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SINGING NUNS AND LAY SISTERS IN THE FRISIAN HOUSES OF THE TEUTONIC ORDER TO 1510

KEYWORDS

history; the Middle Ages; military orders; Teutonic Order; Friesland; Medieval monasticism; women's convents; Beguines

ABSTRACT

Although the Teutonic Order is not known for its interest in accommodating religious women, it did provide some space for sisters to live a godly life among the brethren. Some houses with largely male occupancy had servant half-sisters. Elsewhere, *sorores* are encountered as sponsors who did not perform manual labour. Furthermore, in a few places, semi-autonomous convents functioned in which nuns devoted themselves to choir prayer. However, the picture of the ways in which women were given a place is still relatively diffuse. To add depth to this, this article focuses on the situation in the Frisian circle of Order houses in the north-west of the Empire.

At the Order's two main (priest-) commanderies Nes and Schoten, sisters appear to have been attached in different forms of membership. The most recognisable is found at Schoten, which long functioned as a *hospitale pauperum*, where a small number of serving half-sisters were active until 1491. A second form is found at Nes, which in or shortly after 1281 founded a sub-convent for women whose task it was to provide choral prayers. Because of its narrow economic subsistence base, the community were brought back to Nes around 1375, only for it to die out there. In 1491, however, on the site of the former convent, called Steenkerk, a new convent was founded by the brothers of Nes and Schoten. This time, the occupants were lay sisters, referred to as beguines, who contributed to

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the economic existence of their house through manual labour. They would only wear the habit of the Teutonic Order for a short time, until 1510.

This article shows that the models used for the design of the nunnery convent and the later lay sister house at Steenkerk were derived from the organisation of women's convents of other orders in the area. For the period 1281–1375, this model was based on the Frisian double monasteries of the Benedictines and Premonstratensians, and for the period 1491–1510, it was based on the development of lay sisters convents from the sphere of the Modern Devotion.

Although in the medieval period the Teutonic Order, like the other military orders, did not make strong efforts to accommodate religious women, it seems to have always provided some space for women to live a devout life in its midst.¹ It is known that several houses with largely male occupancy had servant half-sisters. Elsewhere, *sorores* are encountered as generous sponsors who did not perform manual labour. In a few places semi-autonomous convents functioned in which nuns devoted themselves to choir prayer in community.² However, the picture of the varied ways in which women were given a place still relatively diffuse. To add depth to this, this essay focuses the lens on the situation in the Frisian circle of Order houses in the north-west of the Empire.

Its two main commanderies, Nes and Schoten, had no knight brothers. As far as their male population was concerned, their members were only priests and lay brothers with the status of sergeants. Remarkably, however, at some point they also had both nuns and lay sisters under their wing. I already paid some attention to them in my Dutch-language dissertation,³ but this does not seem to have penetrated the international literature very well yet. Reason enough to pay attention to the Frisian women with the black cross separately here. I envisage going through the source data as carefully as possible on the basis of the

¹ See the introduction of Anette Löffler, "Swester und Oberste – ein Brevier für einen Schwesternkonvent," *Ordines Militares Colloquia Torunensia Historica. Yearbook for the Study of the Military Orders* 20 (2015): 205–237.

² *Ibid.*, 212–213, Löffler offers a brief overview of the sister houses according to their geographical location, with the corresponding literature. I note, however, that not every one of them has been studied thoroughly in comparative depth.

³ Johannes A. Mol, *De Friese huizen van de Duitse Orde. Nes, Steenkerk en Schoten en hun plaats in het middeleeuwse Friese kloosterlandschap* (Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy, 1991). A German translation is available at the site <https://fryske-akademy.academia.edu/JohannesMol>, accessed 15 March 2023.

question of why the Order superiors in Friesland decided to make convent life for women possible and what models it could apply to do so. This will at the end include the question of how and why the leadership at the higher levels allowed Frisian constructions. Before we go into that, however, it is useful to report something about the foundation and the special character of both Nes and Schoten.

THE ORIGINS OF THE AUTONOMOUS COMMANDERIES OF NES AND SCHOTEN

The priestly convent of Nes, dedicated to Saint Mary, was certainly the oldest settlement. It was founded a few years before 1243, possibly with the help of donations from wealthy Frisians who had participated in the Fifth Crusade. An important sponsor was certainly also the bishop of Utrecht. In 1243, he gave the brothers of the Teutonic Order in Nes the patronage rights to his proprietary church in Oldeboorn, which village served as the centre for the reclamation of a vast moorland region. Apart from Oldeboorn and the convent chapel of Nes, the brothers of Nes managed to acquire four other parish churches, which it had its own priests serve as pastors. In practice, the convent thus had four or five resident brothers, including the commander and prior, and five or six priest brothers working as pastors elsewhere. Added to this were a few lay brothers to manage the agricultural business.

The Saint Nicholas commandery of Schoten had a different origin. It was established in the late 13th century at the important river crossing of the Tjonger as *hospitale pauperum* on property owned by the bishop of Utrecht. It was headed by a prior and a *grangiarus*, who, however, seem to have been under the supervision of Nes in the beginning period. For Schoten, the community gradually managed to withdraw from Nes' authority and also allowed itself the freedom to appoint its own superior. The aforementioned rights of choice, as well as the fact that Nes and Schoten together formed their own visitation circuit that was placed by the German master at some point under the commander of Utrecht, suggest that they originally intended to form their own administrative circle, as a kind of Frisian proto bailiwick. A circle however, that in the face of lack of expansion in the beginning of the 14th century had to be assigned to the new Utrecht bailiwick, that had emancipated from the large original district of the

Partes Inferiores (or “Netherlands”). In this transfer process however, the Frisian houses managed to retain certain autonomy rights.⁴

SINGING AND SERVING SISTERS UNDER MALE LEADERSHIP

Schoten housed a mixed lay community of brothers and sisters in 1350, but presumably from its inception. A charter from that year stipulates, among other things, that the brothers of Schoten themselves may receive [...] *personas utriusque sexus* [...], albeit after seeking the advice of the commander and prior of Nes, the parish priest of Oldeboorn and the *advocati* of the Schoter convent community.⁵ Taking into account the origin of the commandery as an outpost or grange with a hospital function, it is obvious that the members of the female sex living here always had a serving and caring function. In all probability, they lived in their own house, spatially separated from the brothers, but on the same premises. As we will see further on, in 1491 there still lived two lay sisters, named Margrete and Renttie.⁶

