

Digitization of the Archive of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery

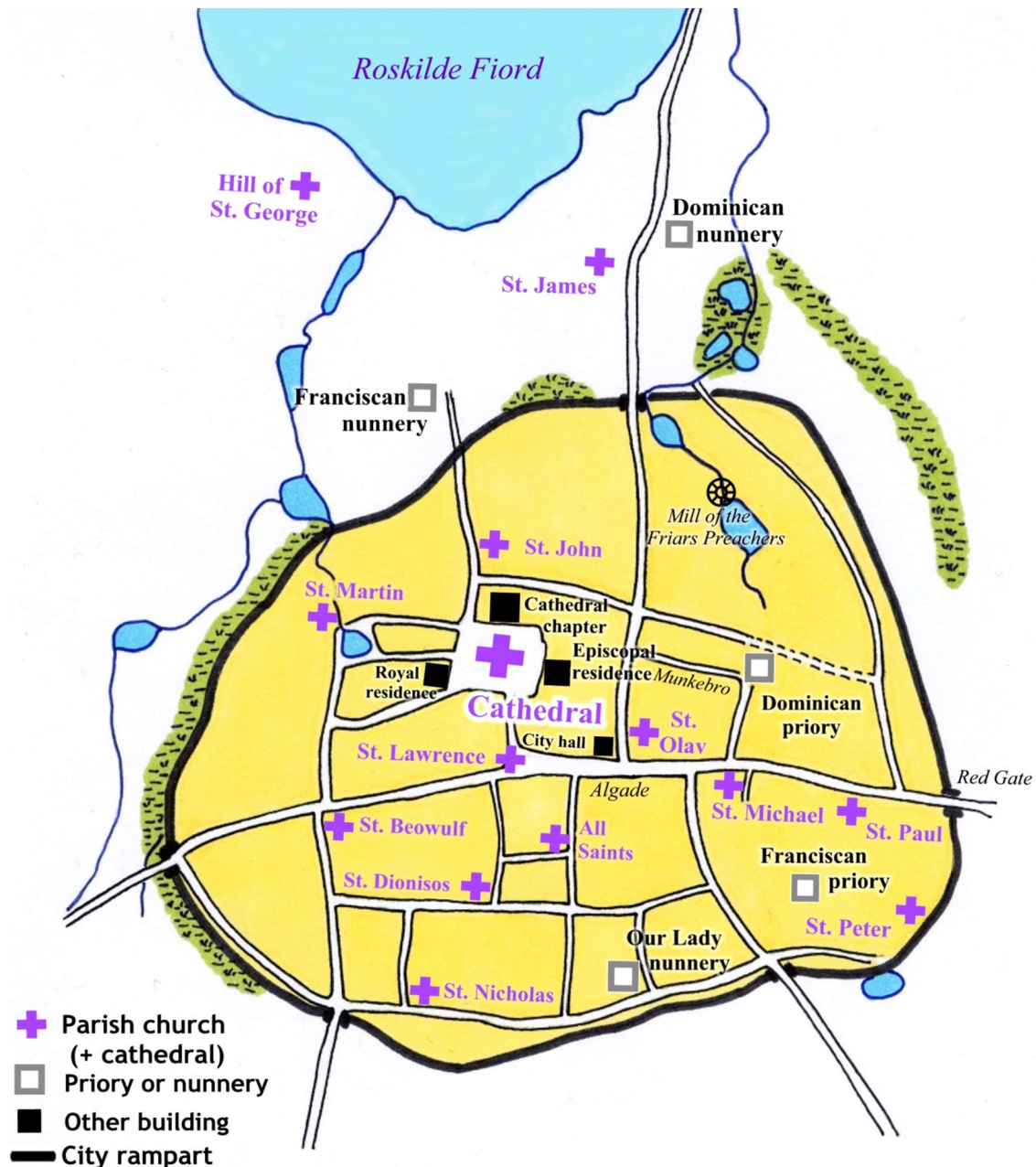
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This is an abbreviated English translation of an article written in Danish: 'Digitalisering af Roskilde Skt. Clara Klosters Arkiv', published in *Historisk Årbog for Roskilde Amt* 2017 (Roskilde: Historisk Samfund for Roskilde Amt), 21-28. The translation has subsequently been published online in 2017 at: www.jggj.dk/StClare.pdf.

Present-day knowledge about medieval monasticism is to a large part dependent on extant written sources, and both the amount and nature of the preserved documents naturally differ quite a lot individual monasteries in between. This is the case in Denmark as everywhere else. For the Danish cathedral city of Roskilde, the degree of source preservation in regard to the medieval church is generally better than for many other parts of the country, and this is particularly the case for the city's old Franciscan (or Clarissan) nunnery. From Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery we do, in fact, have the largest extant archive of diplomas preserved from any monastic house in medieval Denmark: a total of 471 diplomas from the archive are today kept at the Arnamagnaeian Collection at the University of Copenhagen, covering the entire 300 years lifetime of the nunnery.

