One reason for some of the confusion about women’s relative power in the early versus the later middle ages has had to do with unevenness in the publication of medieval documents. Within a universe in which nearly all documents for the period before the year 1000 CE are published, whatever evidence of women’s activities there was has been published. Historians of women have been able to point to it relatively easily and at one time tended to see it as evidence for a Golden Age. In fact, there is much more surviving evidence overall found for the period after the year 1100, but less of it, overall, is published. Preliminary work in those later medieval documentary materials seemed at first to suggest that women were less important in the later Middle Ages. But such conclusions were based on the incorrect assumption that publication was without gender bias, at least when it came to documents—such as monastic charters—from which a relatively unbiased sample of women’s activities might be extrapolated.

That publication was even-handed is a misapprehension. Recent forays into the archives by feminist historians are finding that the records for men’s religious communities are more likely to be published than those for women’s houses and that this is often the result of what outright bias on the part of those who chose to edit and publish documents over the past century and a half. This bias against publishing the documents produced by medieval religious women works against our learning about women in the published materials in two ways. First, we don’t learn about the strength of houses of religious women because their documents are not published, but second, we don’t learn about important secular women who were the patrons of women’s religious houses.

Assumptions about the relative unimportance of religious
women in the later middle ages were still with us when Suzanne Wemple and Mary Martin McLaughlin first began to work on a project that is now called Matrix. It was originally the Medieval Women’s Religious Communities and Lives, 500-1500, an NEH supported dictionary project which planned to list all women’s religious houses in western Europe. It became unwieldy as we began to discover how many more religious communities of women there were out there than anyone had imagined, and that the gazetteers and catalogues that had existed for men’s religious houses since the 19th century were not available for women’s houses. There was much more initial digging than we could have imagined. Nonetheless, the databases for various areas have made considerable progress. The other thing that was clear in 1985 when I worked on that project for a year was that women’s religious communities in the middle ages were much more varied than any of us had thought. Indeed, many of our assumptions were incorrect. What are some of those ideas about women that we are revising and how do they affect the larger picture? First, with regard to nuns and skills of writing, document production, and property administration. Although members of religious orders were only a tiny fraction of the population of medieval Europe (perhaps one half of one percent), most surviving administrative documents for the period up to at least 1250 were produced by members of these religious orders. One of the misconceptions about the production of such records, however, is that they were hardly ever produced by nuns. Recent work by Rosamund McKitterick on manuscripts attributed to the abbey Chelles in France has now shown that many more than once thought of the unsigned manuscripts. Of the middle ages were produced by women, not occasionally by women, but by female scriptoria. Nuns were also very good at making and keeping documents. In addition to the copying of liturgical books and the classics of monastic education and spirituality, however, we also have evidence that women themselves dictated

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charters, copied cartularies, and organized their archives in ways to best exploit their economic resources. We have too often assumed that nuns kept no records because they couldn’t write or because the parchment and ink were too expensive. While there are areas for which almost no records survive, for others we have great masses of materials, particularly for houses of nuns founded in the twelfth century or later.

Moreover, the presence of records in cartularies or their absence cannot be used as a criterion for either good management or economic disabilities. While in some cases, this concern with record-keeping was a means of keeping track of every last shilling because women’s houses were so impoverished, in other cases such record-keeping is by the largest and wealthiest of women’s religious houses. For instance, a memo drafted by the nuns of Saint-Antoine-des-Champs outside Paris in 1238 describes in great detail the properties purchased by that community for two or three of its granges in the surrounding area using gifts in cash made by a single bourgeois woman. The medieval cartulary for Saint-Antoine did not include a copy of every charter, but does describe where each item would be found on the shelves of the armoires devoted to the archives located in the gallery above the church. The nuns of Abbaye-aux-Bois added pages to their cartulary which tallied up rents in cash and kind owed them and cross-indexed each rent to individual charters of acquisition.

One of the things that I thought when I started to work on nuns was that it might turn out that economic practices of women’s monastic communities were somehow structurally different, not just different in scale, from those of men’s communities. Initial hypotheses about gender-related differences in monastic economic practice Languedoc (the region on which I’d done my first work) suggested that it was more difficult for religious communities of women to practice the extremely rationalized agriculture which I have described for Cistercian monks in that region. More study is beginning to show that

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naturally that management of resources by abbesses, like abbots, varied not only because of personal abilities, but because the resources of houses of monks and nuns varied enormously also, and that as my student Erin Jordan kept insisting, there were many houses of very wealthy nuns, including wealthy Cistercian nuns. While it may be that nuns received relatively more rents than land in comparison to men’s houses (and that such rents were less inflation proof than land), part of my initial worry about this may have been because I was comparing 13th century foundations for nuns with 12th century ones for monks. Nuns often got property with conditions attached or for a limited period such as for the lifetime of a daughter. It might be given in order that a female relative of the donor always be appointed to that community, or for a light at the altar, for their bread or for their furs.

