



***Die vergessenen Prinzessinnen von
Thorn (1700–1794)***

**By Joost Welten in collaboration
with Lena Reyners**

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Die vergessenen Prinzessinnen von Thorn (1700–1794). By Joost Welten in collaboration with Lena Reyners. Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2021. ISBN: 978-3-7954-3648-3. 512 pp., 39,90€. German Translation from the Dutch Original Publication “De vergeten Prinsessen van Thorn (1700–1794),” Sterck & De Vreese 2019 by Christina Brunnenkamp and Isabel Hessel.

In *Die vergessenen Prinzessinnen von Thorn*, Joost Welten discusses a century of female rulership in an ecclesiastical context with a focus on the Reichsstift Thorn, offering insights into an ecclesiastical endowment for women of high nobility with imperial immediacy. Here, he pays special attention to one abbess of Thorn, Maria Kunigunde of Saxony (1740–1826), who was equal to other princes in the Holy Roman Empire and held voting rights at the Perpetual Diet in Regensburg. Welten claims that no research has yet focussed on Thorn as it was once part of the Holy Roman Empire, now of the Dutch Republic, which is why national research seems to have neglected it (25). However, as Ute Küppers-Braun’s *Frauen des hohen Adels im kaiserlich-freiweltlichen Damenstift Essen (1605–1803)* (Münster 1997) and Teresa Schröder-Stapper’s *Fürststäbtissinnen. Frühneuzeitliche Stiftsherrschaft zwischen Verwandtschaft, Lokalgewalten und Reichsverband* (Köln 2015) have also looked into Thorn, the Reichsstift is well-known, at least in German historiography. The title with the word “forgotten” (‘vergessenen’) hints at the aim of this publication: to shed light on overlooked female agency and the political influence of high noble women in an ecclesiastical space.

The introduction starts with the analysis of a portrait of Abbess Anna Juliana, Countess of Manderscheid-Blankenheim (1665–1717), positioned in a collection of the canonesses’ coats of arms. Welten claims this piece of art represents the community of women of high noble descendants and their network rather than an ecclesiastical mark (8). This provides him with the thesis: “Religion ist keine Priorität in ihrem Leben” (Religion is no priority in her life) (8).

The study focuses on the everyday lives of the canonesses living in vast splendour, as proof of four generations of noble descendants was required to enter the exclusive space of the ‘Stift Thorn,’ whose religious background is dismissed by Welten (19). He perceives the Reichsstift, despite its ecclesiastical roots, not as a religious institution; according to him, the entry into a ‘Stift’ is a rite of passage for princesses comparable to the Grand Tour for princes. Furthermore, Welten argues that the experience of noble women living in a convent is not at all comparable to the monastic life of nuns. In the Reichsstift splendour

is displayed, in contrast to institutions like cloisters and nunneries whose inhabitants were bound to vows of poverty. Taking into consideration that only two of the canonesses of Thorn have taken the vows to become nuns since the eighteenth century, Welten's insight is convincing. An example of this is the canonesses' letters discussing the noviciate of Elisabeth of Nassau-Hadamar (1698–1724) in a cloister, through which it becomes clear that living in modest circumstances was not perceived as adequate for noble-born and still unmarried princesses. Welten shows the similarities of the abbesses' and canonesses' standard of living in the endowment to court life. Due to the vast source material, the research takes a biographical approach (29).

In ten chapters, the monograph traces the life and agency of Abbess Maria Kunigunde of Saxony, which is put into context with other cohabitants of the 'Stift' in order to compare her agency with other individuals living in the same space, and relying on the same networks during the eighteenth century. In the first three chapters, Kunigunde's noble milieu (*adeliges Milieu*) (31) and her female agency are studied: her patronage of the arts, participation in the court opera 'Talestri,' hunting activities, country life, failed wedding strategies as a young princess, and her role as canoness. In the fourth chapter, her path to becoming an abbess is examined. Kunigunde had been discussed as a potential bride for Emperor Joseph II. However, this attempt failed. The mother of Joseph II, Empress Maria Theresa, compensated Kunigunde by providing her with the important political rank of an abbess, only suited for unmarried women enabling her to participate in the Imperial Diet. In chapter five, Welten analyses Maria Kunigunde's large investments into her residence at Thorn. She only resided there for two summers, and spent most of her time at the court of her brother in Koblenz, due to the dangers of the French Revolution and the uprisings in Liege and Brabant close to Thorn. In the following chapters, the biographies of other canonesses under Kunigunde's rule are the focus of the study, through which the livelihoods of unmarried women in the Reichsstift are shown. In comparison, the opponents Gabriele and Christina of Salm-Salm are introduced to demonstrate the role of Imperial Abbeys in the education of young aristocratic women during the early modern period. The limits of female agency are examined through the example of their stepsisters, Anna Victoria and Felicitas of Merode, other rebellious members of the family, who challenged the rules of this institution. While the analysis of biographical data appears cumbersome, it offers the opportunity to observe the space of agency provided for women in the collegial body, their individual dealings with possibilities via networking, and consequences for the noble lifestyle. The last chapter provides an overview of the different

fields of female agency in the everyday life of the Reichsstift. With this, the ecclesiastical character gave aristocratic women the opportunity to live independently neither as nuns, nor as wives, but as potential political agents. To wrap up his study, Welten provides a brief three pages summary of how worldly these women of noble descent lived at Thorn.

This publication is based on manifold archival and printed sources, and it is concluded by a register of people and places. To demonstrate the vastness of material, especially the correspondence and further ego documents of various agents of noble descendants, this book includes many portraits of the ‘Stiftsdamen’ and their family and court members. The results of their art patronage are demonstrated via prints, paintings, and photographs. It is an unfortunate that the illustrations are not linked directly to the text via a remark, as is the lack of a list of figures. To demonstrate the dynastical network of these canonesses, family trees are added. To add in an annotation to the German translation of the Dutch original: from my point of view the effort of the research task is diminished by the wrong tone of language of the translation. Therefore, I believe, that a final editing office undertaken by a German-speaking historian would have been adequate.

The research done for this vast oeuvre shows the political networks of the princesses in question. As the link of the institution to the noble elite in France and the Netherlands has been neglected by foregoing research, the female agents and their networks came to light in the research undertaken by Joost Welten. Finally, this publication is a page-turner, offering insight into female agency and governance in a place belonging to women, ruled by women, and organized by women, throughout the eighteenth century.

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