vom Früh- zum Hochmittelalter', pp. 159-72.

⁶⁵ Siegrist, 'Pfarrei Schöftland', pp. 90-98; on the *centenarii*, see also above fn 11.

⁶⁶ Siegrist, 'Pfarrei Schöftland', p. 95; Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 88-89.

⁶⁷ Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 111-13 and 115-16.

other city-resident knights and the regional petty nobility. After the 1336 revolution, the family sat continuously in the governing council for about a hundred years.⁶⁸

V.3. Elizabeth of Wetzikon, the Manesse, and Rudolf of Habsburg

The abbacy of Elizabeth of Wetzikon from 1270 to 1298 was a political and cultural high point in the history of the Fraumünster, and of Zurich. She was an early ally of Rudolf of the up-and-coming Counts of Habsburg, partly thanks to the good offices of her cousin Heinrich von Klingenberg, Rudolf's chancellor and later Bishop of Constance, the most powerful prince in the region and diocesan bishop to the abbey.⁶⁹ It is with her sponsorship that Rüdiger the Elder – together with other Manesses, including a Grossmünster canon, and her uncle Heinrich von Klingenberg, Dean of the Grossmünster – commissioned the manuscript now known as the *Codex Manesse*. Quite possibly, the conventuals in the abbey's expert scriptorium produced at least parts of the work.⁷⁰

But Elizabeth politically maintained her independence of Rudolf, who quickly made himself unpopular in Zurich by raising taxes in order to finance his Austrian adventures, and by seeking to centralise power at the expense of the customary rights and privileges of the towns, rural corporations and abbeys in the core Habsburg domains in north central Switzerland.

This is particularly evident in Uri; Emperor Louis II had already granted the abbey extensive rights in the valley, but it remained an insignificant backwater until the opening of the Gotthard Pass in the early thirteenth century. Now the strategically key northern gateway to this economically and militarily important cross-Alpine highway to Milan, Rudolf sought to assert Habsburg dominion in the region. As king, he already held the *Reichsvogtei* over the secular estates in the valley, but Elizabeth deftly thwarted his efforts to leverage the imperial *Kastrovogtei* over the abbey to gain control of its lands in Uri.

Elizabeth was not just passive; the abbey's holdings in Uri had long been neglected, but she took care to reassert and cultivate its existing rights. She also made moves to block Rudolf's strategic ambitions by developing close ties with Uri's leading nobility, including

⁶⁸ Hälz-Steffen, 'Manesse'; on the possible progression from *Scharmann* to ministerial petty nobility see above, fn 13. The prominence of the Manesse also meant that they occasionally embroiled the abbey's lands in destructive feuds, as in the 1260s one between Rüdiger II Manesse and Count Frederick of Toggenburg, and they also sat in the College of Canons of the Grossmünster, the Fraumünster's sometime rival (but also occasional ally) on the opposite side of the Limmat – Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 171-72.

⁶⁹ A contingent of Zurich knights fought for Rudolf in his victory against Ottokar of Bohemia in 1278, the beginning of the Habsburg rule over the Duchy of Austria – without which, as Vogelsanger wryly (and counterfactually) muses, Zurich might have taken the place of Vienna as the capital city of the HRE: Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, p. 176.

⁷⁰ Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 179-82.

the independence-minded and powerful Attinghausen, and by acquiring fortifications along the road to the pass. Shortly after Rudolf's death in 1291, three of the central Swiss valleys – Schwyz and Unterwalden, in addition to Uri – reputedly allied to resist further Habsburg encroachment; one of the legendary conspirators was Arnold Meier von Silenen, Elizabeth's reeve.⁷¹

V.4. The Abbey's Fighting Men

The sources and literature here cited do not dwell on the abbey's military might – Vogelsanger, otherwise a diligent chronicler, positively avoids the subject. Maybe that is due to his personal history; he was a pastor who advanced to arguably the most prestigious office in the Zwinglian State Church of Zurich, the *Fraumünsterpfarrer*, and his love for the historical and physical environment in which he lived his calling clearly shows.

