

# ***Gratia Undecima Mille: The Cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins in Cologne***

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The Christian saints' cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins is an important part of Cologne's history and culture. In the twelfth century, several events transformed the cult: the legend of the virgins was rewritten and widely published as the *Regnante domino*; second, an enormous cache of religious relics was discovered outside Cologne; finally, the legend was again changed by the female visionary Elisabeth von Schönau. Due to the close relationship between the cult and the city, these events changed Cologne's identity. Already an important economic and political center, Cologne became known as the city protected by an army of saints and as a pilgrimage destination and source of relics that rivaled Rome itself.

“By virtue of the most majestic heavenly martyred virgins coming from the east, in fulfillment of a vow, the virtuous Clematius restored this basilica on their land from the foundation up.”<sup>1</sup> So reads the Latin inscription on the south wall in the Saint Ursula church in Cologne. Dated as roughly fourth century, this inscription is the earliest surviving evidence of the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, who became very important saints for the people of Cologne, acting as spiritual patrons and protectors for the city.

In medieval Christian society, veneration of a particular saint by a community, family or person was common. Such saints' cults were based on the belief in a reciprocal relationship between the person on earth and the saint in heaven: in exchange for devotion and prayer, the saint granted miracles. There was often a physical link to the saint in the form of a bone, a bit of hair, or a garment of that saint. This relic channeled the saint's power, and it was thought that the saint actually resided inside the object. Another important aspect of the cult of saints was the saint's *vita* or *passio*, an account of the life and death of the saint. This legendary history was the voice of the cult, telling the world of the saint's great holiness and conferring honor on the people and places associated with the saint. Furthermore, an individual or community often tied their identity to their patron saint.<sup>2</sup> The association of the papacy with Saint Peter is a prominent example of this. In the case of the Eleven Thousand Virgins and Cologne, the city created and expressed a unique identity through its association with this specific saint's cult.

This paper will explore the relationship between city and saint's cult by analyzing three transformative events in the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins during the twelfth century. The first event was the publication of the *Regnante domino*, which infused the legend of Ursula with a sense of adventure and grandeur to match the growing power and prestige of Cologne. Secondly, a graveyard was

discovered just outside the city that was identified as the burial of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, providing Cologne with a treasure trove of religious relics. Finally, the legend was emended by a female visionary monastic named Elisabeth von Schönau, who presented the Eleven Thousand Virgins as a model of the ideal Christian society. Each of these events came about because of broader social, cultural, religious, economic, or political influences, and each had an impact on Cologne's identity as a wealthy urban community and a Christian center equal to Rome or Jerusalem.

Cologne has been politically and economically important since the time of the Roman Empire.<sup>3</sup> During the tenth and eleventh centuries, Cologne “developed into the leading commercial city in Germany.”<sup>4</sup> The city had a strong textile and metal working industry, a mint that produced the most stable currency in the region, and a wealthy and powerful merchant class.<sup>5</sup> Also at this time, the Holy Roman Emperor, whose empire encompassed what is today Germany, Austria and Italy, granted the archbishop of Cologne a large territory to administer in fief. Furthermore, the archbishop became one of seven electoral princes who chose the ruler of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the burgeoning wealth and influence of Cologne, it is not surprising that the city's patron saints, the Eleven Thousand Virgins, would also be conceived in the twelfth century on a grander scale than ever before. Circa 1100, a newly expanded version of the legend, known today as the *Regnante domino*, was published by an anonymous monk.<sup>7</sup> This *passio* account tells the story of a beautiful Christian princess of Britain named Ursula. Devoted to Christ from a young age, she bargains to delay her marriage to a pagan prince until she has completed a pilgrimage to Rome and her fiancé has been baptized a Christian. Ursula is given eleven virginal companions, each with a thousand virgins in retinue, to accompany her in her holy journey. On their way home from Rome, however,

Ursula and her band are stopped at Cologne, which is besieged by Huns. Before they can escape, the Huns murder almost the entire company. The leader of the Huns halts the slaughter as soon as he sees Ursula, struck by her beauty and nobility. He asks her to marry him, and when she refuses him, unwilling to abandon her commitment to Christ, he shoots her with an arrow and kills her surviving companions. The martyrdom of the virgins opened the way for a miracle: God sent a fearful vision to the Huns of “battle lines of armed soldiers pursuing them,” driving them away.<sup>8</sup> So the virgins, through their sacrifice, were instrumental to the salvation of Cologne. The townsfolk repaid this debt by venerating the virgins from that time on, thus giving birth to the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne.

