

## FROM THE MATERIAL TO THE MYSTICAL IN LATE MEDIEVAL PIETY

The German mystic Gertrude the Great of Helfta (ca. 1256–1301) is a globally venerated saint who is still central to the Sacred Heart devotion. Her visions were first recorded in Latin, and they inspired generations of readers in processes of creative rewriting. The vernacular copies of these redactions challenge the long-standing idea that translations do not bear the same literary or historical weight as the originals on which they are based. In this study, Racha Kirakosian argues that manuscript transmission reveals how redactors serve as cultural agents. Examining the late medieval vernacular copies of Gertrude's visions, she demonstrates how redactors recast textual materials, reflected changes in piety, and generated new forms of devotional practices. She also shows how these texts served as a bridge between material culture, for example, in the form of textiles and book illumination, and mysticism. Kirakosian's multifaceted study is an important contribution to current debates on medieval manuscript culture, authorship, and translation as objects of study in their own right.

Racha Kirakosian is Professor of Medieval German at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. She previously taught at Harvard University and the University of Oxford. A scholar of historical text, medieval spirituality, and church history, she is the author of *Die Vita der Christina von Hane: Untersuchung und Edition* (2017) and of *The Life of Christina of Hane* (2020).

FROM THE MATERIAL TO  
THE MYSTICAL IN LATE  
MEDIEVAL PIETY

THE VERNACULAR TRANSMISSION  
OF GERTRUDE OF HELFTA'S VISIONS

RACHA KIRAKOSIAN



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*In memoriam parentum optimorum*

Zohair Kirakosian (1949–2005) & Heilani Ayoub (1956–2017)

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Perhaps every scholar of the historical past is trying to tell a story, trying to fill a gap that, due to various factors, has never been filled or even noticed before. We may oscillate – depending on whom we are speaking to – between contending that our object of study does not require justification, indeed moves in a realm beyond it, and claiming the indisputable importance of our research topic for the understanding of humanity. I have found myself applying both these rhetorical strategies, and to be honest, not believing in either. Why should anyone care for what late medieval minds may have made (or not made) of the personal visions of a thirteenth-century religious woman, who was so attuned to her faith that it came to affect and infuse every inch of her being? How can we even begin to approach devotional practices that lie more than half a millennium back in time, when leaving a written record of one's thought was neither a chore nor a joy, but destiny? The word, so holy in that world, considered to be the incarnation of God, was sacrosanct in all its forms; whether imaginary as in the Book of Life, in which all saved souls would be listed, or physically in a quire of parchment, which needed years of care for cattle and reliable trading networks for ink to be produced, the word itself manifested the desire for the approximation of eternity. Maybe, certainly unintendedly, I have bestowed a little of that approximation on some of the redactors of Gertrude's visions by discussing their writing activities in this book. I hope that my readers will be intrigued by the scribal nature of late medieval piety, where material culture and mysticism were intertwined, where the perceiving and retelling of visions functioned as a creative outlet.

The first time I seriously dedicated time to researching the medieval texts associated with Gertrude of Helfta was during my DPhil years at Oxford, when I was working on Christina of Hane, a Premonstratensian canoness who belonged to a generation of mystics living before Gertrude. Yet the *Life* of Christina, transmitted only much later, is somewhat influenced by the Helfta mysticism, to which, along with Gertrude's visions, those of Mechthild of Magdeburg and Mechthild of Hackeborn belong. The texts of these Helfta women radiated an unparalleled force of inspiration for future scribes, even when the latter copied and redacted seemingly unrelated and older material like that of Christina of Hane. I realised then that turning my attention to the

scribal culture of redaction and its implications for devotional practices would be my next project; and encouraged by my dissertation supervisor and dear friend Almut Suerbaum, I took the first steps towards it. The vernacular transmission of Gertrude's visions offered itself almost immediately: with a plethora of manuscripts from the late Middle Ages – almost entirely unresearched – the German redactions of the Latin writings connected with Gertrude of Helfta contain beautiful examples of how book production and devotional culture intersect. Vivid visions grounded in the material world of the late thirteenth century, and abundant with rich images of objects such as textiles, continued to be charged with meaning by generations of readers. Seen over the period of a couple of centuries – and it is vital to respect the pace of medieval communication – the collective effort of redacting the artistic energy of Gertrude and her cowriters becomes the fulfilment of her mystical programme, which was to engender new experiences of transcendence.