As for Nes, a charter issued by the Utrecht governor in 1395 shows that here, too, sisters were part of the community.⁷ The commander was in fact confirmed in it his privilege to admit both brothers and sisters (*fratres et sorores*) into his convent on his own authority. Of the sisters now, we know that in the time before about 1375 they were housed in a separate enclosure called the convent of Katrijp. This convent first appears in a curious letter from the year 1400.⁸ In it, representatives of the land districts of Boornego, Schoterland and Stellingwerf – being all of south-eastern Friesland – request the land commander to restore this convent to its former state. According to them, it had been populated with nuns but they had left for Nes twenty-five years before, leaving behind one aged sister. There they lived with the brothers under one roof “entirely against canon law and holy scripture”,

⁴ At length on this Frisian self-government: Mol, *De Friese huizen*, chapter 4: the relationship of authority to the Utrecht land commandery.

⁵ *Archieven van de Ridderlijke Duitse Orde, balie van Utrecht*, vol. 2, ed. Jan J. De Geer tot Oudegein (Utrecht: Kemink en zoon, 1871), no. 529.

⁶ *Oudfriese oorkonden*, vol. IV, ed. Oebele De Vries (’s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhof, 1977), no. 85.

⁷ *Archieven*, vol. 2, ed. De Geer tot Oudegein, no. 531: *Insuper ordinamus et declaramus, quod commendator in Nesse de et cum consensu conventus ipsius potest recipere ad ordinem auctoritate propria fratres et sorores, provintiali Traiectensi aut suis successoribus super hoc irrequisitis.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 533.

thus endangering the salvation of their souls.⁹ The plea was to reinstate the abandoned convent as before with learned nuns who could sing the seven hours and pray for the salvation of the souls of those who had passed away “from our lands”. This would also be achievable with little cost as the buildings were still in a reasonable condition. Interestingly, the sisters were called “joncfrouwen van goeden luden”, i.e. unmarried women of good birth.¹⁰ As trained choir nuns, they had to pray for the salvation of deceased benefactors: one of the most important tasks of monasteries since the early Middle Ages. This task also required a considerable material base, as the sisters active in the choir had to be exempt from manual labour.

Elsewhere the text refers to a “sub-convent”. One could therefore identify it as a filial settlement or dependency: a women’s section that was spatially separated from the men’s community but continued to be spiritually, legally and materially one with it. The name *Katrijp*, combined with a reconstruction of the Nesser property after 1580, gives a clear indication of where to look for the nuns’ building complex erected at – some distance from the central commandery.¹¹ *Katrijp* is the name of an agricultural peat reclamation village that, together with *Lyedingaberde*, alias *Luinjeberd*, located east of it, was split off from the mother parish of *Oldeboorn* in the 12th or 13th century. It is known that in 1281 the *homines et parrochiani* of *Luinjeberd* – read: the main landowners within the village – transferred the patronage right of their chapel to the commandery of *Nes*.¹² Because a 15th-century Frisian-language chronicle, partly based on older sources, mentions a heroic performance in Prussia by a Teutonic Order brother *Lambertus*, belonging to the *Lioedingha viri in Catryp*, the suggestion arises that the *Lyedingha/Lioedingha* family of *Katrijp* and *Luinjeberd* were one and the same and that they provided the Teutonic Order in *Nes* not only with their share of the village chapel but also with an endowment of land for the construction of a women’s house. That this then had the name *Katrijp* attached to it instead of *Luinjeberd* will have to do with the fact that the name *Luinjeberd* had gone with it to the new place, while that of *Katrijp* had stuck to the original site because its shifted settlement had been renamed *Ter Band*. According to a detailed topographical map of 1867, the old cemetery of *Katrijp* – then in the middle of an area reclaimed for peat extraction – was at the same line of settlement as the former nunnery site cum abandoned chapel of

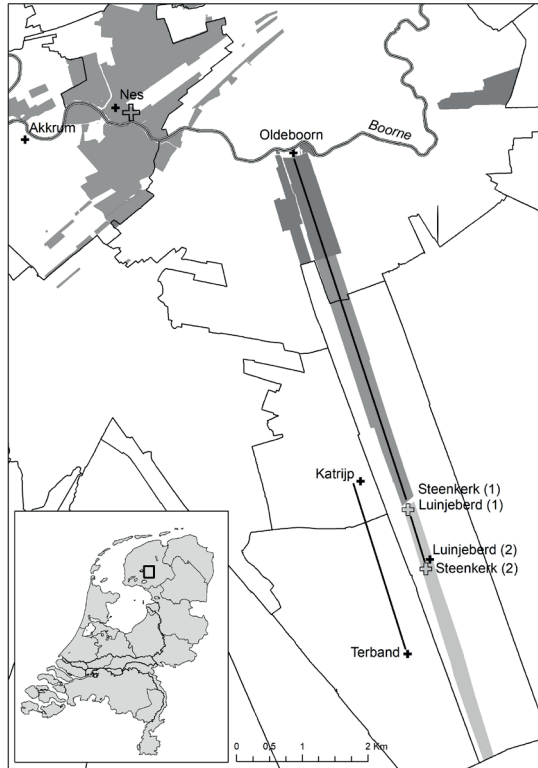
⁹ *Ibid.*: [...] *tieghens redene, ghestelijc rechts, heleghe scrift ende salicheit harder sielen.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Over het volgende: Mol, *De Friese huizen*, 50–51.

¹² *Archieven*, vol. 2, ed. De Geer tot Oudegein, no. 525. This is a charter issued by the archbishop of Cologne.

Luinjeberd. Further on, we will see that this bore the name of Steenkerk (literally stone church) in 1491.



The Location of the nunnery Katrijp/Luinjeberd in the peatland southeast of the commandery of Nes (by J. Feikens, Fryske Akademy, Leeuwarden).

