religions

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Cistercian Monasteries in Medieval Sweden—Foundations and Recruitments, 1143–1420

Catharina Andersson

Department of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Umeå University, 90187 Umeå, Sweden; catharina.andersson@umu.se

Abstract: This article presents an overview of the Cistercian monasteries that were founded in Sweden in the 12th and 13th centuries. The first were Alvastra and Nydala, founded in 1143, both male monasteries. However, eventually the nunneries came to outnumber the male monasteries (7/5). The purpose of the article is also to discuss the social background of the monks and nuns who inhabited these monasteries. As for the nuns, previous studies have shown that they initially came from the society's elite, the royal families, but also other magnates. Gradually, social recruitment broadened, and an increasing number of women from the aristocratic lower levels came to dominate the recruitment. It is also suggested that from the end of the 14th century, the women increasingly came from the burghers. The male monasteries, on the other hand, were not even from the beginning populated by men from the nobles. Their family backgrounds seem rather to be linked to the aristocratic lower layers. This difference between the sexes can most probably be explained by the fact that ideals of monastic life—obedience, equality, poverty and ban on weapons—in a decisive way broke with what in secular life was constructed as an aristocratic masculinity.

Keywords: monasticism; aristocracy; medieval Sweden; monasteries; nunneries; nuns; monks; Cistercians; donations; gifts; diplomas; charters; gender; masculinity

Citation: Andersson, Catharina. 2021. Cistercian Monasteries in Medieval Sweden—Foundations and Recruitments, 1143–1420. *Religions* 12: 582. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080582

Academic Editor: Steinunn Kristjánsdóttir

Received: 30 April 2021
Accepted: 9 July 2021
Published: 28 July 2021

1. Introduction

In the 1160s, Ingegerd, sister of King Karl Sverkersson, is believed to have entered the prestigious Vreta monastery in the province of Östergötland. Before she entered, her brother, King Karl, had donated extensive and generous gifts to the convent. Because Ingegerd became the monastery's prioress, she ultimately found herself in control of the donated property. About 150 years later, another woman would be admitted to another of Sweden's oldest nunneries. Presumably at a young age, Cristina entered the Vårfruberga monastery in the province of Södermanland to take the veil. She was placed in the convent by her father, Botvid, who in connection with the entry also donated property to the convent. Botvid's gift of land was, however, far more modest than the king's donations almost 200 years earlier. Beyond this, we do not know much about either Cristina or her father. However, in contrast to Ingegerd's royal background, it is obvious that Cristina and Botvid did not belong to the elite of society (Johansson 1964, p. 75; SDHK n.d., Svenskt Diplomatariums huvudkartotek (The Main Catalog of Diplomatarium Suecanum), 5783). In other words, it was not always the case that the convents were primarily inhabited by the daughters of the most noble elite. Rather, a certain social diversification can be noted within its walls.

This article discusses who populated the oldest monasteries and nunneries in Sweden. Based on recent studies as well as existing sources, this study examines the social background of the nuns and monks who lived in the monasteries and how these social patterns changed over time during the Late Middle Ages through the beginning of the 15th century. In addition, the article investigates whether one can see a difference in this respect between the male and female monastic houses.

As the focus is on the Cistercian order, the article also presents an overview of the main founding period—from the time of the first monks' arrival in the 1140s through the 13th century. As for the nunneries, the convents commonly considered to belong to the order will be included. (In some cases, however, there is some uncertainty as to which order the nunneries in question were initially affiliated). This article suggests that the burgher families came to play an increasing important role as a recruitment base for the nunneries during the Late Middle Ages. The monasteries' social recruitment base is also discussed from a gender perspective. In recent decades, research has clearly shown that gender is a fundamental factor in how societies are organised as it is evident that gender also reflects a power relationship between the sexes. In her classic article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986), Joan W Scott emphasises that gender is one of the main fields through which power is expressed. There are also other fields, but gender "seems to have been a persistent and recurrent way of enabling the signification of power in the West" (Scott 1986, pp. 1067–70, quotation p. 1069). The Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman further suggests that the relations between the sexes follow two basic logics: the separation of the sexes (i.e., different spheres) and the norm that the male is superior. The stronger the distinction between the sexes (i.e., what is generally considered "female" and "male"), including their tasks and spheres, the stronger the primacy of the male norm (Hirdman 1988).

In medieval Sweden, social organisation as well as power relations were clearly linked to gender. This is, not the least, evinced by the legal male supremacy—all women, except for widows, were formally under male guardianship. In addition, women did not have access to public offices. As for the ecclesiastical and monastic world, the separation of the sexes and the hierarchies of power based on gender were also evident as men were the exclusive holders of ecclesiastical offices. This was not called in question by the monastic organisation, despite the seemingly more egalitarian world that monastic life offered. In addition, monasteries kept women and men strictly limited by the formal *enclosure*, physically separated from the outside world, including the opposite sex. Although an abbess supervised her convent and probably had some influence in the secular world, she too was subordinated to various male authorities such as a bishop or abbot from a nearby male monastery. In addition, unlike an abbot, an abbess did not have the authority to inaugurate new nuns or to perform the sacraments in her convent such as lead the service or receive confession.

It can also be assumed that the work the nuns performed in the monastery, at least in part, reflected the chores performed by women outside the monastery. For example, the nuns in Vadstena abbey, the mother house of the Bridgettine order, largely devoted themselves to sewing and textile care (although this was not their only occupation) (Rajamaa 1992, pp. 148–59). However, the traditional division of labour, or the subordination of the abbess vis-à-vis other ecclesiastical offices, was not the only way in which the monasteries maintained traditional gender structures. Later in the article, it will be argued that the gender structures of the surrounding secular society (i.e., the expected way of life for women and men) were also reflected in the aristocratic group's motives and reasons for placing—or not placing—a child or other relative in a convent.

2. Monasteries and Kings during Social Transformation

In the 12th century, the Cistercian order was established in Sweden. Only one monastery, Vreta Abbey, initially Benedictine, is known before the arrival of the Cistercians. During the 12th century and the first half of the 13th century, twelve Cistercian monasteries were founded. In 1143, the two oldest male monasteries, Alvastra and Nydala, were established. A third male monastery, Varnhem, was established around 1150 (perhaps earlier), and by the 1160s, two more monasteries for men had been established, Julita (later Säby) and Roma, the latter on the island of Gotland. Nunneries were also established at a rapid rate. As will be seen below, the early history of Vreta Abbey is unclear. From the 1160s, however, it is usually considered to be Cistercian, and was at the time one of the

country's most prestigious nunneries. Several nunneries followed. In most cases, the exact year each nunnery was established cannot be determined, but the majority were founded in the second half of the 12th century (although some would move to other areas in the 13th century). Nunneries were established in Askeby, Gudhem, Byarym (later Sko), Fogdö (later Vårfruberga), and Riseberga. No later than 1248, the last of the Cistercian nunneries, Solberga monastery, was founded, similarly to Roma, on the island of Gotland.