There were both a variety of types of communities, and a variety of strengths of endowment. So it is turning out that houses of nuns are not always and just poorer versions of houses of monks. There were many more very wealthy houses of nuns than anyone had imagined. On the other hand, the twin disabilities of too little endowment and too little control of what they had were not escaped by some women’s communities. But those communities may have survived because no one cast envious eyes on their properties. For others, the danger was that their strong endowment if not matched by continuing strong patronage would make them vulnerable to takeover by men’s houses—something that did happen, as discussed below.

It may be, too, that the particular economic adaptations of religious women to their environments were actually of more economic benefit to them and to the larger economy than those taken by parallel groups of monks. Twelfth-century nuns who would become parts of the new Orders, for instance, seem to have pursued animal husbandry with considerably more vigor than did men, possibly because nuns so often had fewer laborers than monks. But to pursue animal husbandry was a sound economic choice at naturally that management of resources by abbesses, like abbots, varied not only because of personal abilities, but because the resources of houses of monks and nuns varied enormously also, and that as my student Erin Jordan kept insisting, there were many houses of very wealthy nuns, including wealthy Cistercian nuns. While it may be that nuns received relatively more rents than land in comparison to men’s houses (and that such rents were less inflation proof than land), part of my initial worry about this may have been because I was comparing 13th century foundations for nuns with 12th century ones for monks. Nuns often got property with conditions attached or for a limited period such as for the lifetime of a daughter. It might be given in order that a female relative of the donor always be appointed to that community, or for a light at the altar, for their bread or for their furs.

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a time when demand for meat and animal products and wool and parchment was growing faster than for traditional cereals.

Generally we can now see that administration of property by monks and nuns was more similar than we may have assumed. Abbesses of the new religious Orders, just like abbots, had the services of a second class of nuns and monks, the lay sisters and lay brothers. Abbesses called upon lay brothers to undertake some of the administrative work for their communities—relieving them of the necessity to leave their cloister very often. Those lay brothers took their vows from abbesses, kissing the Rule of Saint Benedict placed at the seated abbess’s feet.

Certainly with regard to the Cistercians we are finding that women’s communities often had economic practices, administration, and endowment identical to those for communities of Cistercian men, for instance, with regard to their tithe privileges. The order’s houses of women probably participated equally in the innovations in medieval agricultural practices that I have shown elsewhere were initiated by its communities of monks. But in their emphasis on pastoralism (a good thing for all Cistercians) twelfth-century women’s houses of this new movement were strong contenders against men’s houses for pasture resources. There is a good and early study of the pasture resources of the nuns of Nonenque in the Rouergue. But we also know something about the economic power of the nuns at Nonenque’s mother-house at Bellecombe in the Auvergne from two letters written circa 1180 by Henry of Marcy, abbot of Cîteaux. (See Appendix) Clearly these nuns were causing some concern.

In the thirteenth century, Cistercian women’s communities may have been closer to the absolute margins of possible settlement in medieval Europe than were the Order’s communities of men. For instance, we see the countess Isabelle of Chartres giving land to clear to the Cistercian nuns of Notre-Dame-de-Lieu-lez-Romorantin circa 1250—at a time when no Cistercian monks a time when demand for meat and animal products and wool and parchment was growing faster than for traditional cereals.

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were clearing land. Did the retention of peasant cultivators make the possibility for such reclamation more likely for women’s houses? Was this because women’s communities were so poor that they had no other option than to take land to the very margins of settlement and cultivation? Or does this say something about their patronage? 

In works on Cistercian women, too little credit has been given to Catherine E. Boyd’s study of Rifreddo. It’s now hard to believe that it was never reviewed in Speculum. On one point, we no longer worry as much as Boyd did. That is about the Cistercian/Cluniac differences—a distinction that is dissolving before our eyes. Boyd thought what she had found was documentation for a women’s house following Cistercian economic practices in part, but with ownership of tithes more akin to the Cluniac economic model. Today our study of the economic history of both men’s and women’s houses of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would reject the strict distinction for a more shaded one. Traditional Cluniac economies held a portfolio of endowment centered on traditional rents from peasants working on monastic estates, those monks always had other kinds of income too: taxes, tolls, tithes, market-dues and tribute paid by the Saracens to kings in Spain who forwarded parts to Cluny. But Benedictine houses like the new religious groups in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries attempted to restore or establish direct management of their estates. The endowment of the new religious Orders was at first based primarily on their consolidation of property into great estates, but many of them too had the occasional tenant farmer, at last for his lifetime. In general with regard to Cistercian granges, moreover, they were worked by a variety of types of labor: lay brothers, hired-workers, at harvest time even the monks (and nuns), it is important to realize that there was no reason why this type of working of estates shouldn’t have been just as possible for women’s houses as men’s because Cistercian nuns did have lay brothers.