The *Regnante domino* reads more like a high adventure story or an epic poem rather than a passion of a heroic individual martyr. Ursula is different from other Christian saints because of her companions: they act as a cohesive unit, a community of martyrs, and an army of soldiers for Christ. The anonymous author is able to deliberately evoke the imagery and idealism of the wildly successful First Crusade (1095–1099) by describing the virgins as “the maiden troops,” “a virgin army” and “the most loyal comrades-in-arms.”<sup>9</sup> The parallel to the Crusades is further emphasized by the language of opulence and grandeur the author uses to describe the virgins. As they set out on their journey, the princess and her retinue of “seemingly countless girls” are outfitted in “royal splendor,” and the ships built to carry them on their pilgrimage were “sumptuously” decorated with “gold, silver and bronze.”<sup>10</sup> This theme of opulence recalls the great riches the Crusaders gained in the sack of the Holy Land, but instead of earthly wealth, the martyrdom of the virgins is the “incomparable treasure” won at the end of the story.<sup>11</sup> Medieval Christians valued gaining a place in heaven above all else, and martyrdom was considered the surest path to the company of the blessed. The relics or body of a martyr, because it created a direct link to that company in heaven, were also extremely valuable.<sup>12</sup> In the *Regnante domino*, imagery of jewels and flowers are used to express the preciousness of the virgins’ sacrifice. Ursula is described as “a heavenly pearl . . . purified by the royal purple of her own blood” and as a “wondrous flower vase of the Lord . . . [gleaming] whitely with the lilies of virginity.”<sup>13</sup> Cologne, saved by the sacrifice of the martyrs, is all the more blessed because it received the treasure of thousands of patron saints.

The *Regnante domino* not only reflected the grandeur and prestige of politically and economically powerful Cologne, but it also influenced Cologne’s identity as a religious center. Through the conscious construction of parallels to the Crusades, the *Regnante domino* portrays Cologne as a German Jerusalem, the destination of an army of pilgrims who were martyred in defense of the Christian town against the barbarian horde. It seems the world was

willing to recognize Cologne’s preeminence. For instance, the Englishman William of Malmesbury described Cologne as “the greatest city, the capital of all of Germany, full of material goods, and replete with the patronage of saints.”<sup>14</sup>

Just a few years after the completion of the *Regnante domino*, Cologne’s treasure of martyrs became material when construction of a new city wall uncovered a large graveyard, later identified as the burial ground of the Eleven Thousand Virgins described in the *Regnante domino*.<sup>15</sup> Abbot Gerlach of the Benedictine monastery in Deutz, just across the Rhine River from the city, began exhuming the bodies of the virgins in 1156.<sup>16</sup>

The significance of this discovery lies in the importance of religious relics, usually a saint’s bones or clothing, to the Christian cult of saints (Figure 1). Through their relics,



Figure 1. Relics of the Eleven Thousand Virgins on display in the Golden Chamber, St. Ursula Church, Cologne Germany.

saints could bestow blessings and miracles of healing and protection in exchange for a community’s prayers and devotion. Possessing the relics of a saint conferred great importance to a city or a church. The miracles surrounding the relics drew pilgrims from across Europe, which not only increased a location’s religious importance but also boosted the local economy.<sup>17</sup> Since relics were so important, pillaging relics and establishing fraudulent relics

were not uncommon. As Patrick Geary put it, “relics were excellent articles of trade”: they were generally small, easily transported, and beneficial to buyers, sellers and local authorities.<sup>18</sup>

Though some enthusiastically embraced the authenticity of the relics being exhumed from the graveyard in Cologne—one was Thioderic, a monk of Deutz who left a first-person account of the exhumation process—Abbot Gerlach himself harbored doubts. According to the *Regnante domino*, which had become the authoritative text for the cult, the company of the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne included only virginal young women. Among the bones found in this graveyard, however, were the bodies and identifying tablets (“titulos”) of men and boys. In fact, many were prominent churchmen, even a Pope, none of whom were mentioned in the *Regnante domino*.<sup>19</sup> Abbot Gerlach, therefore, sought a higher authority to account for the anomalous bones and certify the authenticity of the relics.

Gerlach turned to Elisabeth von Shönaeu, a young Benedictine nun renowned as a visionary, to validate the grave markers discovered alongside the relics. A fellow Benedictine, Gerlach trusted Elisabeth to discover the truth because she famously had a unique access to the denizens of heaven, receiving personal visits from them in her visions.<sup>20</sup> As Elisabeth explains:

He hoped something about [the relics] could be revealed to me by the grace of God, and he wanted it to be confirmed through me whether or not they should be believed. Indeed, he was suspicious that the discoverers of the holy bodies might have craftily had those titles inscribed for profit.<sup>21</sup>

Apparently, both Gerlach and Elisabeth were wary of false relics.