The 12th century, when the first monasteries were founded in Sweden, can also be described as a time of missions. Although the first known missionary, Ansgar, visited Birka, a Viking-era village, in the early 9th century and Viking seafarers temporarily professed the new faith in the 10th century, it was not until the 11th and 12th centuries that ecclesiastical organisations established themselves in what was to become Sweden. The first churches were founded in the 1000s and 1100s; however, in Varnhem, not far from the monastery, excavations have recently shown that a wooden church existed at the end of the 10th century (Vretemark et al. 2020). These churches were often built by private individuals, but the initiatives also came from the monarchy as well as church authorities or through collective peasant initiatives. These churches formed the basis for the first parishes during the 12th century (Brink 1996, pp. 269–90; see also Bonnier 1996), but the first dioceses were established in the 11th century. The oldest, Skara diocese, was established in Västergötland, west of Lake Vättern, as early as the middle of the 11th century. In the province of Småland, the Linköping diocese was established no later than 1139 when the Skara diocese was divided into two dioceses. Both Skara and Linköping were dioceses that would exist throughout the Middle Ages (Nilsson 1998, pp. 81–82). Although the details are not clear, Linköping had an ecclesiastical tradition before 1139. Possibly, the diocese existed shortly after 1104, when a Scandinavian church province was established and Lund became the archdiocese (Nyberg 2000, p. 79). A little over half a century later, in 1164, Sweden became its own church province with the archdiocese in Uppsala, which is in the region Svealand, north of the region Götaland.

During this time, as this ecclesiastical establishment was in progress, the kings increasingly sought to centralise power. Viking society, where power was based on looting and personal loyalties, was gradually replaced by a society based on the political and economic power associated with royal administration, including the collection of taxes and the establishment of laws (Lindkvist 1988). The kings relied on the church to help transform society to their liking. The administrative skills needed to run the royal administration were provided by literate men, i.e., clerics. In addition, Christianity offered the kings divine legitimacy for their claims and exercise of power. During the 11th century, most of the Swedish kings proclaimed themselves to be Christian. King Olov Eriksson Skötkonung, according to tradition, was baptised in Husaby (Västergötland) around 1000, and, unlike his father, Erik Segersäll, he did not seem to return to paganism after his Christian baptism. King Olov's activities probably strengthened the church. For example, he is associated with the founding of the diocese of Skara (Nilsson 1998, p. 66).

The kings also supported the ecclesiastical organisation with land and protection, so one can argue that the monarchy and the church benefited one another. This cooperation is, for example, evident by the fact that the kings invited and welcomed the monasteries, which, through prayer and prestige, supported them.

In this respect, it is also of interest to draw attention to the relatively high number of nunneries during the period. As we will see, the founding and origin of nunneries, similarly to the male monasteries, can be understood from a political context. The first Cistercian monasteries founded in Sweden were male, but before the end of the century, the female monasteries outnumbered male monasteries. The fact that many nunneries were founded in a recently Christianised kingdom is not unique to Sweden as this was also the case in the Frankish Kingdom and Anglo-Saxon England during the 6th century and Saxony during the 10th century (Tibbets Schulenburg 1989, p. 213; Leyser 1979, pp. 63–64; Southern [1970] 1977, pp. 309–10). These early nunneries were often founded by aristocratic families who presumably needed a place to send widows or unmarried daughters, and

they often controlled some of the nunnery's land holdings. As the nunneries increasingly came to control this property themselves, these aristocratic families lost their interest (Southern [1970] 1977, pp. 309–10; Leyser 1979, pp. 64–71). However, it has also been suggested that the Church's openness towards female participation was particularly high in its initial periods. Max Weber, for example, notes that women in different religious contexts during the "first stage of a religious community's formation" were welcomed, but women's participation declined as "routinization and regimentation of community relationships set in" (Weber [1922] 1965, p. 104). Similarly, Susan Fonay Wemple notes that Frankish women's opportunities to perform different tasks and services within the church were increasingly limited, especially during the Merovingian period (Wemple 1981, pp. 127–48). Similarly, R. W. Southern notes that for the Merovingians and the Anglo-Saxons "[a]s society became better organized and ecclesiastically more right-minded, the necessity for male dominance began to assert itself" (Southern [1970] 1977, p. 310).

A similar argument can be made for Scandinavia. The Cistercians arrived in Denmark about the same time they arrived in Sweden. In Denmark, three Cistercian nunneries and ten male monasteries were founded. However, in contrast to Sweden, the Cistercians in Denmark were not the first order to broadly establish monasteries during the 12th century. The first monastery in Denmark was founded 1096 in Odense, a Benedictine monastery for men. However, during the next century at least five, perhaps even six, Benedictine nunneries were founded as well as two double monasteries (i.e., monasteries for both men and women). Before 1275, 13 Benedictine nunneries and 11 male monasteries had been established in Denmark (Smith 1973, p. 43, passim; Gallén 1956), a ratio that is line with the number of female Cistercian monasteries established in Sweden. For the same reasons, the fact that monasteries founded in Sweden during and since the 13th century in most cases were intended for men seems not particularly remarkable in this context (for an overview of the Swedish medieval monasteries and nunneries, see Lovén 2001).

Thus, the Cistercian monasteries did not function as autonomous institutions, isolated from society. The political context in which the Cistercians' oldest monastery operated as well as who actively worked to establish the Cistercian order in Sweden has also been the subject of much debate in earlier research. The following discussion, however, provides an overview of the conditions related to the establishment of monasteries. Some political actors will be presented as well as some theories about their monastic involvement, but otherwise, the political conditions will not be discussed in detail (detailed accounts of the political context are given in France 1992; Nyberg 2000).

3. Monasteries

3.1. Alvastra, Nydala, Varnhem

The Cistercian chronicle *Exordium magnum cisterciense* reports that Bernhard of Clairvaux, on the request of Queen Ulfhild, sent the first monks to Sweden. According to tradition, on their way through the new land, the group split, settling in two locations: Alvastra monastery in the province of Östergötland, east of Lake Vättern, and Nydala monastery in Småland, south of the same lake. Both monasteries were established in 1143. Thus, both monasteries were affiliated with Clairvaux and were founded within the diocese of Linköping in Östergötland (Nilsson 1998, p. 120). In Alvastra, the monastery is said to be founded on the estate of Queen Ulvhild, who had received it as a "morning gift" (a gift the husband gives his bride after the wedding night) from her husband, King Sverker the Elder. The location and the monastery became important to the royal family, as is evident by the fact that King Sverker as well as the future kings of the family were buried in the monastery church. However, Alvastra was not only important to the royal family; it was as the order's foremost monastery in the kingdom, its *primas* (Johansson 1964, p. 64). Nydala is closely associated with Bishop Gisle in Linköping. Gisle, the first known bishop of the diocese of Linköping, was obviously very engaged in the establishment as he donated an estate to the monks. Traditionally, it has been claimed that the donation was taken from the bishopric, but it has also been suggested that it, at least in part, may have been

part of Gisle's private property (SBL n.d., *Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon*, "Gisle"). Initially, the monastery was plagued with financial problems, perhaps because it served as a shelter for travellers; however, eventually, Nydala would become very rich and a large landowner (Johansson 1964, p. 66).