The peat reclamation villages in this region were very dynamic, in the sense that by systematically draining the area with straight ditches, the inhabitants were able to produce grain on their land for some time, but after a while they had to give it up because the land had subsided due to oxidation of the peat and turned into a swampy *Wüstung*.¹³ They could solve this problem by moving their farm to another spot on their strip plots where the soil had not yet sunk. There the process then started all over again. In this way, settlements moved up into the peat. In the process, not only the farms migrated but also the church had to be moved one

¹³ On this landscape development, see Mol, *De Friese huizen*, 163–167.

or more times. Many traces of this migration process in the form of abandoned churches and churchyards can still be found in the peat moor areas of the Netherlands and north-western Germany. Such a development now also seems to have taken place at Luinjeberd. Indeed, the current farm settlement line of Luinjeberd is not located at its 12th-century site but some three kilometres south of it. It is not known exactly since when the church came into being on its current site, but it may well have been as early as the end of the 13th century. In that case, precisely because the parishioners had to have a new church built elsewhere, they might have made the old one available for the establishment of a women's convent. If we interpret it this way, 1281 was not only the year of the transfer of the patronage right of Luinjeberd, but also the year in which the nunnery was established.

That this was an obvious course of events is evident when surveying the peat-land property here of the Nes commandery, for the time shortly after its dissolution in 1580. This is easily realised on the basis of a surveyor's map from 1608, produced with the prospect of digging peat in mind. The reconstruction immediately shows that the commandery land consisted of the extension of the glebe and *ecclesiae fabrica* estate of Oldeboorn. This indicates at the same time that the land was intended from the outset as a patrimonial fund for the maintenance of the parish priest and the chapel of Luinjeberd (split of from Oldeboorn). It also means that the brothers of Nes some time after 1243 managed to separate this extended property from the Oldeboorn church estate, kept part of it, left another part to the chapel of Luinjeberd – to get it back later -, and used a third one for the construction and maintenance of a spatially separate women's convent.

However, this complex of peatland, albeit large in area, had low fertility, partly due to its subsidence. It is therefore very likely that the commander brought his nuns back to Nes in 1375 because the land on site did not yield enough to allow the sisters to lead an exempt life focused only on providing choir prayers. As can be understood, this "recall" out of economic necessity did meet resistance from the elite in the peat villages whose daughters could count on a place in the convent. Whether the request of the regional administrators to revive the convent locally had any effect is not known. In 1404, nuns still seem to have belonged to the community of Nes. Indeed, in a letter from that year, about the election of a new commander, a Teutonic Order priest named Siuert figures, with the job title *biichtevedir*. From this it can only be concluded then that the priest in question was acting as *confessor monialium*.¹⁴ The circumstance that he resided in Nes confirms the complaint of

¹⁴ Ibid., 255 (Annex I no. 2).

the aforementioned men from Boornego, Schoterland and Stellingwerf that the sisters had taken up residence in Nes. Apparently, by 1404, the move of 1375 had not yet been undone.

SISTERS IN THE TEUTONIC ORDER TRADITION

In principle, women could join the Teutonic Order but preferably as caring and nursing sisters.¹⁵ The founders of the Order and the first Grand Masters did not set out to create a parallel organisation for sister communities from the outset. However, possibly following the example of the Hospitallers, they were willing to allow women on an individual level to help the brothers to nurse the sick and take care of livestock. Women could do this better than men, was the reasoning in the oldest statutes that have survived to us.¹⁶ That there was no further mention of the sisters in the legislative sources reflects the low interest of the central leadership in the existence and religious development of its female members. Yet the general chapter did not rule out full membership for sisters. As Anette Löffler has shown, this is evident from the place accorded to them in the liturgy regarding intercession for souls: in it, they were placed on an equal footing with brothers.¹⁷ Furthermore, it is clear from the numerous loose mentions that *sorores* were present who – sometimes with board and lodging – maintained relations with commanderies within the Holy Roman Empire on an individual basis.¹⁸ Provincial and local superiors were apparently given room to make arrangements for this.

Since the status of serving lay sister described above is rendered as *halpschwester* in the High German version of the statutes, some historians assumed that all

¹⁵ Löffler, “Swester,” 207–208; Beda Dudik, “Über die Deutsch-Ordens-Schwester,” *Sitzungsberichte der kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philologisch-historische Klasse* (Wien) 16 (1855): 312.

¹⁶ *Die Statuten des Deutschen Ordens nach den ältesten Handschriften*, ed. Max Perlbach (Halle: M. Niemeyer, 1890 (repr. Hildesheim a.o.: Olms, 1975)), 52.

¹⁷ Löffler, “Swester,” 207–208; Dudik, “Über die Deutsch-Ordens-Schwester,” 312.

¹⁸ For example, in the bailiwick of Utrecht, excluding Friesland, which in 1361, according to a visitation report, had 52 brothers with the cross, and two sisters: *Visitationen im Deutschen Orden im Mittelalter*, part I, 1236–1449, ed. Marian Biskup and Irena Janosz-Biskupowa, with Udo Arnold, *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens 50/I* (Marburg: Elwert Verlag, 2002), 26. Cf. Peter Heim, *Die Deutschordenskommande Beuggen und die Anfänge der Ballei Elsass-Burgund*, *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens 32* (Bonn–Bad Godesberg: Verlag Wissenschaftliches Archiv, 1977), 54–58.

sisters of the Teutonic Order were half-sisters, that is, lay sisters who had taken vows but had to make themselves useful with manual labour. Their position was compared to that of half-brothers, who took simple vows but had no voice in the chapter and were therefore not considered full members of the Order.¹⁹ This view, however, is no longer tenable. Although in some sources half-sisters are also called *sorores* – making it not easy to distinguish the different categories on the basis of designation alone – various charters, memorial books and other documents show that in addition to these serving sisters or half-sisters, there were also fully professed sisters (*sorores* or *consorores*) living in commanderies who did not perform any work.²⁰ There were even nonprofessed *sorores* present in some houses who were not required to serve.