When Abbot Gerlach asked Elisabeth to validate the relics he was elevating in Cologne through her powers as a visionary, he sent along two of the saints’ relics with their stone grave markers. One of those saints, Verena, came to Elisabeth in a series of visions, answering her timid questions about the Cologne martyrs. The visions were published in one volume entitled *The Book of Revelations about the Sacred Company of the Virgins of Cologne*.

*The Book of Revelations* accounted for the numerous male remains found among the virgins by emphasizing the importance of family to the church. Men who are close blood relations were considered acceptable companions to virgins in church doctrine and monastic rules. Elisabeth presents many examples of family ties between the virgin martyrs and their male companions. For instance, the two saints whose relics were sent to Schönau, Saint Verena and St. Caesarius, were cousins.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Archbishop James and Bishop Maurisus, who joined the virgins after meeting them in Rome, both had nieces in the sacred company.<sup>23</sup> Saint Ursula’s own aunt, a formidable woman named Gerasma, “guided them and in the end she endured martyrdom with them.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, Saint Verena, newly

instated as patron saint of Schönau, was cousin to St. Ursula herself.<sup>25</sup> Another important addition to the Ursula legend is the expanded story of young King Etherius, Ursula’s pagan fiancé, who receives a vision from God urging him to join his fiancée in martyrdom after he is baptized.<sup>26</sup> Elisabeth’s emphasis on family ties brings the ideal of love for family, be it blood relations or fellows in one’s church or religious order, to the forefront of the narrative.

The most problematic of Abbot Gerlach’s discoveries among the graves at Cologne was the body of a Pope Cyriacus, who appears neither in the *Regnante domino* nor in records naming past popes.<sup>27</sup> According to Elisabeth’s visions, Cyriacus was the pope who welcomed Ursula and her company to Rome. In another instance of blood and kinship ties, “he came from [the virgins’] homeland” and “had many relatives among [them].”<sup>28</sup> The night after the virgins came to Rome, he received a vision from God telling him to join these virgins in martyrdom. The reason his name is not in the papal records is due to the fact that he only held the apostolic seat for about a year before his sudden abdication, and because he abandoned the papacy so abruptly the cardinals had him expunged from the records. They “thought it was absurd for him to turn aside as if following the foolishness of little women.”<sup>29</sup>

Elisabeth emphasizes that not only did the virgins receive support from male and female relations, but they were also properly guarded, cared for, and ministered to by the clergy. This is an important aspect of Christian community for Elisabeth and others of her century who felt the church was corrupted and the clergy, especially the pope, were failing in their pastoral duties.<sup>30</sup> In *The Book of Revelations*, the figure of Pope Cyriacus stands as an example of the perfect church leader, the good priest in contrast to the modern pope accused of corruption and negligence.

Secular authority figures are also portrayed as supportive of the religious calling of these women and as allied to the Church. Due to the fact that many of the company are of royal lineage, royalty is strongly associated with the saintly in *The Book of Revelations*. Most illustrative are the accounts of Ursula’s father, Maurus, and her fiancé, Etherius. Not only did Maurus let his daughter postpone a marriage of state with this pilgrimage, but he also furnished her with eleven ships on which Ursula basically cloistered herself. King Etherius, who was Ursula’s fiancé, leaves his kingdom to join Ursula.<sup>31</sup> In Elisabeth’s visions, the secular and religious realms blur as both kings and popes abandon their thrones to suffer martyrdom by Ursula’s side. In the ideal Christian society, this service to God above all else is fundamental.

This story must have resonated strongly with a twelfth century audience, especially in Cologne. That city had survived numerous clashes between church and secular authorities, most notably the revolt of the merchants against Archbishop Anno II in 1074 and the brief civil war

between Henry IV and his son, backed by the pope, which had threatened Cologne in particular.<sup>32</sup> What the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins, newly transformed by the visions of Elisabeth, offered to Cologne was an ideal, a goal toward which the great city could aspire.

With the events of the twelfth century—the *Regnante domino*, the elevation of the relics, and *The Book of Revelations*—the cult of the Eleven Thousand Virgins expanded across Europe from England to Italy and maintained its widespread popularity for centuries.<sup>33</sup> A hundred years after the visions of Elisabeth von Schönau, the legend of Ursula was reprinted in Jacobus de Voragine’s *Golden Legend*, a very popular and widely published collection of saint’s lives. The story had not changed from Elisabeth’s adaptation of the *Regnante domino*.<sup>34</sup> Even in the late fifteenth century, Ursula and her companions continued to be important members of the catholic liturgy. The legend was again republished in 1485 in an English translation, and the great Italian explorer Christopher Columbus named the Virgin Islands after them, since it seemed to him as though there were that many islands floating in the ocean.<sup>35</sup>