A third monastery is usually mentioned when the Cistercians' arrival in Sweden is discussed—the Varnhem monastery in the province of Västergötland, west of Lake Vättern. Around 1150, monks started a monastic community at Varnhem, a daughter house of Alvastra. The church is still used today and there are traces of several other buildings of the original monastery complex. However, Varnhem was most likely not the monks' first location, as the monks might have arrived in the 1140s. Supposedly, they lived and worked on the island of Lurö in Lake Vänern for a short period according to a Danish source from the 17th century (according to Tore Nyberg, probably based on a text from the 13th century), which claims that King Sverker was involved not only in the creation of Alvastra but also in the establishment of a second monastery. However, the monks did not stay long on the island. They are assumed to have moved to Lugnås on the mainland before moving to their permanent location, Varnhem. According to the same Danish document, the estate in Varnhem was given to the monks by a noble woman named Sigrid, who was a relative of Queen Christina, the spouse of (the future) King Erik Jedvardsson (Nyberg 2000, pp. 131–33).

The circumstances surrounding the early years in Varnhem are unclear. It has, for example, been assumed that Erik Jedvardsson opposed the founding of the monastery and sought to persuade Sigrid to stop supporting the Varnhem monks, which explains why the monks temporarily stayed in Denmark. Erik's opposition to the monastery might have been related to the competition for power that existed between the King Erik Jedvardsson and King Sverker (Nyberg 2000, pp. 137–39). Later, however, Erik's family, who in the next century periodically held the royal title King, would create strong ties to Varnhem monastery.

3.2. Julita/Saba, Roma

These oldest monasteries were established, as has been seen, in the three provinces: Västergötland, west of Lake Vättern, Östergötland, east of the same lake, and present-day Småland, south of Lake Vättern. These provinces are also part of the larger region of Götaland in today's southern Sweden. These areas are also the locations of the two oldest dioceses that existed throughout the Middle Ages—the Skara diocese in the west and the Linköping diocese in the east (the latter also included Småland). In 1164, when Sweden became its own church province, Stefan, a Cistercian monk from Alvastra, was appointed the first archbishop of the diocese. The archdiocese was in Uppsala, in the region Svealand, north of Götaland. The geographical expansion of the ecclesiastical organisation had its equivalent in terms of monastic establishment. In the 1160s, the first male monastery outside the dioceses of Skara and Linköping was established in Viby, close to Sigtuna, in the province of Uppland. The first monks came from Alvastra. The estate they settled on had been given to them by a woman named Doter, another woman engaged in the establishment of a new monastery. We know her from a charter that was drawn up in 1164 (which is also the oldest preserved letter issued in Sweden) in which Archbishop Stefan judges in a dispute between the monastery and Doter's son, Gere, who claimed the land his mother gave to the monks belonged to him. Unsurprisingly, the archbishop judged the dispute in favour of the monks (SDHK 200). However, the monks' presence in Viby did not last long. By the 1180s, they had moved to Julita, also often referred to as Saba, in the province of Södermanland, about 160 km southwest of the original location. This time, however, the move was the result of royal influence. King Knut Eriksson, son of Erik Jedvardsson, donated the property in Julita, so the monastery moved from Viby to their new location. Knut's influence is also evident in the preserved sources where he is mentioned as a devoted patron of the monks. He was also included in the monastery's fraternity (SDHK 214). In addition to any religious beliefs, his commitment to the monks

can also be interpreted from a more political perspective. Similar to his father, Knut can be connected to Västergötland. However, during his long reign, the kingdom became politically more stable, and Knut was the first king from the Götaland region to control the region farther north, Svealand. To consolidate his influence in this region, it seems logical to emphasise his presence by also creating strong ties with the Cistercian monastery (and perhaps, indirectly, the archdiocese).

Finally, among the oldest Cistercian monasteries intended for men, is Gutnalia, later referred to as Roma, on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. The monastery was founded in 1164 as a daughter house of Nydala monastery. Beyond this, the facts about its establishment are sparse. It has been suggested that Bishop Gisle, who was earlier engaged in the establishment of Nydala, helped establish Roma (Nyberg 2000, p. 206). However, no documents have been preserved from the monastery that could shed further light on its founding, including royal involvement in the founding of the monastery. The absence of royal engagement, however, does not seem particularly remarkable as Gotland at the time stood outside the Swedish king's geographical sphere of power. Other sources point to cooperation with and support from Estonia, which was geographically as close to Gotland as mainland Sweden. The monks conducted missions in Estonia and had relationships with the German Orders of Knights. Over time, the monastery became very rich, eventually owning property in Estonia (Nyberg 2000, p. 206; Nilsson 1998, p. 126; Johansson 1964, p. 71).

Clearly, the royals were involved in these oldest male monasteries except for Roma, and the interests of the kings coincided with the interests of the monks. In addition, women were involved in the creation of these early monasteries and were very much a part of the monastic life. What, then, were the circumstances surrounding the founding of the nunneries?

4. Nunneries

The oldest nunneries in Sweden are usually presented as Cistercian. However, their initial affiliation is not entirely clear, and it has been argued that during the founding period in the 12th century, the nunneries should be described as Benedictine, as the Cistercians initially did not include female nunneries in their order (Lovén 2001, p. 247). Overall, throughout the 12th century, women are rarely mentioned in Cistercian documents. When women are mentioned, they are presented in a dismissive manner or referred to as problems. Monks who accepted and received visits from women were severely punished. Moreover, monks performed traditional female chores on the *grangies,* the agricultural branches characteristic of the Cistercians, rather than permitting women on the premises (i.e., by the *conversi*—see below). However, at the beginning of the 13th century, an increasingly permissive attitude towards women began to gain ground, and women were increasingly perceived as spiritual support for the monks. Finally, in 1213, the Cistercian order formally allowed nunneries within the order (McGuire 2010, pp. 245–48). However, the fact that the nunneries were not formally admitted to the Cistercian order did not necessarily prevent them from being viewed as Cistercians by their contemporaries. Within the order, abbots often took an informal responsibility for nearby nunneries and assisted the nuns with masses, blessings, and similar tasks linked to the duties of a priest. After the nunneries had formally been accepted within the order, the formal responsibility of the abbots for the nunnery continued as *cura monialium* (care for nuns) (McGuire 2010, pp. 247–49).

As noted above, a relatively permissive attitude on the part of the ecclesiastical organisation when missions were active is also conceivable. Since there was no established network of monasteries by the time the Cistercians arrived in Sweden, these monks and their monasteries became essential actors in spreading and establishing monasticism in this northern part of the ecclesiastical sphere. Thus, perhaps one can assume a greater tolerance vis-à-vis the nunneries and female participation in this mission also from the Cistercians.

Therefore, one could also hypothetically assume that contemporary population, at least to a certain degree, also initially perceived the nunneries as Cistercian. However, the

sources are ambiguous. The leader of the nunnery is sometimes called the prioress (the Benedictine term for the leader of the house), sometimes the abbess (the Cistercians term for the leader of the house). Furthermore, the term prioress can occur in the same charter where a convent is described as Cistercian. Yet another example shows the ambiguity in the sources: the convent in Riseberga, in the province of Närke, is referred to as Cistercian in a letter dated 1248, but Benedictine in 1284. The affiliation of the order does not always seem to have been completely clear even to members of the order (Lovén 2001, pp. 247–46; SDHK 616; 611; 1264).