In the abbey's heyday between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, both it and Zurich (and the two were inextricably linked) were politically, economically, militarily, and strategically important at an imperial level. At one point or another, the histories of all the regional dynastic families intersect with the history of the abbey, and both regional and imperial level succession disputes – the transition from the Salians to the Staufer, the *interregnum* after the demise of the Staufer, the disputed succession after the death of Rudolf of Habsburg – involved military action in the proximity of the abbey.

Important and rich as the abbey was, the fact that the abbey itself managed to maintain a level of neutrality or ambiguity in these upheavals and even in the investiture controversy can only mean one thing: That the abbey was able uphold a credible deterrent to any pretender to its economic (and therefore military) might, which in practical terms meant that the lay commanders guarding the abbey's lands and garrisoning its fortifications trusted in the abbesses' ability to assert the abbey's independence, and therefore secure their fiefs. By the fourteenth century, in a time of economic expansion and greater social mobility, the *locus* of power shifted from the abbey to the city, and the abbey's fortunes declined as its ministerials in turn shifted their focus.

VI. SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

VI.1. Paucity of Sources

It was clear from the outset that the source material, both in primary and secondary literature, was poor – even where abbatial archives⁷² have survived substantially intact, the record rarely extends back past the 1122 Concordat of Worms, which substantially shifted the dynamics between Church and Crown, both in Germany proper and (though

⁷¹ Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 174-79 and 206-07.

⁷² The fact that surviving archives are predominantly ecclesiastical adds to the selective record.

differently) in other parts of Holy Roman Empire; and the Church's largely successful drive to disentangle its senior management and assets – over which the Church now aspired to sole control – from their Carolingian-era draft into the secular power structure and military organisation was not limited to the Holy Roman Empire.

Another problem is that while several prince-bishops and prince-abbots managed to develop their domains into polities as close to sovereign as was possible for an ecclesiastical estate, abbesses were not able to do so. There were prince-abbesses that made it into early modern times – the abbesses of Säckingen or Remiremont come to mind – but they did not achieve a level of territorial consolidation, centralisation, bureaucratisation, and maybe militarisation, that was characteristic of the absolutist state. While it is here argued that both male and female abbeys started out on an essentially level field, events both within the Church and in the secular structure of the Empire conspired to block that development for the female houses. In retrospect, that fact obscures the significance of abbesses within the early medieval power structure.

That abbesses occupied a position of power in their own right within the political landscape of the Frankish, Ottonian and Salian empires, and were not simply the wards of their advocates, is, I believe, sufficiently shown by the texts of the official documents, the prosopography of prominent abbesses, and ancillary sources. Conjectures and hypotheses as to the more precise nature of that position are not (much) more constructed than similar conjectures about the role of their male counterparts.

VI.2. The Importance of Abbeys in the Early Medieval Polity

Abbeys in medieval times were significant commercial enterprises; in an age when agriculture was the key wealth creator, extensive land holdings alone constituted the land-controlling entity as a major economic force in the polity, and as the capitularies and records show, convents could be major landholders. Domain management also entailed workshops for tools, including arms and armour.

Monasteries repeatedly appear in the records as holders of rights over mining concerns, and as centres for the militarily important cavalry; there are also frequent mentions of lay abbots being appointed to strategically important monasteries.⁷³ However, even where abbesses are acknowledged as Empire-level political movers and shakers, there is no indication in the sources of abbesses being put in charge of such strategic assets.

⁷³ Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', Part 2 p. 336 and Part 3 p. 471; L. Bourgeois, 'Fortification des abbayes', pp. 203-04; Gassmann, 'Combat Training', pp. 84-85. Though the principle that the abbot (or abbess) should be elected by the house's monks or nuns from among their midst was a programmatical point of Carolingian church reform, in practice even emperors as pro-ecclesiastical as Louis the Pious considered the right of election a privilege to be granted or withheld, and continued to appoint lay abbots: Lesne, 'Ordonnances monastiques', Part 2 pp. 323-30.