However, the heart of the cult was always Cologne. That city was the place where the virgins had been martyred, the birthplace of the cult, and the source of its religious relics. In all other parts of Europe, they were known as the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne, and the city became famous as “the greatest city . . . of all of Germany . . . replete with the patronage of saints.”<sup>36</sup> In many ways, the cult was also the heart of Cologne: the relationship between the holy virgins and the city formed an important part of Cologne’s identity. Indeed, Cologne proudly displayed eleven marks

for each thousand on its municipal crest, as shown in Figure 2. A thriving economic center, home to merchants so wealthy and competitive they were banned from Italian markets and the minters of the most stable currency in Germany, Cologne commanded amazing material wealth, and yet their greatest treasures were their patron saints. Already one of the strongest archbishoprics in the Holy Roman Empire, Cologne became one of the most important centers of Catholic religion in Europe, comparable to Rome and Jerusalem, due to its relationship with the Eleven Thousand Virgins.



**Figure 2.** Municipal crest, sixteenth century, on display at Kölnisches Stadtmuseum, Cologne, Germany.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Clematius Inscription*, circa 400. Translation from Scott Montgomery, *St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne: Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 10.

<sup>2</sup> For information on saints’ cults and medieval Christianity, see Adriaan H. Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages: The Relations between Religion, Church and Society*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Patrick J. Geary, *Furta Sacra: Thefts of Relics in the Central Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Herbert Grundmann, *Religious Movements in the Middle Ages*, trans. Steven Rowan (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995); Anneke B. Mulder-Bakker, ed., *The Invention of Saintliness*, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture (London: Routledge, 2002); and Miri Rubin, ed., *Medieval Christianity in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Strait, *Cologne in the Twelfth Century*, (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>5</sup> Horst Fuhrmann, *Germany in the High Middle Ages c. 1050–1200*, trans. Timothy Reuter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 24–27; Joseph P. Huffman, *Family, Commerce, and Religion in London and Cologne: Anglo-German Emigrants, c. 1000–c. 1300* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11; Strait, 18–43.

<sup>6</sup> See Otis Mitchell, *Two German Crowns: Monarchy and Empire in Medieval Germany*, (Bristol: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985), Fuhrmann, and Strait.

<sup>7</sup> Pamela Scheingorn and Marcelle Thiébaux, “Introduction,” to *The Passion of Saint Ursula [Regnante domino]*, trans. Pamela Scheingorn and Marcelle Thiébaux (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1990), 8.

<sup>8</sup> *The Passion of Saint Ursula [Regnante domino]*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 20–21.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>12</sup> For discussions of this, see Adriaan H. Bredero, Peter Brown, Patrick Geary, Anneke Mulder-Bakker, and Miri Rubin.

<sup>13</sup> *The Passion of Saint Ursula [Regnante domino]*, 28. Incidentally, the second image also emphasizes the group cohesion of the eleven thousand virgins in that the vase holds all the separate lilies of the martyrs together.

<sup>14</sup> Huffman, 10. Huffman gives the original Latin in footnote 11 on that page (the translation is mine): “Colonia est civitas maxima, totius Germaniae metropolis, conferta mercimoniis, referta sanctorum patrocinis.”

<sup>15</sup> Montgomery, 19–20; Huffman, 208.

<sup>16</sup> Thioderici, *Incipiunt Revelationes Titulorum*, MGH, SS, vol 14, 569.

<sup>17</sup> For the importance of relics, see Peter Brown, Adriaan Bredero, Patrick Geary, Horst Fuhmann, etc.

<sup>18</sup> Geary, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Anne Clark, “Introduction” to Elisabeth and Anne L. Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: The Complete Works; Translated and Introduced by Anne L. Clark; Preface by Barbara Newman* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 18–19.

<sup>20</sup> Anne L. Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau: Twelfth-Century Visionary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 37–40.

<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth, *The Complete Works*, 215.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 218–19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>27</sup> Huffman, 209.

<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth, *The Complete Works*, 217.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> For information on pre-Reformation religious upheavals, see Herbert Grundman and Adriaan Bredero, *Christendom and Christianity in the Middle Ages*.

<sup>31</sup> Elisabeth, *The Complete Works*, 220.

<sup>32</sup> See Horst Fuhmann, 110 and Paul Strait, 30–31.

<sup>33</sup> See Joseph Huffman and Scott Montgomery.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. Ganger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., Inc., 1941).

<sup>35</sup> Karen A. Winstead, *Chaste Passions: Medieval English Virgin Martyr Legends* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 164–169 and Montgomery, 40–41.

<sup>36</sup> William of Malmesbury, quoted in Huffman, 10.