In what follows, the convents that are commonly described as Cistercian will be presented, even though their affiliation is unclear. For the Vreta monastery, however, it is beyond doubt that the convent initially was Benedictine, since it was founded before the Cistercians arrived in Sweden.

4.1. Vreta

The Vreta monastery is commonly described as the oldest monasteries in medieval Sweden. It was founded in the beginning the 12th century in Östergötland and ruins of the monastery can still be seen on the west shore of Lake Roxen, about 200 km southwest from Stockholm. Most scholars agree that King Inge (the Elder) Stenkilsson and Queen Helena established the monastery. The exact year is unknown, but there is also an agreement that the king died before 1110. Consequently, the monastery must have been established before 1110. However, it has also been suggested that the monastery was founded even earlier. According to this hypothesis, King Inge might very well have died shortly after 1101 (the queen probably survived him). If that was the case, the monastery should have been founded around the year 1100 or even in the late 1000s (Nyberg 2000, pp. 81–82).

Before we take a closer look at the details of the founding of Vreta, let us for a moment again dwell on the political context in which the monastery was established. Although the kings professed Christianity during the 11th century, throughout the century there were most likely still local leaders and groups, especially in the province of Uppland in Svealand, who opposed the new faith or perhaps opposed the new system of power and centralisation which the new faith brought with it. The introduction of Christianity, with its close cooperation between the monarchy and the church, meant that power was increasingly concentrated in the king's hands at the expense of local leaders (Nyberg 2000, pp. 78–82).

However, there was also a recurring struggle for royal power within Christian political circles, with political actors who tried to strengthen their own legitimacy through Christian actions and symbols. Monarchs established their spiritual and political presence in a region by founding or strongly supporting a monastery, as with Knut Eriksson and the Saba monastery. In the case of Vreta, a similar hypothesis can be made for King Inge. The king was, as well as his father before him, King Stenkil, closely connected with Västergötland on the west side of Lake Vättern. However, his presence in Östergötland shows that his political ambitions were more extensive. Furthermore, according to the Icelandic *Hervarasaga* from the 13th century, Inge had political ambitions also in Svealand and the province of Uppland, although the political resistance seems to have been strong in that area. Founding a monastery in Svealand may therefore have been a rash project. A monastery in Vreta, on the other hand, nevertheless marked his political presence outside Västergötland. A previous study on Iceland has also shown that monasteries were often placed in border areas, between the territories of the various leaders (Udnæs 2002, p. 79). In other words, King Inge's supposed monastic foundation can be understood as a way to strengthen his political position, vis-à-vis pagans (as proposed by Nyberg 2000, pp. 81–82) as well as Christian rivals. Thus, the political context in which the monastery came into existence should not be overlooked. Clearly, the monasteries played an important role in a politically turbulent time.

Vreta was initially Benedictine although it has been debated whether the monastery was originally intended for nuns or for monks. In 1945, the historian Nils Ahnlund

published an article in which he claimed that the monastery from the beginning was established as a Benedictine nunnery and that Queen Helena, King Inge's spouse, entered the nunnery after her husband's death (Ahnlund 1945, p. 325; passim). The notion that the monastery was originally for women has been accepted by researchers for a long time. However, Tore Nyberg questions this assumption in *Monasticism in North-Western Europe, 800–1200* (2000) where he reviews the political circumstances surrounding the oldest Scandinavian monasteries. Nyberg focuses on the presumed close connection between the monastery and the bishopric in Linköping. Among other things, he notes the architectural similarities between Vreta monastery and the bishop's church in Linköping. According to Nyberg, King Inge might have believed that a monastery should be built close to the bishop's church (Vreta is located about 10 km outside Linköping). Nyberg also concludes that this monastery was probably intended for men. Nyberg pays attention to a similar model that can be found in the Norwegian diocese of Bergen, whose cathedral was combined with a monastery and monastic church relatively close by (Nyberg 2000, pp. 83, 153). Bertil Nilsson goes even further by hypothesising that the land where the monastery was built had been the home of an earlier church and even bishopric by the time the monastic order was in place, although only for a short duration. The intention of the royal couple's significant donation may have been to establish a community for diocesan clerics, "a monastery". This would then follow a pattern known also from other early bishoprics in Scandinavia. Dalby, Lund, and Roskilde in Denmark are all early examples of churches to which early communities of priests were attached (Nilsson 2010, pp. 37–42). Lars Hermanson, on the other hand, does not per se go into the specific discussion of whether Vreta was originally a nunnery or monastery but emphasises the important political significance of nunneries. Kings, whose power rested on completely different conditions than had been the case during the Viking Age, needed to legitimise their claims to power by displaying their Christian faith. They needed to claim that they had received their power from God and therefore were holding a sacred office. The queen was an important part of this exercise of power as she represented an earthly version of the Queen of Heaven, the Virgin Mary. To fully act as a Christian queen, according to Hermanson, she needed to have a female monastic institution at her disposal. As for King Inge and Helena, this meant Vreta (Hermanson 2010, pp. 221–24, 235–36).

So, there are several unanswered questions about the monastery's early years, although most historians believe that the monastery was founded by King Inge and his wife, but it cannot with certainty be proven that the monastery continuously existed during the first half of the century. However, when it comes to the second half, there is a relative agreement that King Karl Sverkersson was involved when the monastery was "re-founded", or alternatively, transformed into a Cistercian nunnery, possibly in 1162. The king handed over an extensive donation to the nunnery and, as the introductory example shows, according to tradition, the king's sister, Ingegerd, is said to have entered the nunnery and become its abbess. Therefore, Vreta soon came to be, or perhaps more likely, was already from the very beginning, a particularly prestigious nunnery. Several women from the royal families entered the nunnery as early as the end of the 12th century, which contributed to its high reputation; in addition, the nunnery received extensive donations from families other than the royals (Nilsson 1998, p. 129).

4.2. Riseberga, Askeby, Solberga

Soon after Vreta, a second Cistercian monastery for women was founded, Askeby in Östergötland, about ten kilometres east of the bishopric in Linköping. Askeby is first mentioned in 1280 in a papal letter of protection, but it has been assumed that it was founded as early as the 1160s, similar to Vreta during King Karl Sverkersson's reign. No domestic documents have been preserved from the nunnery's first years, although Askeby is often considered to have had close connections with Karl Sverkersson. Later, the nunnery, similar to Vreta, received extensive donations from the society's most aristocratic families,

although it never competed with Vreta in reputation (Johansson 1964, pp. 79–80; Nilsson 1998, p. 129).