The Nunnery of St. Clare was founded in 1256 as the fourth of five monasteries in medieval Roskilde. The main founder was Countess Ingerd von Regenstein (†1258), who in spite of her German-sounding name was a local noblewoman from Sjælland, being the daughter (and eventually sole heir) of Jakob Sunesen (†1246), probably the wealthiest Danish magnate of his time. She was also the founder of Franciscan friaries in Roskilde (1237), Copenhagen (1238), Kalundborg (1240) and Næstved (1242), and a great benefactress to the Dominican friary in Roskilde as well (in 1257). The nunnery was built in the north-western fringe of the city, just outside the city rampart.¹ There are no visible remnants of the monastery today, but the street name *Sankt Claras Vej* bears witness to its former existence. For the main of its existence, the institution was home to twenty to thirty Clarissan nuns, so termed after the foundress of the female Franciscan order, St. Clare of Assisi. The bulk of the sisters appear to have been of the rural gentry from all around Sjælland, but also daughters and widows of less well-off families were given admission to the convent. The nunnery continued until the Protestant Reformation in 1536 put a stop to Catholic monasticism in Denmark, but some monastic houses were allowed to go on a bit longer, and the last nuns in Roskilde St. Clare are mentioned in 1545. After that, the former nunnery and its rich landed estate at first continued as a royal fief, until the entire estate was handed over to support the University of Copenhagen in 1561.

¹ Roskilde, like most other cities in medieval Denmark, did not have an actual city wall, only a rampart to mark the limit of urban jurisdiction.



Reconstructed city map of late medieval Roskilde, pointing out the locations of the ecclesiastical institutions of the city. The Franciscan (or 'Clarissan') nunnery of St. Clare was situated just outside the northern rampart on the road leading downhill to the harbour. Map by the author.

At this occasion, the Archive of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery was transferred to the university as well. The nunnery archive was of relevance to the secular university administration because the majority of the documents were diplomas relating to the monastic estate, predominantly in the form of letters of donations, deeds, wills and courtly declarations. Thus, the diplomas of Roskilde St. Clare tell, for instance, how the nunnery had received landed property as 'dowry' when individual women entered the convent or as donations in connection to last testaments and foundation of perpetual masses; how received estate was exchanged for more practically-located property; and

how the nuns' possession of landed property and other privileges with recurrent intervals were confirmed by popes, bishops and kings. The diplomas therefore documented the nunnery's – and later the university's – rightful ownership to its rent-giving estates.



Example of a diploma from the Archive of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery (AM LX 22 r). It is a parchment letter issued in 1408 by Anna Pedersdatter, widow of Mikkel Rud, in which she donates two farms, situated in Hastrup and Svansbjerg, to her daughter, Margrete, who is a sister at the convent of St. Clare in Roskilde. The letter was sealed by Lady Anna herself along with two witnessing knights, Jakob Lunge and Jørgen Rud; the seals of the two former are still present. Photo by the Arnamagnaeian Collection.

As time passed and the old nunnery archive gradually fell in legal importance, it rose in historical value instead. According to a register of 1633 the archive was then kept by the head of the university in a separate drawer, but in 1716 Professor Arne Magnusson (†1730) was given the task of bringing order to all the old diplomas in the university archives. To ease the job, Professor Magnusson decided to bring the entire nunnery archive home to his apartment in Copenhagen, where it remained for the rest of his lifetime. While such an approach would meet little tolerance by archival authorities today, the act turned out to be quite fortunate, as the archive hereby survived the university fire in 1728. When Magnusson died, the Archive of Roskilde St. Clare returned to the University of Copenhagen as part of the so-called Arnamagnaeian Collection, which with its almost

3,000 manuscripts and more than 15,000 diplomas has been acknowledged for UNESCO's list of World Cultural Heritage in 2009.

The Archive of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery will in the years 2017-2020 be the centre of considerable scholarly attention as the core axis of an interdisciplinary research project co-funded by the VELUX Foundation and the University of Copenhagen. The project *Skrift og tekst i tid og rum* ('Script and Text in Time and Space'), which is based at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, includes both experienced and early career scholars from very different fields of expertise, which in this connection can be grouped under the terminological umbrella 'digital humanities'. The overall aim of the project is to "...generate a brand new basis for the work with Danish medieval texts by discovering a number of fundamental issues concerning the development of medieval writing, their dating and localization." Put in more practical terms, this means that we are going to use the Archive of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery as a case study for the development, adjustment and implementation of a variety of digital-technological tools in order to increase our understanding of medieval manuscripts in general, herein also how we as scholars can analyse them better and improve our transmission of the source documents themselves along with the historical content to the general public. The research project is structured in three sub-projects with focus on different, but internally linked topics: 1. Digital-editorial philology; 2. Scribe studies and the Archive of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery; 3. Language technology and historical source material. While the first sub-project is set to find out how medieval texts are best published electronically online in an up-to-date and user-friendly way, the third sub-project can be said to aim at developing an advanced computer software, which – popularly put – by 'itself' will be able to read a medieval manuscript and, based on its incorporated knowledge of thousands of familiar manuscripts, to present a qualified suggestion as to *when*, *where* and perhaps even by *whom* the text was written.