While abbesses clearly had a military role, they do not appear to have had an Imperial-level or even generally an active military role, unlike some monasteries and especially the larger bishoprics; the sources do not mention such a role, and no abbess is among the eleven monastic magnates listed in the *Indiculus Loricatorum* who were called upon to provide reinforcements to Emperor Otto II's Italian Campaign.

Still, even without such an enhanced strategic role, the mere administration of extensive, and often widely dispersed holdings of land and rights required personnel, necessarily lay.⁷⁴ In this, there does not appear to be a difference between convents and monasteries, as under the organising principles of the feudal order, even in the inchoate state it appeared at the time, it seems to be an accepted norm that clerics (other than ecclesiastical princes) cannot hold secular feudal office.

VI.3. The Abbey and State Force

The sources here used suggest that when considering military organisation from Carolingian to Salian times, an isolated focus on the military in the modern sense – i.e. the mobilisation of state force against an external or at least organised enemy – misses the apparently layered nature of ‘state force’. And ‘state force’ itself is a problematical term, since it is arguable whether the modern concept of state can be applied to the Carolingian, Ottonian, or Salian empires. It should be understood here as shorthand for force, threat of force, or readiness to use force, exercised by individuals in the course of fulfilling official functions.

Daily activities such as messenger services or transportation – on foot, by horse or cart, or by boat – intrinsically involved armed individuals, but the relevant individuals cannot be described as soldiers or police, any more than we would today so refer to the guards accompanying an armoured cash transporter. Having said that, their role potentially seems to have included keeping the peace on the highways and similar police or paramilitary functions; whether such *gendarmerie* service was a special chore or privilege, matched by a relief in other duties, or whether every (able-bodied adult male) individual was subject to being ‘drafted’, is not clear – later medieval militia structures suggest that it may have been the latter.⁷⁵

In any event, the feudal levies described in the capitularies obviously were only a small selection of the available fighting manpower.⁷⁶ As Haack shows, the capitularies often cited as evidence for a well-oiled Carolingian military machine rather document courtiers

⁷⁴ Goosmann, ‘Aristocratic Exploitation’, p. 52.

⁷⁵ Gassmann, ‘Well Regulated Militia’, pp. 26-30. An anecdote related by Nelson, ‘Women and the Word’, p. 70, shows that women from the gentry had their *solatium* of hands-on burly fixers, so it is not unreasonable to assume the same from the entourage of abbesses. For other references to the *solatium*, see e.g. the *Capitula de causis diversis* of 807(?) – MGH – *Capit. I*, No. 49, §2, p. 136.

⁷⁶ Werner, ‘Heeresorganisation’, p. 830, 834.

feeling their way to *ad hoc* fixes to temporary crises, where the Imperial military needs could no longer be satisfied by the traditional levies, but had to intrude on the manpower lords would have preferred to keep on the land for labour, *gendarmerie*, and *Landwehr* purposes.⁷⁷

While the Imperial high command had a need for infantry, they did not just want to make up numbers; rather, it was important that the troops raised showed up reasonably well armed, and especially suitably provisioned. To me, the injunction in the marching orders for Abbot Fulrad to personally lead his troops is probably designed to ensure that the levies are disciplined on the march and well supplied.⁷⁸ Such a participation would not have violated the injunction against clerics' fighting.⁷⁹

VI.4. Abbatial Military Contingents

While there is evidence for abbots raising and supplying, and in some instances even leading, contingents to the imperial host, there is no such evidence in respect of abbesses.⁸⁰ Possibly, that is an accidental omission from the record; the convents at Essen, Gandersheim, or Quedlinburg were already substantial enough in Otto II's time to compete in size with other abbeys in the *Indiculus Loricorum*, but maybe their location in Saxony excluded them, as Saxon abbots do not feature, and Otto needed to make sure – justified, as it turned out – his frontier to the Slavs remained secure.⁸¹

Certainly, the important convents were large enough to feature vassals who would have been liable for mounted service, and the capitularies regularly allow also abbesses to exempt senior administrative aides from call-up.