Riseberga, another second daughter house of Vreta, was situated in the province of Närke in the diocese of Strängnäs. Riseberga's founding probably took place a few decades after Askeby was founded, and the sources do not indicate any direct royal involvement. Nevertheless, a person with close ties to the reigning king was responsible for the initial donation, Earl (*jarl*) Birger Brosa. Birger served under King Knut Eriksson, and after the king's death also served under King Sverker (the Younger) Karlsson (SBL n.d., "Birger Brosa"; "Sverker den yngre"). However, Knut Eriksson acted, as we have seen, as a strong defender of the Saba monastery and perhaps was Birger's initiative for a new nunnery, as Nyberg claims, supported by the king's goodwill (Nyberg 2000, p. 211). However, it is not possible to determine the exact date of Birger's donations, and he might have made his donations after King Knut's death in 1195 or 1196. Two donation letters issued by Birger indicate that he transferred property and fishing rights to the nunnery, but the two letters where this information is discussed cannot be dated more precisely than between 1180 and the year of the earl's death, 1202 (SDHK 245; 246). We do know, however, that after his death, his widow, Brigida, entered the nunnery. Brigida was a descendant of royal families—daughter of the Norwegian King Harald Gille. In addition, for a short period she was Queen of Sweden, before she married Birger (SBL n.d., "Brigida").

The last of Vreta's daughter houses was Solberga, situated on Gotland, only a few hundred meters outside Visby's town wall. It was also the last of the Cistercian nunneries to be founded. The circumstances surrounding the foundation are, again, not entirely clear, but the nuns are first mentioned in a charter from 1246, which is also considered the year the nunnery was established. In this letter, the bishop of Linköping, Lars, transfers the sacrificial income from "St. Olof's altar in Åkergarn" to the nuns. According to Bishop Lars, the initiative for the nunnery was taken by the clergy and the population on the island, which led the bishop to send a number of nuns there. The rights to the gifts from the chapel probably strengthened the finances of the newly founded nunnery. However, the nunnery does not seem to have been financially strong after its founding even though the nuns were said to have come to the island on an invitation from the Gotlanders. The right to the income from St. Olov's chapel caused recurring conflicts between the convent and the local population (Johansson 1964, pp. 884–85; Nilsson 1998, p. 131; Berglund 2013, p. 120).

4.3. Gudhem

The highly regarded Gudhem monastery, on the other hand, was one of the richest nunneries in medieval Sweden. Unlike Vreta and her daughter houses, Gudhem was in Västergötland, about 20 km southeast of the diocese of Skara and 20 km southwest of Varnhem monastery. The view from the hillside where the nunnery was situated is impressive, and in beautiful weather the nuns could see as far as the cathedral in Skara. Ruins of both the monastery church and other buildings can still be seen. Similar to Vreta, the convent became very prestigious. One of the reasons for this was the large donation that Queen Katarina bequeathed to the nuns in 1250, and the queen may have entered the convent herself (SDHK 642; 653) as she was buried in the monastery church. A replica of her tombstone can still be seen at the monastery ruins (the original is placed at the Swedish History Museum, Stockholm).

Gudhem is also one of the country's oldest nunneries, dating in the 12th century. It has been suggested that King Karl Sverkersson, as was the case with both Vreta and Askeby, was involved in establishing Gudhem, and that he founded the nunnery when he became king in 1161. Nyberg, however, opens the possibility that the royal manor on which the convent was founded may have been handed over to the nuns by Erik Jedvardsson in 1158—i.e., before Karl Sverkersson became king. It must then have been a Benedictine nunnery. In the sources, however, the nunnery is first mentioned in a papal protection letter issued sometime between 1168 and 1177 (Nyberg 2000, pp. 184–86; Johansson 1964, p. 77; SDHK 222). If Erik Jedvardsson was also involved in the establishment of Gudhem, this

would be in line with the positive attitude he eventually showed the Varnhem monastery. Moreover, as with the monks in Varnhem, in the coming decades the nuns' ties to the Erik family were strong, as is evident by Queen Katarina's engagement to Erik Eriksson, the great-grandson of Erik Jedvardsson.

4.4. Byarum/Sko, Fogdö/Vårfruberga

Two more nunneries belonged to the Cistercian order, although both left their original locations during the 13th century: Byarum, originally located in Småland, eventually moved to Sko in Uppland, and Fogdö monastery (later called Vårfruberga) moved from its original location in Södermanland to a location a few kilometres away.

The Byarum nunnery was founded in the late 12th century. According to Hilding Johansson, the nuns received property from King Knut Eriksson and Linköping's bishop, Kol (Johansson 1964, p. 81). Byarum is located about 35 km north of Nydala, one of the previously mentioned first two Cistercian monasteries. The original location was at the intersection of two roads, one from the west and one main transit road from the north, which continued south towards Nydala and the larger city Växjö (Nyberg 2000, pp. 210–11). The likely intense traffic is sometimes cited as the reason why the nuns moved as the constant traffic and visitors may have been too financially onerous. In the 1230s, the nuns moved to Sko. This move proved to be financially rewarding for the nuns. According to tradition, Knut Långe, recognised as king from no later than 1231, transferred property to a group of nuns around 1225. In the 1230s, the nuns from Byarum are believed to have joined the group. Furthermore, the king's son, Holmger Knutsson, is said to have been even more involved in the "re-founding" of the convent by providing large donations. Holmger was buried in the monastery church (probably, his father was, too) and was later revered as a saint by the nuns (Johansson 1964, pp. 81–82; Sjödén 1942, pp. 1–2; Hall 1909, p. 2).

Finally, a few words about the origin of the last nunnery in this presentation, although not the last one founded. Fogdö monastery is not mentioned in the sources until 1233, but it was most definitely founded before this year. Specifically, there is another source that is relevant in this context—a land register of the convent's estates. In the register, Earl (*jarl*) Siward is mentioned as responsible for the founding. However, this Siward is otherwise unknown, but several researchers suggest that the foundation took place during the second half of the 12th century, perhaps even as early as the middle of the century (see Johansson 1964, p. 83; Nyberg 2000, pp. 153–54). Whether any other persons were involved in its establishment is unknown. However, a papal bull from 1193 reveals that Knut Erikssons's betrothed was put in a nunnery for protection for a limited but politically turbulent period. Knut himself was forced into exile. It has been suggested that the nunnery in question was Fogdö, which would then support the idea of its relatively early establishment, possibly in 1060 or even in the 1150s (Annell 1983, pp. 78–81). What we do know for sure, however, is that the nunnery moved a short distance from its original site around 1290 and that it later came to be called Vårfruberga. Similar to several of the other Cistercian monasteries, this convent would eventually become very rich and own a great deal of land.

5. The Nuns

As with the monk's monasteries, the royal families were intimately involved in the founding of the female monasteries; however, members from these families also entered the nunneries often after their husbands died. Clearly, the royal families had very strong ties to both male and female monasteries during the 12th century. By the 13th century, the networks around the monasteries expanded, however, still representing the society's uppermost layer, often with close ties to the royal families. During this time, royal support often changed—increasingly, the kings' support consisted of providing letters of protection rather than donating property. However, the monasteries continuously received extensive donations, but over time, donations came from other magnates as well as lower-level aristocrats. In terms of entrances, the royal presence in the Cistercian convents also

decreased. After 1250, when Queen Katarina is believed to have entered the convent in Gudhem, we do not know of any royal woman who converted to Cistercian monastic life.