The eventual legal fitting in of these religious probably depended partly on the material contribution they made when they entered. For example, in Cologne at Saint Catherine's commandery, a woman who brought with her a large donation but did not want to give up all her assets, nor did she feel inclined to carry out manual labour, could enter into an "associational" membership in which the Order only had to provide her with lodging and meals with the further duty of mentioning her in intercession.²¹ In such a construction, resembling a *familiaris* relationship, the woman who entrusted herself to the care of the Order was still considered a *soror* of the Teutonic Order.

Thus, it is understandable that different forms of membership for women could coexist. My perception of this so far is that serving lay sisterhood appealed mainly to lower- and middle-class women. As long as they were not offered an alternative religious ideal (this objective would later be pursued by the beguines, Saint Francis' third order movement, and the sisters of the Common Life), the number of women who wanted to be part of a monastic community in a servant status was quite large.²² In addition, like the Order of Saint John's, the Teutonic Order also

¹⁹ Marian Tumler, *Der Deutsche Orden im Werden, Wachsen und Wirken bis 1400* (Vienna: Hochmeisterisches Amt, 1955), 385–387.

²⁰ Various cases cf. Hans Limburg, "Schwestern, Halbschwestern und Halbbrüder des Deutschen Ordens im Mittelalter," in *Von Akkon bis Wien. Studien zur Deutschordensgeschichte vom 13. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert. Festschrift zum 90. Geburtstag von Althochmeister P. Dr. Marian Tumler O.T.*, ed. Udo Arnold, Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens 20 (Marburg: N. W. Elwert Verlag, 1978), 14–28. See also Heim, *Die Deutschordenskommende*, 54–58.

²¹ Limburg, "Schwestern," 19: *Ad mansionem et curedum*.

²² On the integration of the women's religious movement into the existing orders in the 13th century, see Kaspar Elm, "Die Stellung der Frau im Ordenswesen, Semireligiosentum und Häresie zur Zeit der heiligen Elisabeth," in *Sankt Elisabeth, Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige*, ed. Kaspar Elm (Sigmaringen: Thorbecke Verlag, 1981), 7–28; Brigitte Degler-Spengler, "Die religiöse Frauen-

had an influx of women from patrician and aristocratic circles. In the 13th century, several ladies followed the example of their sons, brothers, fathers and husbands who had joined the Order as knight brothers. In doing so, they offered themselves and all or part of their possessions to the Order to lead a pious retired life in the vicinity of the commander's church within a separate women's house.²³ From this "associative" sisterhood as well as from the "serving" half-sisterhood, a diversely organised female following developed in various regional centres in the 13th century.

As for Friesland, it cannot be ruled out that the statutory form of half-sisterhood discussed earlier applied to the Schoten lay sisters. For the learned nuns of Katrijp/Luinjeberd, however, a different concept must have prevailed. Now, at some time several other women's convents were also part of the Teutonic Order which, although subordinate to a commandery, were autonomous and in which the women led a life in which the focus was not on caring for the sick but on worship.²⁴ The best known is the convent of Saint Catherine, founded in Frankfurt in 1344, which had 30 nuns of noble descent who had taken vows and had to live in seclusion. The nuns living there wore the cloak with the cross of the Teutonic Order and received their veil from the hand of the prior of the Sachsenhausen commandery. However, they were subordinate to the archbishop of Mainz. Furthermore, in Hitzkirch, Switzerland, there was a monastic community of women led by a prioress, whose members had to pay an annuity upon joining. Also known is the convent in Rüwenthal near Bern, where professed nuns lived in seclusion. Finally, there are reports of three separate, similar women's convents in the bishopric of Saxony-Thuringia: in Mühlhausen, Halle an der Saale and Eger.²⁵

bewegung des Mittelalters. Konversen – Nonnen – Beginen," *Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte* 3 (1984): 75–88; and ead., "Zahlreich wie die Sterne des Himmels' – Zisterzienser, Dominikaner und Franziskaner vor dem Problem der Inkorporation von Frauenklöstern," *Rottenburger Jahrbuch für Kirchengeschichte* 4 (1985): 37–50.

²³ Interesting in this context is the case of the early patrons of the Utrecht house Albert Visser and his wife Fementia in 1245: for their substantial donation, they were promised a place in the convent churchyard and memorial as brother and sister of the Order: *Quod si in domo sua mori contigerit, eorum exequias, ut fratrorum nostrorum et sororum nostrarum, celebrabimus et in cimiteriis nostris sepeliemus* eosdem: *Oorkondenboek van het Sticht Utrecht*, vol. 2, ed. Klaas Heeringa (Utrecht: Rijkskuitgeverij, 1940), no. 840; Jeremia J. van Duijl, *Goederenverwerving van het Duitse Huis te Utrecht 1218–1536* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2022), 64–65.

²⁴ For these three convents, see among others Karl H. Lampe, "Beiträge zur Geschichte der Deutschordensschwester," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung* 16 (1967): 48–53.

²⁵ Bernhart Jähmig, "Der Deutsche Orden und seine Ballei Thüringen im Mittelalter," in *Deutscher Orden 1190–1990*, ed. Udo Arnold, Tagungsberichte der Historischen Kommission für ost- und westpreußische Landesforschung 11 (Lüneburg: Nordostdeutsches Kulturwerk, 1997), 303–358.

None of these institutions seems to have been founded directly by the Teutonic Order itself. Their affiliation was the result of fortuitous initiatives by private founders who hoped that by transferring their convent to a well-privileged and relatively wealthy knightly order, they would secure its future. The latter must then often have disappointed both the sponsors and the sisters in the long run. For it is striking that, in general, the brothers of the Teutonic Order made little effort to firmly anchor these communities in the governance of their commanderies. Only the Frankfurt nunnery appears to have been able to hold out until the Reformation. The sisters of Hitzkirch had already disappeared from the scene in 1307, those of Rüwenthal in 1405. Possibly they were not sufficiently self-reliant in economic terms. In any case, there seems to have been no coordination and assistance from central governing bodies, either at the end or the beginning. Therefore, it is unlikely that the Frisian brothers turned to the above-mentioned convents to shape their nunnery of Katrijp/Luinjeberd.