If we accept that the call-up of infantry and cavalry (the *loricati*) followed separate lines, and that the raising of the infantry as a rule was the job of the *comes* of the local *paganus*, regardless of whether the affected individual was the *homo* of a lay or ecclesiastical lord,

⁷⁷ Haack, *Krieger der Karolinger*, p. 220; note that the provisions in the capitularies punishing failures to comply with call-ups are directed against the lords: *Constitutio de Expeditione Beneventana* (866; *MGH – Capit. II*, No. 218, §4, p. 96); Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 78-79.

⁷⁸ *MGH – Capit. I*, No. 75, p. 168. In an 840 letter, Loup of Ferrières asks to be excused from a call-up as he is still recovering from the rigours of the Aquitanian campaign: *MGH – Epp* Vol. 6, No. 24, p. 31; Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 120-21.

⁷⁹ Though especially German prelates of the High Middle Ages were unequivocally warlike: Reuter, 'The Prelate as Warrior.'

⁸⁰ See *Capitulare Missorum* of 819 (*MGH – Capit. I*, No. 141, §28, p. 291): counts, bishops and abbots, but not abbesses, are basically obliged to attend musters; Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 78-79. The immediately preceding paragraph of the capitulary obliges vassals of abbesses to obey call-ups (see fn. 25).

⁸¹ Werner, 'Heeresorganisation', p. 808; though he does not allocate any *loricati* to the convents in his estimates of the Saxon forces (*ibid.*, p. 827).

then we have provided an explanation for one side of the equation. The evidence in the sources, though scarce, is consistent with this interpretation,⁸² and the literature too points to the key position of counts – and comital rights – within the feudal military constitution.⁸³

On the other side of the equation, it is persuasive that abbesses too were lords to individuals who would have mustered as *loricati*.⁸⁴ But while we have clear evidence of (some) bishops and abbots being responsible within the Empire's *ordre de bataille* for these individuals, even if they did not actually lead them, there is no corresponding evidence for abbesses.

In fairness, it is not a problem confined to convents; with abbots, the differentiation between lay and regulars appears attractive, and Fulrad of St. Quentin was lay abbot – but Loup of Ferrières was not, and his heart was very evidently not in his military function. Auer discusses that there is, so far, no convincing explanation distinguishing those Holy Roman Empire bishops and abbots with military leadership responsibility for their *loricati milites* from those without, at least not until a *Reichsfürstenstand* develops as a defined concept.⁸⁵ However, as discussed, this entailed prelates acquiring comital rights, a

⁸² For example the *Capitula de expeditione Corsicana* of 825 (*MGH – Capit. I*, No. 162, §2, p. 325), though abbesses are not mentioned: *Homines vero episcoporum seu abbatum, et qui foris manent, volumus ut com comitibus eorum vadent, exceptis duobus quos ipse elegerit; et eorum austaldi liberi, exceptis quattuor, volumus ut pleniter distringantur* (The men of the bishops and abbots, and who remain outside, we wish that they go with their counts, except two whom he shall select himself; and their free *austaldi*, except for four, we wish that they all should be drafted). Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 105-106. On the meaning of *austaldus*, see Haack, *Krieger der Karolinger*, p. 179. Also the *Capitulare Bononiense* of 811 (*MGH – Capit. I*, No. 74, §7, p. 167): *De vassis dominicis qui adhuc intra casam serviunt et tamen beneficia habere noscuntur statutum est, ut quicumque ex eis cum domno imperatore domi remanserit vassallos suos casatos secum non retineat, sed cum comite cuius pagenses sunt ire permittat* ('About the royal vassals who are still serving at court yet are known to hold benefices, it is held that whoever remains at court with the emperor shall not retain his housed vassals with him, but shall permit them to go with the count in whose territory they are'; the same text is found in the *Capitularium Ansegisi* of 827 (*MGH – Capit. I*, III §73, p. 433)). In an 840 letter, Loup of Ferrières says *Misi tamen homines nostros una cum comite pagi, qui expeditionis officia more solito exequerentur* ([Since he himself could not attend the call-up,] 'I have anyway sent our men accompanied by the local count, that they may execute the duties of campaign in the usual manner' – *MGH – Epp* Vol. 6, No. 24, p. 31).