In general, previous historical research on the Swedish Cistercian monasteries has paid little attention to the individuals who entered in monasteries as monks and nuns and which social strata they represented. Although it has been noted that widowed queens and other prominent widows made a life in nunneries, the focus has been on the monasteries' economic conditions, property, or their importance in a political context (for economic conditions, see Sjödén 1942; Ossiannilsson 1945; Tollin 1987; Holström and Tollin 1990). However, in 2006, Catharina Andersson published her dissertation, *Kloster och aristokrati. Nunnor, munkar och gåvor i det svenska samhället till 1300-talets mitt* (*Monasticism and Aristocracy. Nuns, monks, and gifts in Swedish Society until the Middle of the Fourteenth Century*), which identified the women who joined the nunneries, including their social background, up to 1350. In addition, she discussed why families sent their daughters to nunneries. Andersson argued that a daughter in a nunnery should be understood from a gift-theoretical perspective, where a daughter is seen as a gift to God and that the daughter's family expected to receive both spiritual and worldly gifts—i.e., benefits—in return.

The study included the seven Cistercian nunneries as well as the three convents that followed the Mendicant orders—i.e., the convents in Skänninge, Kalmar, and Stockholm. The latter, however, showed great resemblance to the traditional Cistercian nunneries, and unlike their Mendicant brethren, the sisters lived under strict enclosure and accepted material donations.

The source material consisted of "entrance diplomas". Since the woman, or more commonly her father, usually transferred property to the nunnery in connection with her entry, a diploma or charter was prepared to confirm the transfer. The charter described the transferred property, and moreover, it also confirmed the nunnery's right of disposal of the property even though a nun occasionally could be guaranteed some of its profit. The donation constituted the woman's allowance, but the donations were in several cases very extensive and fulfilled other functions, including strengthening the relationship between the convent and the family providing the donation. Andersson argues that personal ties to a prestigious monastery also meant that other family member's, primarily the father's, social position and symbolic capital were strengthened (for more on donation's social context and consequences, see Rosenwein 1989; White 1988).

In the study, at least 81 entering women (or young girls) were identified. Some diplomas did not specify the exact number of the women entering the convent, for example, sometimes the vague wording "my daughters" was used. As most women were under formal male guardianship, most of the entry diplomas were issued by a male relative, usually a woman's father, although a woman's brothers or even son could issue an entry diploma. However, 15 of the women identified issued their own the diplomas. Most probably, these women were widows since they obviously had the legal right to dispose of their own property by transferring it to the nunnery. One can also assume that in some of these cases the nunnery served as a place for retirement, a sort of pension. This is, for example, a reasonable interpretation of the circumstances surrounding Ulfhild Rangvaldsdotter's entry into Riseberga convent in 1325. In addition to the extensive donation Ulfhild brought with her to the convent, she also brought at least one, possibly three, servants and stipulated what would be included in her allowance (Andersson 2006, Tables 1–5; SDHK 3327).

In some of these diplomas, a title is stated in connection with the issuer's name, for example, *dominus* (knight), or for a widow, the title of her deceased husband. In other cases, it was possible to determine the donor's social status with the help of supplementary charters or with the help of results from previous research. In this way, it could be determined whether, for example, the issuer was politically associated with the king—i.e., a member of the Council of the Realm (*riksråd*). About 40% of the identified women could be linked to the society's uppermost class (Andersson 2006, pp. 401, 411, passim).

However, most of the others also belonged to the aristocracy, but most likely without personal ties or very distant ties to the national elite. Rather, they supposedly acted in their local environment. In some cases, the woman's family possibly even belonged to the group of better-off farmers.

In support of ascertaining the woman's social affiliation, the size of the entry donation was also studied. The issuers who could not be linked to the upper strata of the elite generally made less extensive donations to the convent than did the elite. Donations from the latter usually consisted of at least one *markland* or more, whereas donations from the former other, the local aristocracy, on average, donated a half *markland* when the woman entered the convent (Andersson 2006, pp. 178–83). Previous research has estimated that 1 *markland* approximately corresponds to 12 hectares (i.e., almost 30 acres) and that a common peasant usually cultivated about a half *markland*. However, assumptions like this must be used with great caution (see Myrdal 1985, p. 36; 1999, p. 38).

In other words, we can conclude that there was some social diversification among the nuns. Indeed, most nuns came from families who could spare a significant amount of property to place their daughters in a convent. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the families' assets, social position, and probably status differed. Furthermore, women from the lower strata of society could, under certain circumstances, enter a nunnery. There are, for example, several cases where former female servants and daughters of a servant's family are offered a place in a nunnery, seemingly as a thank you for long and faithful service. In 1302, Ramfrid, widow of the Law-Speaker (*lagman*, i.e., the highest legal office in the province) in the province of Uppland, bequeathed a sum of money to the daughter of her servant. The daughter's name is not mentioned, but the will states that the money was for the daughter, who had a minor disability, to be received in Gudhem nunnery. Perhaps the girl in question was unable to work, so she was sent to the nunery—a gesture of social care from Ramfrid, the housewife (SDHK 1985).

Whereas the first monastic period was characterised by a royal interest in monasticism as well as royals actively entering nunneries, the second period (i.e., from the middle of the 13th century) was characterised by a social broadening, both in terms of who materially supported monasteries and who chose to place their female family members in the nunneries. Presumably, one can also speak of a third period, the late medieval, which started in the second half of the 14th century. However, regarding the monasteries' social recruitment base during the Late Middle Ages, only Vadstena Abbey has been the subject of a more extensive study. The mother house of the Bridgettine Order, established in 1384, has been thoroughly investigated by Lars Arne Norborg in his classic study *Storföretaget Vadstena kloster* (1958). In this study, Norborg shows that most of the women who were received and brought property to the monastery did not belong to the upper aristocracy, even during the abbey's founding period. On the other hand, the proportion of the burghers' daughters clearly increased during the 15th century (Norborg 1958, pp. 37–38).

No studies have investigated the social backgrounds of the Cistercian nuns after 1350. However, it is a reasonable hypothesis that the Cistercian nunneries eventually received an increasing number of daughters from the burghers. In the previous study by Andersson, which covered the period up to 1350, only a few of the identified women were from burgher families, and those who were identified as such entered one of the Mendicant convents. No woman from a burgher family was identified in a Cistercian nunnery. However, a primary search in the database *The Main Catalog of Diplomatarium Suecanum* (SDHK) has been carried out: a search was made in the detailed "summary of contents", which is attached to each diploma's data record (most of the diplomas are also shown in their entirety with its original text, in Latin or Old Swedish). These summaries provide information on the date and often the place where the diploma was prepared and included the name and title of the issuer, the main content of the diploma text, and the role of the issuer in this specific context. The search was carried out on all Cistercian nunneries existing between 1351 and 1420. Some additional data were retrieved from an older edition of diploma summaries from the National Archives—*Svenska riksarchivets pergamentsbref I-III*

(RPB 1866–1872). These searches identified 45 women, most of them through the diplomas prepared for their entrance to the convent, but in some cases also through wills where one specific nun was one of the beneficiaries. The review reveals only a first identification of these women, and to analyse their social background in more detail, a more comprehensive analysis of the entire original diplomas is needed. Nevertheless, this first review clearly indicates that a change in the nunnery's recruitment base, compared to the previous period. The most striking change is the social status of the issuer. In only one of these cases does a knight act as an issuer. On 13 July 1400, the knight (*riddare*) Karl Ulfsson provides for Bengta Staffansdotter's entrance into the Vårfruberga convent—however, obviously, she was not his daughter (SDHK 15435). On two occasions a squire (*väpnare*) puts a woman in a convent (SDHK 17343; 19380). No further example is given of a nun who, through the issuer's title, can be linked to the elite. In most cases, there was no title at all among the issuers, and specified titles would in most cases have been expected if the issuer belonged to the national elite. On the other hand, nine of the identified women can certainly be linked to the burghers. Some of these women lived in the Riseberga monastery, and some even had family living outside Sweden. Jacobus Plescowe had his will prepared in March 1361. Jacobus was a member of the town hall in Lübeck (*rådman*), and among the beneficiaries of the will, two female relatives (*fränkor*) in Riseberga monastery appear (SDHK 7929). Nuns who can be linked to the burghers are also found in other diplomas (SDHK 8527; 9143; 39745).

