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 ***Anchoress and Abbess in Ninth-Century Saxony: The Lives of  
Liutbirga of Wendhausen and Hathumoda of Gandersheim  
(review)***

Aneilya Barnes

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

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*Anchoress and Abbess in Ninth-Century Saxony: The Lives of Liutbirga of Wendhausen and Hathumoda of Gandersheim.* Translated by Frederick S. Paxton. [Medieval Texts in Translation.] (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press. 2009. Pp. xx, 204. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN 978-0-813-21569-3.)

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Frederick Paxton's *Anchoress and Abbess in Ninth-Century Saxony* includes a full-text translation of the *Lives* of Saint Liutbirga of Wendhausen (*VL*) and Saint Hathumoda of Gandersheim (*VH*). In addition to his thorough introduction, Paxton has also included a full-text translation of the poetic *Dialogue* of Agius on the death of Hathumoda. The ninth-century hagiographies chronicle the lives of Liutbirga, who was the first recorded anchoress of Saxony, and Hathumoda, who was the first abbess of Gandersheim, while the *Dialogue* was a letter of consolation to Hathumoda's grieving sisters.

The earliest extant copies of all three texts are in a manuscript collection of Abbot Andreas Lang (1483-1502) that catalogs the lives of important Benedictine men and women. Unfortunately, the manuscripts from which he worked are now lost, and, although widely debated, the original author of the *VL* remains a mystery. Unlike the author of the *VL*, Agius of Corvey, who was a priest and monk at the famous monastery, pointedly named himself as the author of both the *VH* and the *Dialogue*. He may have been Hathumoda's uncle, but he undoubtedly knew her well, as he performed the priestly functions for her community.

Despite the personal anonymity, the author of the *VL* vividly depicts the pious events of Liutbirga's life. As a young woman, she impressed Gisla, who was the widowed daughter of a Saxon nobleman and, eventually, persuaded Liutbirga to join her family. Liutbirga served and lived with Gisla's family as a relative until sometime around 840, when she persuaded Gisla's son and heir, Bernhard, the bishop of Halberstadt, to allow her to retire to the family cloister at Wendhausen. According to the *VL*, there she lived out the remaining thirty years of her life as an anchoress walled into a cell inside the abbey church, where she dyed yarn,

battled the devil, prayed, repented, prophesied, and counseled others, all while imposing the most rigorous asceticism on herself.

Like Liutbirga, Hathumoda demonstrated great promise at a young age, prompting her parents to ask papal permission to establish a cloister with her as abbess at the tender age of twelve. Pope Sergius II acquiesced, and Hathumoda became a model Benedictine abbess. She insisted that the nuns be properly cloistered (even from relatives); she always ate communally, and, although she permitted it by others, she never consumed meat. In summation, Agius presents Hathumoda as a strict, yet benevolent, abbess who lived a firmly austere life.

Hathumoda died at only thirty-four years of age, which is the focus of almost two-thirds of the *VH*. Agius describes the medical care she received [**End Page 774**] during her long-term illness, the visions she had, and the sisters who rallied to support her through her illness. He also details the rituals, prayers, and chants that were performed for her in both life and death. In the *Dialogue*, Agius explains to her biological sisters that they should take consolation in her divinely willed death, because Hathumoda would now represent them in the heavenly court.

Paxton has done a significant service by providing lucid translations of three texts that are valuable sources for understanding the lives of Carolingian religious women. When they are combined with his introduction, which situates the texts within the broader historical context of ninth-century Saxony, it is quite evident that the *vitae* are rich sources for understanding the complex web in which such female monastic communities were an integral component, including the ecclesiastical, political, and social networks that their families dominated. Additionally, they contain a wealth of social and cultural history for the Carolingian period, including detailed information about death rituals and medical care.

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The earliest extant copies of all three texts are in a manuscript collection of Abbot Andreas Lang (1483–1502) that catalogs the lives of important Benedictine men and women. Unfortunately, the manuscripts from which he worked are now lost, and, although widely debated, the original author of the VI remains a mystery. Unlike the author of the VI, Agius of Corvey, who was a priest and monk at the famous monastery, pointedly named himself as the author of both the VII and the *Dialogue*. He may have been Hathumoda's uncle, but he undoubtedly knew her well, as he performed the priestly functions for her community.

Despite the personal anonymity, the author of the VI vividly depicts the pious events of Liutbirga's life. As a young woman, she impressed Gisa, who was the widowed daughter of a Saxon nobleman and, eventually, persuaded Liutbirga to join her family. Liutbirga served and lived with Gisa's family as a relative until sometime around 840, when she persuaded Gisa's son and heir, Bernhard, the bishop of Halberstadt, to allow her to retire to the family cloister at Wendhausen. According to the VI, there she lived out the remaining thirty years of her life as an anchoress walled into a cell inside the abbey church, where she dyed yarn, battled the devil, prayed, repented, prophesied, and counseled others, all while imposing the most rigorous asceticism on herself.

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