THE SETUP OF FRISIAN NUNNERIES OF OTHER ORDERS

It is more likely that they were inspired by the religious houses of other orders in their immediate vicinity. Most monasteries founded in Friesland in the 12th and 13th centuries – regardless of which order they belonged to – not only had monks or canons but also a group of sisters, linked to the male community in legal, economic and religious terms. They can be described as double monasteries, with the proviso that the geographical criterion given in the usual definition, namely that both communities were on the same site and therefore also formed a local unit, did not always apply.²⁶ In several abbeys, the women's section was not located next to the men's monastery, but in a separate residential complex with its own chapel,

²⁶ The geographical criterion can be found in Ursmer Berlière, *Les monastères doubles au XII^e et XIII^e siècles*, Mémoires de l'Académie Royale de Belgique 18, fasc. 3 (Brussels: M. Lamertin, 1913), 5, 15. See also Stephanus Hilpisch, *Die Doppelklöster. Entstehung und Organisation* (Münster: Aschendorf, 1928), 1–2. Double monasteries with spatially separated communities he calls “neighbouring monasteries.” Compare Walter Deeters, “Benediktinische Doppelklöster in Ostfriesland,” in *Res Frisicae. Beiträge zur Ostfriesischen Verfassungs-, Sozial-, und Kulturgeschichte*, Abhandlungen und Vorträge zur Geschichte Ostfrieslands 59 (Aurich: ostfriesische Landschaft, 1978), 73–85. Only Willem Nolet and Petrus C. Boeren use a more extensive definition in: *Kerkelijke instellingen in de middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam: Urbi et Orbi, 1951), 400. They speak of a double monastery when the women's community is under the direction of a men's monastery and receives pastoral care and sustenance from it.

several kilometres away from the monks or canons. Such double monasteries-in-a-wide sense probably developed from communities that lived under one roof at the start but had to be separated at the instigation of the order leadership. The Cistercians and Premonstratensians, in particular, immediately set out to separate the sexes spatially from each other to avoid celibacy violations.²⁷ Since each of these orders aimed to unite their houses into a federation of independent monasteries, one might expect that autonomous nunneries led by an abbess would have emerged after separation. However, this was not the case in the Frisian lands. Here, although separate women's houses were established, they remained dependent on the men's monasteries in all respects. A provost or prior was then entrusted with the general management of the nunnery; he represented the monastery externally in the name of the abbot. And he was assisted for the pastoral care of the monks by a confessor. In religiosis, however, the community was governed by a prioress. The property remained in one hand and was managed by lay brothers of the men's monastery.

It was not until the 15th century that many of these dependent nunneries in Friesland were able to stand on their own two feet, meaning that their patrimony no longer had to fall under abbey ownership. Since then, the interests of the women's monastery were no longer looked after by a father abbot but by its own prioress supported by a council of the eldest sisters. An example of this development offers the Cistercian abbey of Bloemkamp, located not far west of Nes, founded in 1191, where in 1233 a dependent women's priory was established in a village ten kilometres away. The priory was officially called Aula Dei. However, it was usually called Nijklooster, to indicate the difference from the mother abbey, which henceforth bore the name Oldeklooster. Nijklooster only became completely independent in 1435 after an estate division, although the nuns continued to involve their confessor from Bloemkamp afterwards.²⁸

Nes and Katrijp/Luineberd seem to have followed this double convent model-in-a-broad sense. We already suspected that bringing the nuns back to Nes was linked to poverty as a result of dwindling income from the peatland. Nes itself did not suffer because most of its property consisted of fertile clay along the banks

²⁷ For the Cistercian nunneries, see Jaap J. van Moolenbroek, "De stichting van Cisterciënzer vrouwenkloosters in Nederland tot 1300," *Archief voor de Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Kerk in Nederland* 27 (1985): 173. One finds the development among the Premonstratensians treated in this respect by Norbert Backmund, *Monasticon Praemonstratense*, vol. 2 (Straubing: Monasticon Verlag, 1951), 156–158.

²⁸ Adalbertus Willebrands, "De vrouwenpriorij Aula Dei in Friesland," *Cîteaux in de Nederlanden* 5 (1954): 81.

of the river Boorne. A scenario could then have unfolded similar to the one we encounter with relatively poor double monasteries in the Frisian lands that did not split but continued to develop into women-only monasteries under male leadership. These are not always easily recognisable because the nuns in them hardly visibly acted independently, as all external contacts were the responsibility of the male staff. We find this type especially among the Frisian Premonstratensians and Hospitallers, especially in the Dutch province of Groningen and the nowadays German coastal area between Ems and Weser. With the former, the leadership was usually in the hands of a provost; with the Hospitallers, the person with final responsibility was always a commander.

To show how this type could have developed within a military order, I will suffice with a brief description of the Hospitaller commandery of Wijtwerd some distance north of the city of Groningen. At the end of the 15th century, this house had fifteen nuns (*mulieres ordinis*) who sang the Hours and were led by their own prioress. However, there were also a commander, a prior and several priests and lay brothers attached to the house.²⁹ And it was precisely they who administered all matters concerning the establishment of the order. We find them all mentioned by name in an important charter from 1430.³⁰ In addition to the commander, there were at least eight brothers, most of whom also held offices: a prior, two priest, two lay brother cellar masters and three lay brothers *grangiarii*. Although the concluding formula points out that the deed was also drawn up for the common conventuals – read: the sisters – it seems that the aforementioned brothers represented the entire male population of the commandery at that time.

Had there been other priest brothers at the time, they would certainly have found mention in the witness list, because of their status, before the lay brothers. The fact that the commandery thus had so few priests is therefore the main indication that the choir prayer at Wijtwerd was not provided by men but by women, largely invisible to the outside world. We do not find them mentioned for the first time until 1455. A charter then mentions the commander and the “common convent brothers and sisters of the house at Wijtwert”.³¹ In terms of numbers, the latter appear unambiguously in the already cited 1495 visitation report and later sources. Then too, the prioress was apparently able to act as administrator on be-

²⁹ Gerrit F. Noordhuis, *De Johanneters in Stad en Lande. Geschiedenis van de Johanneters in de provincie Groningen (13^{de}–17^{de} eeuw)* (Warffum: Sikkema, 1990), 31–32.