A thoroughgoing study of all these 45 women's social origins is highly desirable. An initial review of the diplomas nevertheless gives an indication of the late medieval conditions. In contrast to the period before 1350, the supreme elite rarely appeared. There is a faint hint that it was instead the burghers' daughters who entered the nunneries. To get more detailed information about the rest of these women, the majority of who were placed in the nunnery by a close male relative without a title or issued their own diploma, more detailed studies are needed. Further investigations need to be made into the size of the donated property and to what extent donations of property were replaced by other entrance gifts, for example, money. It is not unreasonable that it would turn out that the proportion of women linked to the burghers would have increased even more.

6. The Monks

As we have seen, the first nuns in the Cistercian monasteries originated from the elite, including the royal families, and then families who could donate very large estates to the monasteries. This pattern differs in a striking way from what we find in the male monasteries. The earliest monks arrived from other monasteries in Europe, not from the native royal families. Not even later, it seems, were sons of the elite the ones who primarily populated the monasteries. Who, then, were these monks?

It is a greater challenge to investigate the monks' family backgrounds than the nuns' family backgrounds. We have a comparatively large number of preserved diplomas when it comes to women's entrances into the convents. When, however, it comes to men's entries, these documents are extremely rare because men, in contrast to women, had the opportunity to bring other gifts other than property, mainly their labour. In contrast to the nuns, whose properties to a large extent probably were cultivated by tenants (*landbor*), some of the monks cultivated the land themselves—the group within the monastery known as *conversi*. These men made a less extensive vow, and their main task was to perform a large part of the manual labour within the monastery. They were not ordained priests, nor did they learn Latin, but they could provide manual labour. Priests, however, brought with them other gifts the monastery needed—their education and their ordination. One could not approach the monastery empty-handed. However, for men, there were more options than land or estates, alternatives that did not require a charter as property was not being transferred.

However, with the help of a thorough and systematic review of other types of charters, some personal information can, occasionally, be gained also in the case of the Cistercian

monks. Although social stratifications are not possible, the limited information that exists may still be a point of departure for a discussion about the social structures within the male monasteries. For example, the article "Male Monastic Recruitment among the Cistercians in Medieval Sweden" (Andersson 2014) analyses the family backgrounds of 15 monks or children placed in a monastery during the 13th, 14th, and 15th centuries. Two groups of entrants were given special attention in the study: children (i.e., child oblates) and adults (i.e., choir monks). However, the *conversi*, as well as elderly men who sought entrance into a monastery as a sort of retirement home, were not considered in the study.

When it comes to children in the 1130s, the decade before the Cistercians were established in Sweden, the order formally forbade boys under 16 years old from entering. In the Swedish material, entering boys are also rare. Only five boys (or young men) who were placed in the monastery by their parents could be identified in the survey. Three of these left the monastery as adults. Although the preserved sources are very limited, boys who were placed in monasteries with the intention that they would live their whole lives there seem to have been unusual. On the other hand, it is not implausible that children were put in a monastery for a shorter period to receive an education or as a way for the family to formally create social bonds with the monks. Placing a son in a monastery was probably a way for families, similar to daughters in a nunnery, to create personal ties with a prestigious institution. Placing a son in a monastery for only a limited period can also be understood in relation to the medieval tradition of fostering. This practice, placing a child in another kin-group or related family, was a way of creating and maintaining social bonds and contacts with relatives and other kin-groups. This practice was a well-established when monasticism was established in Sweden, so it may have been transferred and incorporated into the monastic culture (Andersson 2014, pp. 151–58, 169).

Of the ten adult men who lived in the monastery as monks, six were certainly ordained priests. This was probably also the case for one or more of the remaining four monks. However, what applied to all of them, including the children identified, was that none of them had direct ties to society's uppermost layer—i.e., the aristocratic elite. In a few cases, a person from the elite was found in the monk's external family circle or network or a few generations earlier. Sune, who went to the monastery as a child or at a relatively young age, was probably a great-grandson of a brother of the influential Birger jarl (earl), the father of two future kings (SDHK 887; 7615; 8309). Nonetheless, the other cases are linked to the lower aristocracy. In some cases, the monks had obviously served as local priests before taking the monastic vow or had local priests in their families (Andersson 2014, pp. 160–65). However, many diplomas have been lost, and it is possible that several monks also had ties to the elite.

However, it is not unreasonable, based on the total convergence of the sources we have, to formulate the hypothesis that the Cistercian monks were primarily recruited from a lower aristocracy. This is also in line with European conditions. Admittedly, Constance Brittain Bouchard notes that Burgundian Cistercian monks often came from families of knights. In a Burgundian context, however, the title *knight* refers to a group of men who operated on a local level. They did not necessarily represent the most noble families, as was the case in the less populous Sweden. Instead, Bouchard notes that the monastic leaders "tended to be noble but of the middle or lower nobility. They were not burghers' or peasants' sons, but neither were they sons of great dukes and counts. At Cluny, for example, the abbots were routinely the sons of castellans and knights" (Bouchard 1987, p. 77). In Sweden, on the other hand, the title of knight meant that the man in question belonged to the elite—i.e., a man often closely connected with the kings' family circles. The sources, albeit sparse, give no strong indication whether the Cistercian monks were recruited from this elite. In other words, what first appears to be a difference between Sweden and other parts of Europe can be understood as a similarity.

7. Why Daughters—And Not Sons?

So, it seems obvious that the nunneries during the 12th, 13th, and the beginning of the 14th century attracted the uppermost layers of society, the aristocratic elite, to a much greater extent than the monasteries for men. Hypothetically, it can further be assumed that this difference became less apparent during the Late Middle Ages. For the latter period, there are indications that it was rather the lower aristocratic layers who showed interest in the nunneries, a situation that probably had long been the case for the monasteries. However, how can the previous difference be explained? Why is there such an inconsistency when it comes to the actions of the royal families as well as other magnates vis-à-vis the nunneries and male monasteries? Why did they place their daughters there, but not their sons?