⁸³ Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals*, p. 87, also pp. 111-14; Haack, *Krieger der Karolinger*, p. 82; Werner, 'Heeresorganisation', pp. 799-800, Prinz, *Klerus und Krieg*, pp. 91-99, as well as Renaud, 'Politique militaire', p. 11, who points to *MGH – Capit. II*, No. 204, III. §2, p. 71 of 847.

⁸⁴ Implicitly also Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 2 pp. 63-64.

⁸⁵ Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 2 pp. 60-64; as mentioned, the development in France was different, see above fn 35, and England was organised differently again.

development from which abbesses were excluded⁸⁶ and which was merely accidental to far more profound changes in the constitutional make-up of both the Church and, on the secular side, the Empire or the various kingdoms.

Among possible explanations, Auer also points to the role of the *advocatus* or *Vogt*, the lay male supervisor – usually a scion and appointee of the house's founder family – installed as the ecclesiastical head's minder and liaison in secular concerns between the house's assets and the sponsoring prince's interests. The clues are tantalising, but not determinative.⁸⁷

VI.5. Convents as Power Factors

In summary, convents – like their male counterparts – had a military role and function within the power landscape of the Early to High Middle Ages. However, it was a passive rather than an active function, a conservative element preserving the *status quo*, even against an ambitious prince. The convents' holdings supported a wide range of armed personnel, from a yeomanry or *gendarmerie* that secured the highways and protected the convent's production, to – with the larger houses – nobility or quasi-nobility with feudal obligations to the abbess and a secular obligation to muster well-equipped or even mounted. But this military force was not projected, at least not by the abbess; where armed personnel could be called up for military duty strictly speaking, they did so at the behest and under the command of the secular nobility, and represented a reliable reservoir of fighters for the lay sponsor's family.

Seen from the prince's side, the convents were powerful enough to ensure that their holdings did not create a power vacuum, attracting adventurers; they were an economically strong source of funds and supplies, including horses, arms and armour; but their organisation at the same time neutralised them from the constant power games of medieval rule.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ In a 952 diploma given in Zurich, Otto I refers to Reginlinde as '*comitissa*' – Reginlinde, herself from the powerful family of the Counts of Nellenburg, had been granted possession of the Fraumünster Abbey by her husband, Hermann I, Duke of Swabia, and she withdrew there in her widowhood; whether she was ever formally abbess is not clear. By 952, her daughter Bertha was queen and regent of Burgundy, and her granddaughter Adelheid was married to Emperor Otto I. Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 96-99; Otto I – *MGH – DD – O I* No. 147, p. 228.

⁸⁷ Auer, 'Kriegsdienst des Klerus', Part 2 p. 63; on the other hand, in the first *Capitulare Olonnense* of 825, each bishop, abbot and abbess is conceded two *advocati* (*Vögte*) who remain exempt from call-up so long as they remain in that capacity; if they were the mediators of military command, they would be leading the abbatial men called up: *Singulis episcopis, abbatibus, abbattissis duos concedimus advocatos, eosque quamdiu advocacionem tenerint ab hoste relaxamus*; *MGH – Capit I*, No. 163, §4, p. 326; Haack, *Krieger der Karolinger*, pp. 183-84.

⁸⁸ See also Vogelsanger, *Fraumünster*, pp. 53-54.

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