³⁰ Groningen, Groninger Archieven (hereafter as: GA), Kloosterarchieven, inv. nr. 244, fol. 118r.

³¹ GA, Archief klooster Selwerd, inv. nr. 1, f. 118v; Noordhuis, *De Johanneters Stad en Lande*, 31.

half of the convent, which can be seen as an important development in a process of emancipation.

THE RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF KATRIJP/LUINJEBERD OR STEENKERK
IN 1491 AS A LAY SISTERS CONVENT

Looking at it this way, the brothers of Nes could have opted for such a further development into a women's convent under male leadership after recalling the nuns from Katrijp/Luinjeberd in 1375. However, they did not do so. They decided not to take on any more female novices and let the community of nuns die out. Apparently, they still had enough priests to continue providing choral prayers themselves.

Yet this did not mark the end of female convent life within the Teutonic Order in Friesland. Remarkably, in 1491 an entirely new initiative was taken to establish a lay sister community in the once abandoned convent complex of Katrijp/Luinjeberd. We know this from an extraordinarily informative charter, written in Old Frisian, dated 15 July that year.³² The drafters are Meynardus, commander of Nes, Arnoldus, prior of Schoten, Thomas, Teutonic Order priest at Rottum, Ulfardus, Teutonic Order priest at Luinjeberd and the remaining Nesser priest brothers Paulus and Helyas. They announce to take under their "care, privileges our protection" the two sisters Margrete and Renttie – and any other sister who wished to join them – living at Schoten at that time.

To this end, they offer them the (old, abandoned) stone church of the village of Luinjeberd. On its south side, where the nuns' convent buildings used to be, the sisters are allowed to construct new residential and farm buildings. In addition, they receive meadows, a piece of grazing land for the upkeep of twenty cows and a precisely demarcated plot of arable land, in which, incidentally, they are also allowed to dig the peat needed for their own needs. They do not have to make regular monetary payments to Nes, provided they pay for the living expenses of a confessor provided to them by the Order. Furthermore, they have to take care for a corrodian of Nes and produce the textiles needed for the brothers of Nes. According to the final stipulation, they are obliged to wear the habit of the Teutonic Order and be controlled by visitators of the Order.

³² *Oudfriese oorkonden*, IV, ed. De Vries, no. 85.

As simple as these provisions sound, they reveal how poor and meagre was the equipment the Frisian brothers of the Teutonic Order provided their sisters. In exchange for a piece of little fertile peatland, Nes was freed from the maintenance costs of a corrodian and saved on clothing expenses. It will also have pleased the prior of Schoten that he no longer had to provide for the upkeep of two religious women. Apparently, he accepted the fact that his priory ceased to exist as a convent and his title as prior became meaningless. On the other hand, it has to be taken into account that the economic situation of Nes and Schoten had deteriorated so much in the previous period that a more generous endowment might have put both houses in dire financial straits.³³

Although the brothers of Nes and Schoten could count on a material benefit when the sister convent now called Steenkerk would flourish, it cannot be assumed that this was a decisive motive for the new foundation. More likely, the initiators saw in it a good opportunity to raise again the spiritual prestige of their commanderies, which had suffered badly due to various reform perils in Friesland.³⁴ They could count on the new sister convent meeting a need: namely that of middle-class women, who at this time aspired to a reclusive life in a modest community; women who until then had been denied access to the contemplative form of monastic life because the entry fees of the traditional, mostly aristocratic women's convents were far too high.

THE LAY SISTER HOUSES OF THE FRISIAN HOSPITALLERS AS A MODEL?

That the Steenkerk thus reconstituted was intended to be an autonomous convent of lay sisters under the leadership of a *mater* raises the question of where or with whom the initiators could have oriented themselves for its design. Not in their own circles within the Teutonic Order, because within it this type of convent was unknown. To this end, let us first take a look at the other military order that had branches in the Frisian lands, namely that of the Hospitallers. They were already mentioned above in relation to the set-up of the nunneries under male leadership.

It is not very well known that the Frisian Hospitallers, especially in the areas between Lauwers and Weser, had not only male-led nunneries under their care but

³³ On the economic problems of Nes in particular at this time, see Mol, *De Friese huizen*, 186–190.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 134–138.

also a relatively large group of lay sister houses.³⁵ These were establishments that are not listed as convents in the well-known 1495 visitation report for the Alemannia priory. Until recently therefore, they were not recorded in the literature as houses with women, but they certainly were. I will not cover them all here but will pay attention to the few with the oldest surviving records, to show how they functioned. These are the commanderies of Abbingwehr in Emsingo and Strückhausen in Bremer Stadtland. The former was undisputedly the oldest and richest commandery in Ostfriesland. In 1402, it housed both brothers and sisters.³⁶ That the sisters at that time there were considered rightful members of the order is shown by a document from ten years later, in which a local nobleman hands over a piece of pasture land to the commander and conventuals of Abbingwehr, with the stipulation that the commander and the brothers and sisters are henceforth allowed to manage that land entirely as their own property.³⁷ Later documents show that only a few priests lived in Abbingwehr against a large number of sisters. These were to remain there until their house was dissolved by the Count of East Friesland in 1528. They were led, apart from by the commander, not by a prioress but by a *suster moder*.

Another early mention of lay nuns in a Frisian Saint John's house relates to the commandery of Strückhausen, in the Bremen Stadtland on the western bank of the Weser estuary. In 1423, the Hospitaller priest brother Hilderyck made a declaration on his deathbed about founding a convent. In the presence of witnesses, he declared that, with the consent of the parishioners of Strückhausen, he had handed over a certain complex of buildings together with the dilapidated parish church to God, Mary and Saint John the Baptist for the use by and maintenance of "his former 'cloister' brothers and sisters [...] who bore the cross of the Order of Saint John in Strückhausen, so that they could serve God and Saint John and to provide them with food and clothing and enable them to give alms to the poor."³⁸ He stipulated that this property was to remain in the hands of the convent of Saint John in Strückhausen forever. So here we are dealing with a relaunch of a community

³⁵ Johannes A. Mol, "The Hospitaller Sisters in Frisia," in *Hospitaller Women in the Middle Ages*, ed. Anthony Luttrell and Helen J. Nicholson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 179–208.