In the thirteenth century, abbeys of both Cistercian nuns were clearing land. Did the retention of peasant cultivators make the possibility for such reclamation more likely for women’s houses? Was this because women’s communities were so poor that they had no other option than to take land to the very margins of settlement and cultivation? Or does this say something about their patronage?

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and Cistercian monks purchased and consolidated land, often for huge sums as we see for example in the granges purchased by Saint-Antoine-des-Champs with money from Blanche of Paciac discussed above. Thirteenth-century houses of Cistercian nuns in being somewhat less apt to remove tenants from their estates than the Order’s monks may have ironically enough had the means to undertake the clearance that had never been done by Cistercian monks, because those nuns had tenants who could be encouraged to undertake such reclamation and ties to the great lords (and especially the Ladies) of the countryside to give them permission to undertake that last expansion. This at certainly what is suggested by some of the documentation from around Paris.

We should not assume necessary huge contrasts between nuns’ and monks’ endowment, nor should we necessarily assume that cases wherein agricultural land was consolidated into granges were always better than rents and income. Certainly the nuns of Saint-Antoine des Champs in Paris, with control of at least rents on 300 houses within the city of Paris by the end of the thirteenth century, were much better prepared for the economic future than was their father-abbot at Cîteaux, whose debts would lead him to suppress certain houses of nuns and take over their revenues as we see at la Cour-Notre-Dame (see below).

While Cistercian women’s endowment may have been fragile when there was less of it, moreover, there is no indication that women were less apt as managers, or in hiring managers of whatever sort they needed for their business activity, nor that they suffered any disabilities from the stress of enclosure (all talk and no action?), nor that the patrons who made gifts to them had any doubts as to the efficacy of the singing of the monastic office by women—as for masses, they had to hire them done, and all women’s houses had to support a father confessor. Women’s tighter enclosure may have been part of the post-Trent world, but not necessarily of the post-1298 Periculoso world as Elizabeth Makowski has shown; women’s enclosure probably
never prevented good property management. Perpetual chantries were established at houses of Cistercian nuns, including in Paris by the scholars of the university and they were endowed sufficiently to support their priests.

What our findings over the past several decades have done is to challenge assumptions that medieval women were consistently failures as managers and administrators of their own property. They were not at all—and the story of the thirteenth-century abbess Constance of la Cour Notre-Dame is only one example of many that may be cited. Indeed, women’s historians are coming to realize that much of what we thought we knew about religious women’s communities and their tendency to fail in the later middle ages is based on reports written by men who were intent on urging their suppression. Abbots did cite the poverty or decadence of women’s communities, dispersing their nuns, only to take over their properties—not only at la Cour, but elsewhere.

What does the fact that bishops and other authorities concurred tell us about a more general hostility to women? Could it be that women’s religious communities are taking a larger share of the pie than ever before? We certainly cannot assume that when religious women were maligned it was because they were morally imperfect. Often it was simply because they were, like the nuns of Argenteuil, sitting on a particularly good piece of property. Certainly, too, there were conflicts of interest when neighboring abbots were appointed as visitors of nuns’ houses, as was clear at Rifreddo already in Catherine Boyd’s study.

There are institutional aspects involving Cistercian women and other religious women that my study is beginning to open up. Medieval communities of Cistercian nuns became increasingly isolated from each other as time passed, and that by the end of the middle ages there was little mutual aid among Cistercian women which went beyond cloister walls. By the mid-to-late thirteenth-century, Cistercian abbeys of women increasingly answered to the abbot of the nearest neighboring community of
Cistercian monks, but this had not always been the case. In the twelfth century there had been efforts by Cistercian nuns to organize into a self-governing filiation with a General Chapter of abbesses meeting at le Tart; thirteenth-century houses were still founded when an abbess sent a group of nuns to a new site. The process of transforming independent houses of nuns into satellites of communities of monks (and the resistance by women to that process) has gone almost unnoted in the history of the Cistercian order; the existence of such changes in the status of its female members, however, suggests that there may have been parallel changes in the relationships of its abbeys for men as well.