Moving to the United States, I took the project with me to Harvard, where it was awarded the Harvard Medical School William F. Milton Fund, which facilitated my archival work in subsequent years. Further financial support came from Harvard University's Anne and Jim Rothenberg Fund for Humanities Research and the Arts and Humanities Dean's Office. In the summer of 2015, I worked with the holdings of the Herzog Ernst Library in Gotha, having the honour to do so as a research fellow of the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung. In 2016, a scholarship of the Gerda Henkel Foundation enabled me to spend three months in Oxford in order to study the historical context of the reform movement as well as consult manuscripts at the Bodleian. The next project stage was reserved for studying the material aspects of medieval books and textiles: the first stop was the Huntington Library in San Marino California, where I was a Mayers Fellow in the spring of 2017; the second stop led me to Dumbarton Oaks, where, invited by Jan Ziolkowski as the Director's Scholar, I received important input from colleagues working on Byzantine artefacts and saints' lives. Many other fora and workshops advanced my research on material culture and mysticism, as I had the opportunity to present and discuss different book chapters, for example: at UC Berkeley with Niklaus Largier; at Yale University (Medieval Studies Lecture Series) at the invitation of Brianne Dolce; at the Anglo-German Colloquium in Saarbrücken with Sarah Bowden, Stephen Mossman, and Nine Miedema; at Cornell University (Institute for German Cultural Studies) with Peter Gilgen, Leslie Adelson, Patrizia McBride, and Paul Fleming; at the University of Berne (Doktoratsprogramm der Westschweizer Universitäten) with Michael Stolz and Seraina Plotke; at Augsburg University (Oberseminar) with Freimut Löser; at Somerville College Oxford with the college-based medieval research group; at Heidelberg University at the invitation of Stefan Seeber, Tobias Bulang, and Ludger Lieb; at the LMU Munich with Beate Kellner, Susanne

