

Monika BRENIŠÍNOVÁ (ed.), *(Trans)missions: Monasteries as Sites of Cultural Transfers*, Oxford, Archeopress 2022, 166 pp. ISBN 978-1-80327-324-2.

The monastery, a place of silence and prayer, of darkness and stone floors, distant from the world and its bustle – or the monastery as a specific entity within society, communicating and cooperating with the world around it, opening its gates to it? There is no contradiction between these two faces of monastic life, and it is also the subject of the present book. Monika Brenišínová, who works at the Centre for Ibero-American Studies at Charles University (Prague), has brought together scholars from the fields of art history, history, anthropology, and translation studies to offer in one volume a wide range of different perspectives on monasteries from the Middle Ages to the present day. Although the individual contributions are very diverse in content and methodology and the overall impression is fragmented at first glance, they are united by several research approaches, which Brenišínová, as the editor, summarises in the introduction.

The focus is on the monastery as a carrier, co-creator, and communicator of culture. Since the interest of scholars is concentrated on Central and Western Europe and extends to the Spanish colonies in America, the focus is mainly on Catholic, Western European culture. But just as the gates of the monastery were not and are not closed to outside influences (political, cultural, or even personal), so too was the ‘domestic’ monastic culture, i.e. the stimuli and impulses that the men and women of the monastic communities experienced, were inspired by, and developed for their daily spiritual life. This cultural communication of monasteries with the world outside their walls was necessarily influenced by the differences in the strictness of *clausura*, but at the same time, it did not violate the rules of cloisteredness. It was mainly a communication of ideas, a transmission of spiritual impulses between two worlds separated now by a high wall, now only by a defined space for monks and nuns within an otherwise open monastic complex. According to the results of the research presented in this book, this was a lively transmission and communication at different levels and at different times in different monastic communities – both male and female. Monika Brenišínová and her colleagues seem to have confirmed that interest in this cultural transmission mediated by monasteries has been very topical in recent years (In the same year, for example, another interesting publication was published: *Women Religious Crossing between Cloister and the World: Nunneries in Europe and the Americas, ca. 1200–1700*, M. Pérez Vidal ed., Arch Humanities Press 2022).

Let us now move on to the individual research approaches in which researchers examine the cultural life of monastic communities and its transformations and the transfer of ideas to

the outside world and their necessary translation (linguistic, visual), but also the influences that come from the outside and affect the monastic cultural framework retrospectively.

It is remarkable that in the first three studies, the focus is concerned with the tradition of medieval manuscripts and illuminations carried on (especially) by women's medieval communities in Bohemia. Three female researchers meet here, exploring women's religion and women's piety from the perspective of art history and history. Daniela Rywíková interprets illuminations that treat the theme of the female body in connection with sin (Woman of Sins) and offers many interpretations of the various details contained therein. She offers connections between the animal motifs and features of the hermaphrodite body with the mortal sins and the story of the Antichrist. It shows the multitude of different inspirations that may have influenced the illuminator and led his hand to capture images charged with symbolic levels and complex messages. The author suggests that these complex and multi-significant illuminations may have been presented to the nuns of the monastery for instruction, meditation, and self-discipline and that at the same time, they may have captured the nuns' perception of their own religious life (striving for perfection, struggling with sin) and the world around them. I am only sorry that this supposed function and the real reach of illuminations are not further documented and developed.

Lenka Panuškóvá begins her study by asking questions about the everyday use of the manuscript and its illuminations and tries to get concrete ideas about their function and cultural use for a wider audience. She focuses on one of the most famous manuscripts of Czech provenance, the *Passional of Abbess Kunhuta*, and its potential users, the Benedictine nuns of St. George in Prague. Her work challenges the thesis that the richly illuminated manuscript containing many mystical texts was intended only for the private use of its commissioner, the royal daughter Kunhuta of the Přemyslid dynasty. With persuasive arguments supported by parallels from foreign research, she points to the hypothesis that other inhabitants of the monastery (and not only nuns but also girls educated here) participated in its use. It occurs to the reader that this participation in "reading" must have been both formative and inspiring as well as uplifting for the female members of the community, regarding the content of the manuscript (which includes, for example, a mystical parable about a noble princess and a knight as a metaphor for Christ and the soul). Lenka Panuškóvá's study thus helps to provide an understanding of the perception of meditative symbolism and the sharing of resources for personal spiritual growth within the monastery itself. She also points to the great interconnectedness of this cultural space with the cultural milieu of the royal court, which she encounters very often in her research on the *Passional*.