There are things to be cleared up. Was there in fact a tendency for women’s abbeys to receive rural rents rather than land, which would have had disastrous economic consequences in inflationary times? Or is my initial impression about that an artifact of my own collection of data? Did lay women who founded Cistercian communities for their sisters routinely use papal letters of approval for the new community of nuns as a means of circumventing the objections to the foundation of women’s houses made by the Order’s General Chapter of abbots as is suggested by several examples of that practice? I would also like to know whether or not the surge of foundations for Cistercian nuns in thirteenth-century northern France resulted from the ascendancy of noble ladies in that region while their husbands were on Crusade. Certainly the power of northern French noblemen over property in the thirteenth century was much less limited than is sometimes suggested.

Cistercian women’s communities certainly had closer ties to towns than men’s and received more urban properties. Such urban properties were quite advantageous in the later Middle Ages, when prices were rising and leases could be renegotiated. There is much to be learned from the study of the records surviving for communities of nuns about secular families, inheritance, and about secular as well as religious.
women’s administration of property. How individuals and families arranged for life after death in their gifts to religious communities often reveal assumptions not only about women and their property, but about which family members should get property, and about continuity of lineage and family property.

We can celebrate some progress. The damage to our understanding of nuns caused by Eileen Power’s look at nuns ONLY in the bishops’ registers has been corrected in studies by Penelope D. Johnson and Marilyn Oliva, although I still dislike Johnson’s title. Whatever “equality of souls” between men and women there may have been in the minds of medieval theologians, there was rarely total economic equality in the daily lives of nuns and monks. Although many religious women may have been more independent than their sisters outside the cloister, and although it is apparent that the nuns of Cistercian communities were part of a privileged elite, these nuns did not achieve the control over their lives that most medieval men (at least of their own class) enjoyed.

What of material remains? Here let me mention the tremendous advances made by Roberta Gilchrist. But I do part company with one point in Gilchrist’s interpretation, which is that she proposes a double-standard of evaluation—one different for men’s communities than women’s—because the latter were so much more involved in service activities. I would propose instead that the standard by which the nuns of Cistercian communities were part of a privileged elite, these nuns did not achieve the control over their lives that most medieval men (at least of their own class) enjoyed.

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End Notes
1 See <monasticmatrix.usc.edu>


Appendix

Thellière, Bellecombe, pp. 32-35 and Patrologiae Latina 204, were written by Henry of Marcy as abbot of Clairvaux (1176-1179; later cardinal bishop of Albano from 1179-89). Guichard, abbot of Pontigny (1136-65), archbishop of Lyons (1165-80), and papal legate. Alexander III ruled 1159-81. From this evidence, it can be assumed that the letters must date to 1179-81.

Letter 1

To our Lord, and most beloved friend, and reverend father, Guichard, by grace of God, bishop of Lyons, I Henry, abbot of Clairvaux, insignificant as I am, send salutations. Your sons, our brothers, of les Bénissons-Dieu have been saddened by the heavy oppression by which many outside monks and nuns have been repelling in intolerable ways the animals of those brothers from their own pastures. Among other things the nuns of Bellecombe have attacked the monks by building shepherd’s huts near the granges belonging to the monks of les Bénissons-Dieu. Because of which we seek, and pray that you vigorously assert your authority in this case, that the rights of our brethren not be destroyed by such outsiders.

Letter 2

To the most saintly father, by the grace of God, Lord Pope, Alexander III, from Henry of Marcy, former abbot of Clairvaux, now cardinal bishop of Albano, insignificant as I am. Our poor little house of monks called les Bénissons-Dieu was founded in a dry place with arid soil, but despite limited and impoverished resources that can be used only for pasture, its monks continue to provide nourishment for human souls. Of late, however, the situation of the monks of les Bénissons-Dieu has been threatened by the introduction of other religious groups’ sheep and cows into the territories in which les Bénissons-Dieu’s own sheep were customarily pastured. The crowds of animals belonging to outsiders have begun to compete with the animals of those poor monks. Indeed, not only have the flocks of total outsiders gravely encroached on the pasture used by the said house of les Bénissons-Dieu, but so have those of the nuns of Bellecombe. As a result of the nuns having built new shepherd’s huts in the vicinity of les Bénissons-Dieu’s granges, moreover, our brothers seek and pray that we request your clemency in making a general declaration addressed to everyone, but especially to those nuns, by which those nuns as well as all others might be prohibited from continuing their encroachments. Thus, that by your papal patronage, the pasture which has supported the brothers of les Bénissons-Dieu might be freed from such competition and from new buildings being put up.

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