³⁶ *Ostfriesisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. 1, ed. Ernst Friedländer (Emden: W. Haynel, 1878), no. 188: *Den broderen ende zusteren to Abbingeweer of zunte Johannis leven*.

³⁷ Mol, "The Hospitaller Sisters," 192.

³⁸ *Oldenburgisches Urkundenbuch*, vol. II, ed. Gustav Rühning (Oldenburg: G. Stalling, 1914), no. 672: [...] *synen olden closterbroderen unde susteren ... de dat cruce dregen sunte Johannes ordens to Struckhusen, to godesdenste unde sunte Johannes unde to erer vodynge unde kledynge unde allen armen luden de ere alemysen begherende syn*.

dedicated to caring for the poor and in which religious practice was maintained by brothers and sisters. The sisters wore the cross on their cloaks, signalling to the outside world that they saw themselves as members of the Order. Similar testimonies, but from the 16th century, are found for a series of other Hospitaller houses in the area between Lauwers and Weser, including Bokelesch, Burmönken, Dünebroek, Havermönken, Hasselt, Heiselhuzen, Jemgum and Oosterwierum. Most of them already existed in 1319; only one does not find the female element mentioned in those early reports because their emancipation process in administrative terms did not start until late.

THE SISTER HOUSES OF THE DEVOTIO MODERNA MOVEMENT

Although the renovated Steenkerk of 1491 bears many similarities to these Hospitaller lay sister houses in Groningen and Ostfriesland, it still does not look like it was copied from them. The main reason for stating this is that Steenkerk was not placed under its own commander from the outset – apart from the confessor. The sisters here, unlike the above described lay sisters in Hospitaller houses, were allowed autonomous development, with only remote guidance. I therefore think the commanders of Nes and Schoten were more likely to have copied the set-up from the many new lay sister convents that had sprung up in the vicinity in the previous decades. These houses were part of the broad Modern Devotion movement that flourished in the Low Countries since around 1375, especially in the cities. Although the *Devotio Moderna* is often associated only with the Brethren of the Common Life and the Congregation of Windesheim, consisting mainly of men's convents, it should be stressed that its foundations of convents for women exceeded those of the houses for men two times over. In almost all cases these were lay sister communities, which after a spontaneous initial phase opted for a monastic way of life based on the rule of the third order of Saint Francis.³⁹ This was a version originally tailored to lay life in the world. Tertiaries vowed obedience to their superior and committed themselves to strict house rules but refrained from solemn vows that bound them for life. Theoretically, therefore, their formal ties to classical monastic life were limited and loose. In practice, however, they did live in a community dedicated to asceticism and seclusion, that is, as monastic as the real

³⁹ See the introduction at Koen Goudriaan, "De derde orde van Sint Franciscus in het bisdom Utrecht. Een voorstudie," *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 1 (1998): 206–210.

nuns. During the 14th century, many, indeed most, convents of tertiaries aspired to a conventual way of life similar to that of “real” monasteries and focused on Augustine’s Rule. A feature of this development is that, over time, a large number adopted the strict enclosure (*clausura*).

Another aspect deserves special attention here, because it helps explain the popularity and success of these lay sister convents. Their inmates were not obliged to hold the solemn Latin choral services, the *horae regulares*. They could content themselves with a short liturgy of hours in the vernacular: the Office of Saint Mary. Since they thus did not have to be “learned in Latin”, they could free up a relatively large amount of time for productive manual work. They often earned their living by spinning and weaving, which made extensive property, house and land rents unnecessary. Therefore, it was relatively cheap to establish and maintain such communities. For this reason, I have sometimes qualified them as “low budget” convents for women.⁴⁰

Unlike in the rest of the Low Countries, where most of these austere but self-reliant sisterhoods were founded in cities, in rural Friesland, many such densely populated houses were also established in the countryside.⁴¹ Early ones were Oegeklooster (1411), located near Bolsward, and Aalsum (before 1438), between Akkrum and Irnsum. Both houses lived according to the third rule of Saint Francis. After 1450, other new foundations were established: Fiswerd near Leeuwarden (before 1451), Mariënacker in Workum (before 1457), Groendijk or Sydsingawier near Sneek (1463), Staveren (1466), Bethany near Tjummarum (1474), Engwerd near Poppingawier (1478), Siegerswoude (1482), Nazareth near Idsega (1483), the Holy Ghost Monastery in Bolsward (before 1504) and the later White Nuns of Leeuwarden (before 1512). The third rule of Saint Francis was also followed in Engwerd and in the first three institutions mentioned. The other houses followed the third rule of Saint Augustine, with the exception of the white nuns of Leeuwarden, whose community lived first according to the third and later the second rule of Saint Dominic.

The re-foundation of Steenkerk fits well into this scheme. Since the Teutonic Order had no third rule, it had to content itself with granting the inmates the status of half-sisters. However, this did not mean that they were expected to live like their predecessors, the singing nuns of Katrijp/Luinjeberd. This was already ruled out by the stipulation that they had to do the weaving for Nes. Thus, although

⁴⁰ Mol, “The Hospitaller Sisters,” 202, 206.

⁴¹ For the following overview, see Mol, *De Friese huizen*, 138–141.

their house adopted the patron saint of the old Steenkerk – Saint Elisabeth of Thuringia, so beloved in the Teutonic Order – it took on a different character.⁴² This is particularly reflected in the way people in the area referred to the sisters. After 1491, they were almost always called beguines, a term used not only for “real” beguines living in their own houses in an enclosed courtyard but also for tertiaries and sisters of the Common Life. Furthermore, the mother superior of Steenkerk did not bear the title prioress, which was common in old-style nunneries, but called herself *mater*, like the superiors of tertiary houses.⁴³ So it seems very likely that the Teutonic Order took these modest but popular lay sister communities as an example when it re-established Steenkerk as a convent.

