

Lutheran Abbesses and Their Authority in the Lutheran Church

Excerpted from Merry Wiesner, "The Holy Roman Empire: Women and Politics," in **Women Writers and the Early Modern British Political Tradition**, edited by Hilda L. Smith [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], pp. 311-14.

Along with [female] secular rulers which parallel those in western Europe, the [Holy Roman] Empire also had a type of female ruler unknown in western Europe: abbesses of free imperial convents. ... The abbess in a free imperial convent, like the city council of a free imperial city, was the penultimate legal authority in her area; her only overlord was the emperor. She appointed secular and church officials, sent a representative to the *Reichstag*, heard legal cases, built and supported hospitals, orphanages, and occasionally schools. Though the usual story told is that all convents were closed in Protestant areas after the Reformation, in fact this did not happen; many abbesses retained their powers and independence after the Reformation, even in Protestant territories, with their convents either remaining Catholic or transforming themselves into Protestant convents. Along with abbesses who became Protestant for practical political reasons, there were also some who accepted the new theology and energetically introduced it into their territories. ... Abbess Elisabeth von Weida of Gernrode sent a representative to the Diet of Worms in 1521 to get a first-hand report about what Luther was saying. She began to name Protestant pastors to all the churches under her control in 1525, expecting the new teaching to bring a further deepening of the spiritual life in her convent and the territory she controlled. Anna von Stolberg, who was the abbess of Quedlinburg from 1515 to 1574, controlled nine churches, a hospital, and two male monasteries. She accepted the Protestant Reformation in the 1540s, started a consistory, made all priests swear to the Augsburg confession, and set the salaries for church and school officials. In 1680 her successor the abbess Anna Sophia issued a new baptism ordinance, and in 1700 the abbess Anna Dorothea [issued] an "edict against the separatists," that is, those who wished to leave the Lutheran state church. Abbesses clearly recognized their special social and political status, and reflected it in their writings as well as actions. Anna Sophia of Quedlinburg, for example, published a book of meditations entitled *Der treue Seelenfreund Christus Jesus*, which includes a long introduction and afterword discussing the special duties of virgins, the most important of which was praising God. ...

Though continuation of convents was rarely challenged in practice after the mid-sixteenth century, there were still doubts about the appropriateness of this peculiarly German form of female rule. In 1564, Stephan Molliter, a Lutheran pastor who had in fact received his initial appointment from the first Lutheran abbess of Gernrode, used the funeral of one of her followers as the occasion to rail against female rulership. He chose as his text the passage from Ecclesiastes, "Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child" (10.16) to criticize the young age of the new abbess (who was in the audience) and the childlike nature of all women. Even those Lutheran commentators who chose to praise the abbesses felt it necessary to justify and explain their power. Friedrich Kettner, who wrote a long history of Quedlinburg published in 1710, includes a lengthy discussion about why the titles "abbess," "prioress," and "canoness" could legitimately be maintained, using examples from the New Testament and early church to show that these were not later popish inventions. ...he feels compelled to discuss Isaiah 3.12 ("I will give you children to be your oppressors and women to be your rulers...") and agrees with John Aylmer that Isaiah was not talking about the female sex here, but those of the feminine temperament (*weibliche Gemuth*). As in the English defenses of gynecocracy, Kettner includes a long list of ancient and contemporary female rulers who do not have such a "weibliche Gemuth." In the long run (or at least until the secularization of church property in 1807) doubts and debates did not matter. Patronage networks combined with ambivalence in gender and religious ideology to allow abbesses a wide range of powers.



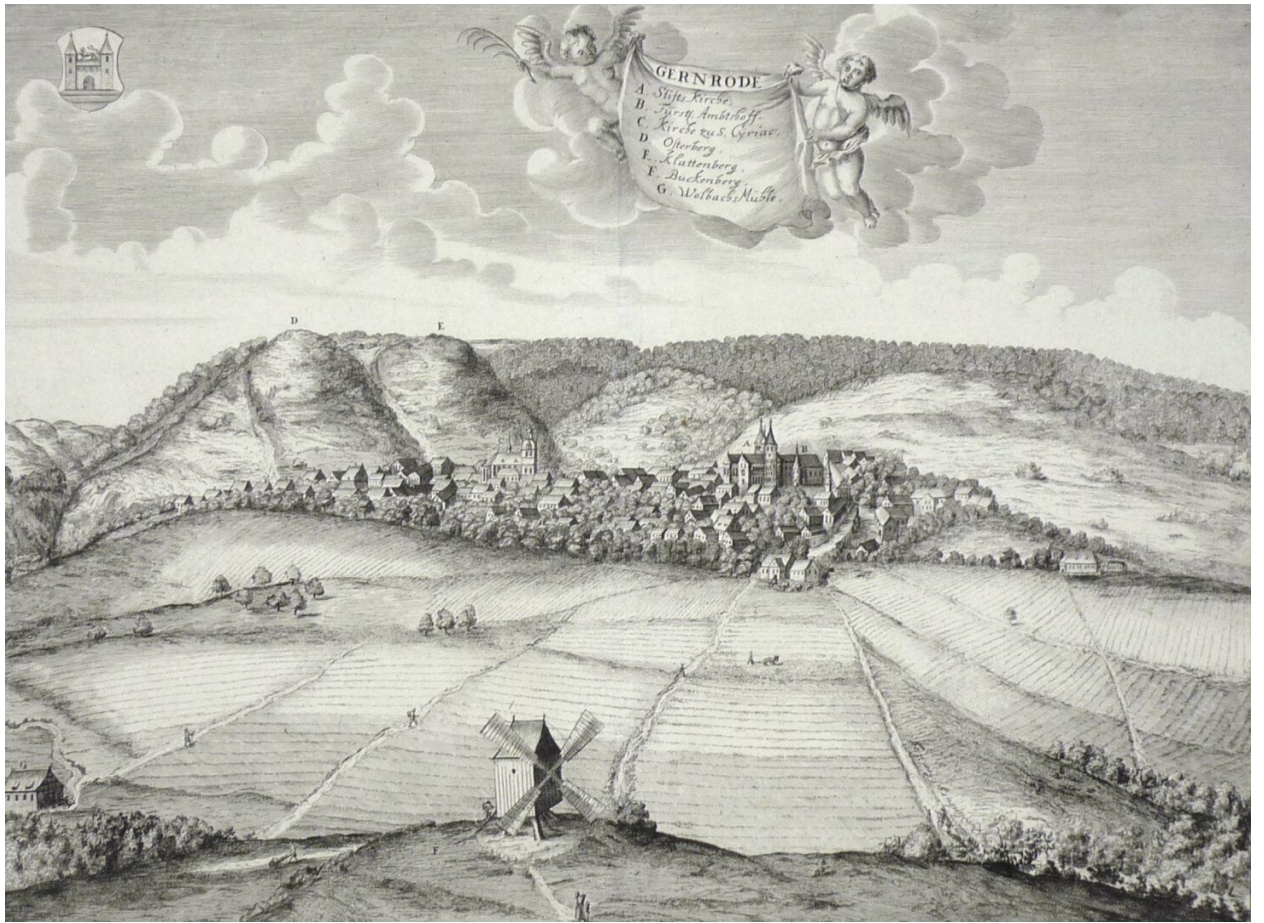
Anna II (1504-1574), Countess of Stolberg, Princess-Abbess of Quedlinburg Abbey



Quedlinburg, ca.1650



Graveplate of Elizabeth von Weida (1460-1532), Abbess of Gernrode



Gernrode, 1710