Renáta Modráková accentuates this topic in her study too. She focuses on the various levels of contact between this Benedictine monastery of St. George and the world around it on various social levels. She observes not only the outward activity of the Benedictines (Easter dramas performed in St. George's Basilica, manuscripts coming out of the Prague monastery scriptorium, or young girls educated in the monastery before their marriage), but also – and significantly – the cultural influences of other social groups from within the monastery. The names of the founders in calendars, the manuscripts donated by donors, or visitors and clergy entering the cloister – through all of this the outside world entered the daily life of the monastery and influenced its culture. Last but not least, the author draws attention to the hitherto little-explored cultural interaction between the various religious orders and specific monastic houses in Prague and other places in Bohemia.

Communication between the monastery and the outside world is also the aim of Monika Brenišinová's text. She, however, studies the much more open space of the Franciscans. Therefore, the areas where the groups of religious and lay people met were much larger and more populated. The author mentions the very interesting space of the missionary work of friars in the New World and notes the innovations they brought to pastoral care and to the way information was transmitted. The necessary attempt at clarity in transmitting new Christian teachings to the Native Americans brought with it many new requirements for translation and visual clarity. Missionaries did not hesitate to use local traditional elements of piety to graft their message onto them and make it more familiar to the audience. They emphasised those elements of Christian religiosity that were more understandable and closer to the local audience. The author engagingly illustrates the emphasis on penitential processions in two groups of murals. She sees them as visualisations directed towards the local population, offering them activities which were close to the old traditions (prayers for rain), but in a new Christian gown. She also shows other means employed by missionaries, such as linking different understandings of time (local agricultural cyclicity, Christian linearity). This complex process by which the missionaries incorporated the various elements of local culture into the Western European Catholic tradition, attempting to reconcile and integrate them into a functioning unit, is fascinating.

In the studies that follow, the research approach to sources changes. While until now, the main role was played by the image, which was necessarily accompanied, explained, and interpreted by the word/text, now the text/word itself, which has in itself that moment of transmission and interpretation, comes to the fore. Jana Králová discusses the role of translation as a necessary part of missionary activity, in which the intelligibility of new religious ideas is absolutely crucial for their reception. The translations of the Bible in particular into vernacular languages in the New World were logical and soon saw the light

of day, but what is all the more remarkable is that the attention of the Inquisition soon began to put many of them on the list of forbidden books, recommending only “proven” official languages for religious texts. In spite of these complications, the range of translated texts and other cultural activities that are studied is wide, and the author is then able to trace other interesting approaches to the subject, some of which are more developed in the present study and some of which are only hinted at, e.g. the role of the translator/interpreter, the emphasis on the meaning of the text, the question of gender in translations, etc.

Antonio Bueno-García also deals with the theme of translation. However, his interest is focused on very specific and interesting sources – the prologues of texts translated by Dominican friars. From these, he excerpts many interesting insights into the reception of the translator and his work itself. A varied picture of many themes emerges from the prologues: one can trace the different nature of the translator’s relationship to the author (his admiration or criticism) and other reasons that led the translator to his work. Here we find guidelines for the effective dissemination of the translation, but also requests for prayers for the translator’s soul. The author captures the translator’s reflections on his own work and approach to it. This touches on the innovations that the translator introduces into the original, thus becoming partly a co-author of the work, although he does not explicitly acknowledge this. These paratexts are an excellent illustration of the many influences that enter into the transfer of information and culture in the process of translating texts from one language to another.

The contribution of Barbora Spalová and Jan Tesárek introduces a third dimension to the already-mentioned line “image – word/text”, and that is time. Time, as a quantity that is relative and that can have its own subjective speed in every place on this earth, stands out as the main idea of the research on various contemporary monastic communities in Bohemia. It turns out that although the local society, as a result of the influence of the past decades, has created a considerable distance from the Church and religious orders in general, it partly feels the attraction of monastic life and tries to look into it now and then. These researchers explore the role of time and the different perceptions of it in the space of monastic communities in this current “attraction of religious orders”. However, they also focus on the equally interesting question of how members of monastic communities translate this “monastically different” perception of time into their lives in society, and through this everyday practice, they transfer their understanding of time to those they meet.

The two reports at the end of the book, which deal with current or just completed research projects on the topic of monasteries in Central Europe, are also worthy of attention. These are Jan Zdichinec’s project on monastic historiography in the early modern period and Kateřina Charvátová and Radka Ranochová’s project on monasteries in Bohemia and

their history and present. Both reports support the assumption stated at the beginning of this text, namely that monastic life and its communication with the outside world are currently of interest to the academic (and perhaps even lay) public.

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