The author of the present article has still only a very limited understanding of the technological sides to the project. I am, instead, attached to sub-project 2, which is of a much more historical character, as it aims to clarify the practice of writing at a monastery in medieval Denmark. This includes, among other thing, palaeographical analyses of handwriting and spelling throughout the 300 years lifetime of the archive, as well as identifying the types of parchment and ink, which were used. For my own part, I am connected to the research project as its 'monastic historian' with a special interest in the actual place, where the archive originated, and in the people, whom the diplomas basically concern.

Even for European standards, the Archive of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery offers a unique insight to the conditions of a medieval nunnery, mainly in concern of its landed property, but also in regard to the nunnery's relations in general to the rest of society, and not least the internal monastic life of the nuns – a topic otherwise very much neglected in Danish scholarship. The archival studies will therefore also include a more historical survey of the diplomas, focusing on their content and context. Although the archive mainly consists of letters received by the nunnery from many different issuers, the collection of diplomas still has a lot to say about the recipient institution as well, since the nunnery, of course, only kept letters, which the sisters had an interest in preserving. Indeed, the bulk of the diplomas have been issued on the request of the nunnery, some even by the sisters themselves. Also, several of the diplomas are extant in the form of certified transcripts (*vidisser*), often of now lost originals, made on initiative of the nunnery administration.

In overall, the digitization of the Clarissan archive from Roskilde may provide us with a hitherto unknown insight to the scribal practice of a monastery in medieval Denmark. This would include such questions as what topics that were felt needed to have and keep in a written form; who issued the diplomas; for whom were they issued; where; when; why; and concerning exactly what? And to what extent will the palaeographical analyses, along with explicit references in the letters, make it possible to identify specific scribes with particular relations to the nunnery and its social network? The location of where the diplomas have been issued will be analysed closer, as the spatial provenience of the letters is essential for our understanding of their creation and the scribes who made them. Also other locations referred to in the letters will be digitally identified ('geo-tagged') as they bear witness to the residence of various agents involved with the nunnery and, thus, to the overall geographical settings of the nunnery's network – including, of course, the actual distribution of its landed estate. Moreover, spelling forms of both place-names and personal names mentioned in the letters may say something about the linguistic background of the scribes, and hereby help identifying them.



Official diplomas issued by Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery were equipped with seals in order to prove their validity. One seal represented the female head of the nunnery ('the abbess'), another represented the entire female community ('the convent'). On the convent seal of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery (left) is centrally depicted St. Francis of Assisi kneeling before a seraph (an angel with six wings that Francis allegedly saw just before receiving his stigmata). Below them kneels a woman, perhaps St. Clare herself, before a priest, who holds something above her head. The seal of the abbess (right) shows a nun, probably the abbess herself, kneeling before the Holy Virgin, who is holding baby Jesus in her arms. Danske Geistlige Sigiller no. 425 and 426.

Going beyond the given frames of the research project as such, which for its historical part will focus on the scribes and their textual production, the survey will inevitably also provide basis for a better understanding of the Clarissan nunnery in Roskilde itself. This includes such questions as who were the nuns and their biological families; who else, apart from these families, made donations to the nunnery; what did the donors expect in return (e.g. prayers, masses, funerals); how much land did the sisters bring in with them at admission; how and by whom was the estate administrated; on what terms did the tenant farmers live; and what type of kind was received by the nunnery in rent? One particularly interesting aspect would be if the survey could bring just a glimpse into the considerations behind the decision of becoming a Clarissan nun and on everyday-life for the sisters in Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery.

Actually, the first major discovery has already been made by the project, shortly after it commenced on 1 April 2017. Different scholarly registers and literature on the collection have until now been somewhat vague in stating the number of diplomas involved, going from "more than 350" to "a little less than 400". However, the initial and now terminated digital photography of all the letters has established that the archive do indeed consist of no less than 471 diplomas! Time will show

whether this positive miscalculation means that the additional diplomas will provide new knowledge on the medieval history of Roskilde, but, to be realistic, rather than hitherto unknown documentation we are probably more likely to find copies of letters already known.

The planned, public benefit of the research project ***Skrift og tekst i tid og rum*** takes several forms. Digital photographs in high resolution of all 471 diplomas (with seals and other details of interest) will be made available for open access-usage on the Internet, along with full-text transcripts of the written content of the letters, both in the original languages (mainly Latin and Old Danish) and in English parallel translations; a short summary of the content of each letter will also be provided. In the digital website presentation of the diplomas, all personal names and place-names mentioned in the text will be ‘tagged’, making it possible via hyperlinks to access any available presentations of the persons and places in other online catalogues, such as *Dansk Biografisk Leksikon* (‘Danish Biographical Encyclopaedia’) and *Danmarks Stednavne* (‘Place-Names of Denmark’). Likewise, explanations of specific medieval terms will be available through links to *Ordbog over det Danske Sprog* (‘Dictionary of the Danish Language’). Furthermore, the scholarly outcome of the various surveys will be presented in a collective anthology on the palaeographical, scribal and monastic history of Roskilde St. Clare Nunnery and its archive, while specific aspects from the sub-projects will be published in relevant journals and proceedings.