As a matter of fact, the brothers of Nes’ interest in their new convent did not last long. After only ten years, the sisters complained to the Order about a lack of support and guidance. In a letter from 1502, they asked the visitor to allow them to confess to a secular priest named Petrus.⁴⁴ Their first confessor, Ulfardus, parish priest of Luinjeberd, who had co-signed the foundation charter in 1491, had apparently died and Nes had not yet provided for his replacement. It is questionable whether the visitor complied with the request. To save on the cost of living for its own priest brethren, Nes had accepted few, if any, newcomers. Consequently, there were no longer enough candidates to fill the vacant pastoral care posts including that of Steenkerk in combination with Luinjeberd. The available priest brothers preferred to choose the more wealthy parishes like Oldeboorn, Irnsum and Rotum rather than those of the poor peat villages of Katrijp/Terband or Luinjeberd.

The sisters would not seek refuge with the Teutonic Order for long afterwards. Between 1506 and 1509, they turned to the government of Duke George of Saxony in Leeuwarden to ask it to send them a pious and understanding priest of whatever order as a visitor, since the visitors of the Teutonic Order had done them no service. Duke George of Saxony then ordered the abbot of the Cistercian monastery Bloemkamp and the land deans of Steenwijk and Deventer to inquire about the situation in Steenkerk. Apparently, on the occasion of this visitation, it was decided to place the modest convent with the Cistercians. Bloemkamp’s chronicle

⁴² This patrocinium is mentioned in a will from 1496: *Friese testamenten tot 1550*, ed. Gerrit Verhoeven and Johannes A. Mol (Leeuwarden: Fryske Akademy, 1994), no. 56.

⁴³ This title of *mater* retained the mother superior even after her convent joined the Cistercian order: Michael Schoengen, “Akten en bescheiden betreffende de Cisterciënser abdij Bloemkamp,” *Archief voor de geschiedenis van het Aartsbisdom Utrecht* 29 (1903): 222–224.

⁴⁴ *Visitationen im Deutschen Orden im Mittelalter*, part II, 1450–1519, ed. Marian Biskup and Irena Janosz-Biskupowa, with Udo Arnold, *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte des Deutschen Ordens* 50/II (Marburg: Elwert Verlag, 2002), 274, 276.

records that the abbey took Steenkerk under its wing as a Cistercian house in 1510. In 1525, the nuns left their building complex near the old stone church and moved into a new convent near the then functioning parish church of Luinjeberd, which was named Mariënbosch (*Nemus beatae Mariae*). Incidentally, the further course of Mariënbosch's history shows that its transformation into a Cistercian convent with singing nuns failed. Two nuns from Nijeklooster (*duae sorores reformatrices*), who had been sent to Mariënbosch in 1542 by Abbot Hendrik van Steenwijk to reform and adapt it, had to return without having achieved anything. This had not so much to do with the spiritual condition as with the convent's poverty. The solution was found in sending two lay sisters (*duae conversae reformatrices*) from the Cistercian nunnery Vrouweklooster near Burum, who could guide the Steenkerk sisters in setting up their agricultural and craft business, to which all members of the community had to contribute with manual labour. The convent's tight purse did not allow sisters to be fully exempted for choir service.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

On reviewing the record, we can see that in Friesland, until 1510, the Teutonic Order always had under its care not only brothers but also sisters, clothed in the black-crossed habit. And this in three different "formulas" or forms of membership. The most recognisable one is found in the commandery of Schoten, which had started as *hospitale pauperum* at a river crossing. Until 1491, this order house housed a small number of lay sisters to whom, in all likelihood, the status of (serving) half-sister recognised by the Order applied.

We find the second form of membership for women at the commandery of Nes. In the second half of the 13th century, presumably in or shortly after 1281, the brothers of this house founded a convent for women, called Katrijp, near the abandoned former parish church of Luinjeberd. This existed at least until around 1375 when, probably in view of the low income of the convent at Luinjeberd, the commander ordered the nuns to be brought back to Nes, only to have them die out after 1400. The members were *sanctimoniales* c.q. choir nuns whose task was to sing the *horae regulares*. Their convent is called a "sub-convent" in the sources.

⁴⁵ Schoengen, "Akten en bescheiden," 203. The miserable economic situation led to land sales in 1547, cf. Wim Dolk, "Decretale verkopen van kerkelijke goederen in de 16^e eeuw," *It Beaken* 27 (1965): 132.

It can be thought of as the female, spatially separated part of a double convent-in a broad sense. The nuns had been given separate accommodation elsewhere and were led spiritually by a prioress but remained under the authority of the commander and had a priest brother from Nes as confessor. Like the nuns of Saint Catherine's Convent in Frankfurt, they will have been statutorily considered full *sorores* of the Order. Nevertheless, precisely because of their strong dependence on a male commandery, their convent had a different set-up. Comparison with the women's convents of other orders in Friesland strongly suggests that it was modelled accordingly. In other words, the brothers of Nes drew inspiration for its setup from examples in the immediate surroundings, possibly to compete with other orders here.

The latter is also the case with the Steenkerk convent, re-founded in 1491 by the brothers of Nes and Schoten on the site of the former sub-convent. Its members would wear the habit of the Teutonic Order until 1510 and were also under visitation by the Order. Unlike their predecessors from before 1375, they were not *sanc-timoniales* but lay sisters who had to contribute to the economic existence of their homes through manual labour. For the design, the initiators do not seem to have turned to the existing Hospitaller lay sister houses in the Frisian lands between Lauwers and Weser. Rather, the model was provided to them by the new tertiary houses from the sphere of Modern Devotion that had emerged in the previous decades in the vicinity of Nes and Schoten.

With each of these three "formulas" for Frisian sisters, it is true that a more or less appropriate form of membership within the Teutonic Order could be found for them: either the (serving) half-sisterhood, or that of full-fledged *soror* who was entitled to intercession as extensively as the brother. The central Order authorities may not have encouraged the emergence of a female branch within their corporation, but at the local and regional level they left their brethren free to come up with their own proper solution to the influx of religious women locally. That this was successful to a certain extent in Friesland in particular will also have to do with the fact that the Frisian brothers – none of whom were knights – enjoyed a far-reaching form of autonomy here until the 16th century.

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