It is sometimes argued that the decision to place a daughter in a nunnery most probably was an economically cheaper alternative to the aristocracy than to arrange a secular marriage (see Cooke 1990). However, this assumption has also been questioned. Bouchard, again with references to Burgundy, argues that the initial donation was rather extensive, comparable to both the sons' inheritance shares and the daughters' dowries (Bouchard 1987, pp. 59–67). In addition, the Swedish sources give no indication that the entry into a nunnery was primarily motivated by economic reasons. Without exception, the diplomas state that the right of disposal of the donated property belonged to the nunnery. In other words, in contrast to the dowry, the entry donation went out of the family's control forever (Andersson 2006, pp. 233–43, passim).

In addition, the donation cannot be assumed to have been less extensive than an expected dowry. A more reasonable interpretation is that both the dowry as well as the entry donation generally corresponded to the daughter's inheritance share, the latter stipulated and guaranteed by the laws.

In my opinion, to better understand the underlying reasons why daughters were placed in a nunnery (in addition to the obvious religious motives), it is more profitable to investigate the social benefits expected after the daughter was placed in a nunnery, such as strengthening the family's social position in society. Furthermore, giving a daughter as a gift to a nunnery could also be part of how conflicts were resolved. This is a reasonable interpretation for the understanding of the motives behind Algot Bengtsson's, Law-Speaker (*lagman*) in Västergötland during the 14th century, decision to put his firstborn (as far as we know) daughter in Vreta nunnery in Östergötland. He could just as easily have chosen the nearby Gudhem nunnery for his daughter, as we have seen also a very prestigious nunnery. However, Algot chose Vreta. Why? The answer may be sought further back in time. At the time for the entrance, Vreta was led by the abbess Ingrid, daughter of Svantepolk Knutsson. Svantepolk, who lived from the 13th to beginning of the 14th century, belonged to the nobility and had close connections to the king. During his lifetime, a serious conflict flared up between Svantepolk and the ancestors of Algot. The consequences were severe for the Algot family and led to their loss of both political influence and positions. Algot's grandfather was, for example, deprived of his position as Law-Speaker in Västergötland. For Algot, who managed to regain some of the family's influence and social position, the decision to place his daughter in Vreta nunnery, a nunnery strongly connected with Svantepolk's family, can therefore be interpreted to improve the relations between the families. The daughter became a gift of reconciliation—a way to recreate formal bonds of friendships between the families. (SDHK 4332; Koit 1957, pp. 1–6; SBL n.d. "Algot Brynolfsson"; see Andersson 2006, 2013; on formalised friendship in a political context, see Hermanson 2009).

Still, the question remains—why daughters? Why not sons? In my opinion, part of the explanation for this should be sought in contemporary gender ideals of the medieval aristocracy. Placing a daughter in a nunnery rather than letting her enter a worldly marriage did not necessarily make such a big difference when it came to what a woman was expected to do or her formal rights and obligations. Both inside and outside the nunnery, the woman was under guardianship and supervision, so her legal capacity was severely limited both

as a nun and as a married woman. However, in contrast to secular women, nuns were forbidden to own any property. On the other hand, since secular women in most cases were under male guardianship, they did not have a formal opportunity to dispose of their land, or, as Maria Sjöberg puts it, activate their property as a power resource (Sjöberg 1997). None of the alternatives, life as a married woman or a life as a nun, questioned the basic order—i.e., a woman's limited legal capacity or real control of land (see Andersson 2010).

Placing a son in a monastery, on the other hand, stood in direct conflict with secular aristocratic ideals of manliness—i.e., how aristocratic masculinity and identity should be constructed. The monk was expected to live by the norms and regulations that were practiced within the walls of the monastery—personal poverty, obedience, equality, celibacy, and an apostolic life. These were ideals clearly contrasted with the fundamental values of a secular aristocratic male identity. The aristocratic man possessed self-determination as well as guardianship over himself and others. He owned and, in contrast to most women, had the right to dispose this property. This was not only a matter of ownership of tangible assets—it was fundamental in terms of power and influence (Sjöberg 1997). Equally important was the right to bear arms and fight, essential in the construction of masculinity. Monasteries, for example, banned weapons. Furthermore, for the monk, there was only one alternative when it came to sexuality—celibacy. This can also easily be contrasted to sexual activity, an obvious part of secular masculinity (Karras 2008, p. 54; Damsholt 2004, p. 130). Subsequently, the monks were "handicapped in relation to the understanding of masculinity of the time", as Nanna Damsholt puts it in her article with the rhetorical title "Is a monk a man?" (Damsholt 2004, p. 130, my translations).

The conflict between secular and clerical masculinities has also been considered by many researchers, and clerics has even been given the title "emasculine" (Swanson 1999). Ruth Mazo Karras, on the other hand, stresses that clerical identity should be understood as a variant of the masculine gender. According to Karras, a metaphorical fight is cherished by the clergy—i.e., the fight against the physical desire the celibacy provoked. Mastering this desire meant that the clerics considered themselves to possess a higher morality than secular men. Accordingly, one can also speak of a competition between different masculinity ideals (Karras 2008, pp. 52–61; for more on competing masculinities, see Connell 1995).

Thus, placing a son in a monastery implicated a greater conflict with secular ideals of gender than it would be if a daughter was placed a nunnery. Or, as Swanson puts it: "Religious women still fitted in the traditional trinity of female life-styles (virgins, married, widows), but religious men became extraneous to contemporary gender constructions" (Swanson 1999, p. 167). This, I think, is an important factor that must be considered when interpreting the sources, and its seemingly lack of nobilities or men from the uppermost aristocracy inside the monasteries. These groups certainly showed a great interest in the monasteries, male as well as female. However, this interest seemingly and significantly decreased when it came to the question of whether any of its male family members themselves would enter these monasteries and be incorporated in the monastic community.

8. Conclusions

In this article, attention has been drawn to the different social groups that were represented in the Cistercian monasteries in medieval Sweden and the patterns that emerge when one compares nunneries and the monasteries intended for men. It can be ascertained that the monasteries and the nunneries were actively supported by the kings during the monastic establishment phase. The monasteries were important tools in the kings' ambitions to centralise power. It is reasonable to think that the relatively high number of nunneries and the openness towards them are expressions of the fact that the church was in an establishment phase and that the nunneries strengthened the church's institutional presence in the kingdom.

Among the people who came to live their lives within nunneries, although not within the monasteries for men, we find people from the royal family circles as well. Furthermore,

the nunneries were overall more frequently populated by people from the uppermost aristocracy than were the monasteries for men. In the beginning, the monks seem to have been recruited from the lower, more locally active aristocracy. During the Late Middle Ages, however, these social differences between the nunneries and monasteries diminished since the elite appears to have placed their daughters in nunneries to a lesser extent than before. Instead, these nunneries were probably populated by a relatively higher proportion of women from the burghers.

In the article, it has further been argued that a plausible explanation for the aristocracy's lack of interest when it comes to placing male family members in a monastery should be understood in terms of contemporary gender ideals. The monk's life and power broke (in contrast to the nun's) in a decisive way against several of the elements that were part of a secular aristocratic masculinity. The rule of St. Benedict prescribed a life of chastity and obedience, entirely devoted to prayer, Mass, and God. However, although the idea of monastic life was living "outside the world", monastic life undoubtedly resembled the world outside.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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