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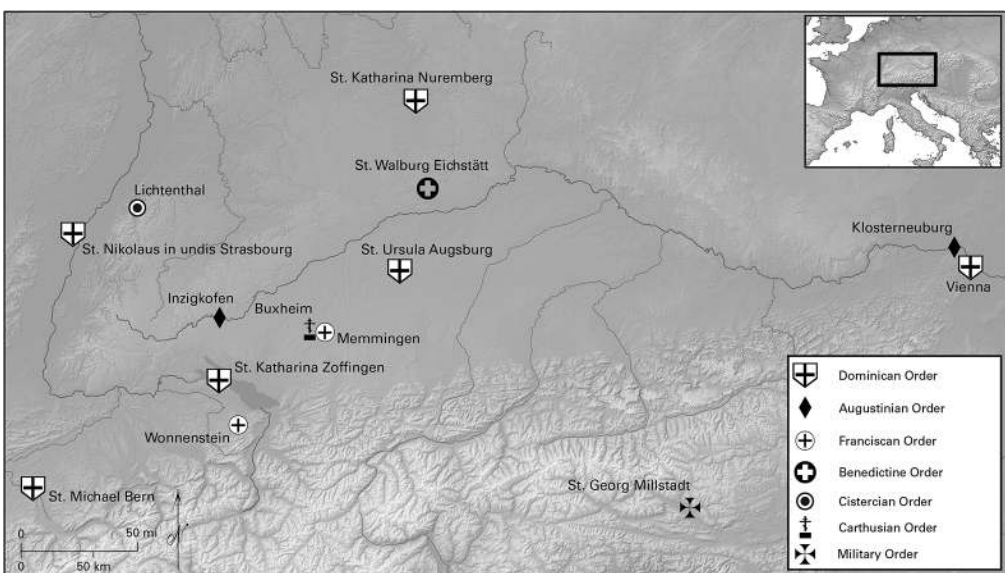
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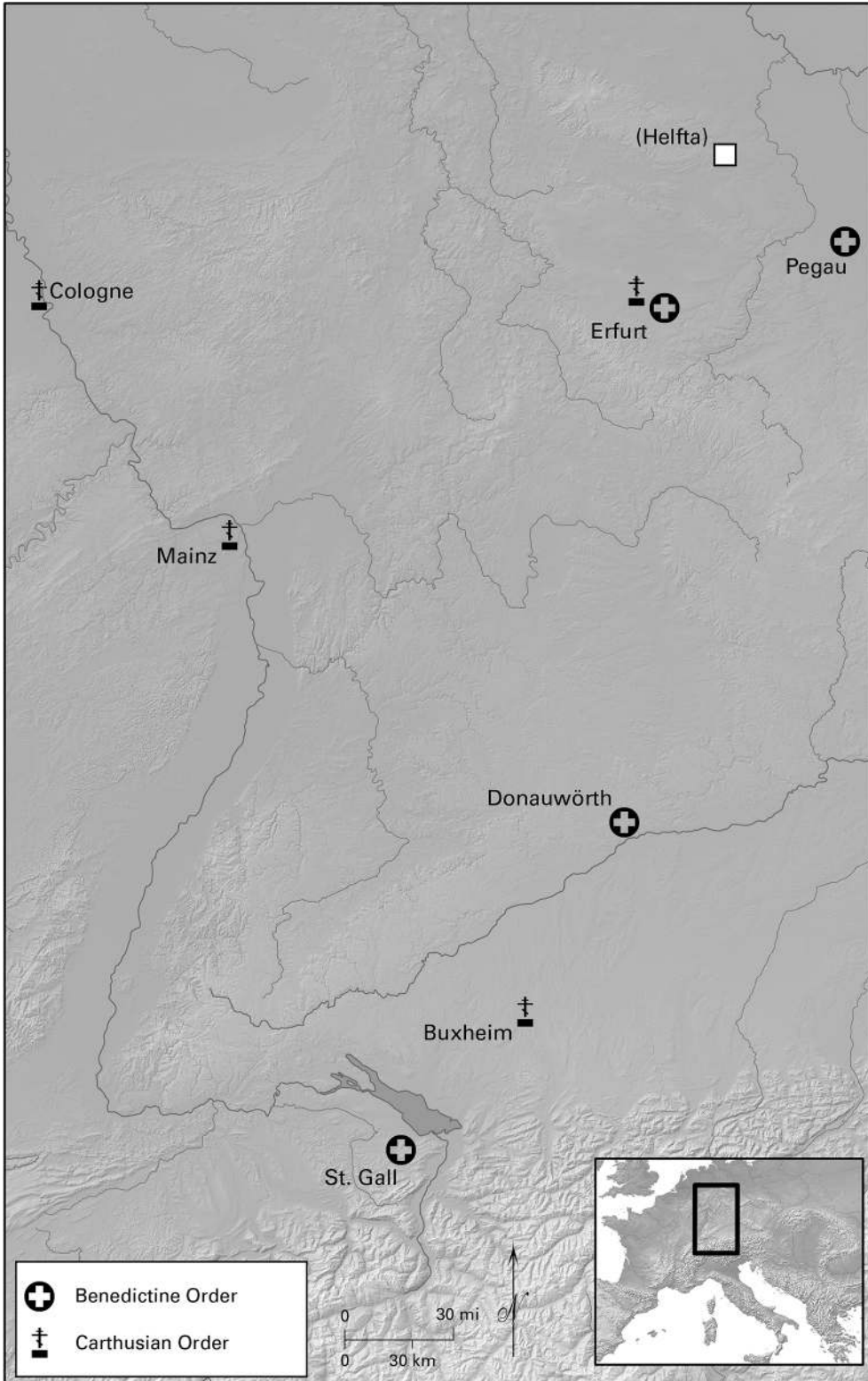
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## NOTE ON THE MAPS

The two distinct maps aim to visualise the reception of the *Legatus* in late medieval Germany. Map 1 portrays the discernible centres of transmission for the reception of the vernacular redactions, *ein botte der götlichen miltekeit* and the *Trutta*-Legend. The actual dissemination of these texts was much broader than the depiction on the map, on which only places that certainly or very likely held text copies are indicated. The geographical span is still accurate. The same is true for Map 2 which shows the provenances for text witnesses of the Latin *Legatus*, including the recently discovered *Leipzig Legatus* from the Benedictine abbey in Pegau. Helfta is included on this map as a point of reference; however, it is marked in parentheses because no actual text witness originating in Helfta survives. Whether a convent was a male monastery or a nunnery is not indicated, the maps' purpose being the illustration of the identified geographical dissemination and the diversity of the religious orders. Please consult Chapters 1 and 3, and the list of manuscripts in the “Appendix” for more information on the transmission history.



1 The Vernacular Reception of the *Legatus*



2 The Latin Reception of the *Legatus*