



Regarding blessed Haseka, virgin recluse in Westphalia

De B. Haseka, virgine reclusa in Westphalia

Text Information

Author | Hermann Greven

Language | Latin

Period | 15th Century

Genre | Biographies

Source | *Acta sanctorum quotquot toto orbe coluntur, vel a catholicis scriptoribus celebrantur. Editio novissima*. Ed. Joanne Carnandet. 26 January, vol. 3, 373–374. Paris: V. Palmé, 1863.

Collection | Prayer, Spirituality, and Life after Death: Global Medieval Perspectives

URL | sourcebook.stanford.edu/text/greven_blessed_haseka/

Transcription, translation and introduction by Laura Moncion.

Introduction to the Text

This spiritual biography (or *vita*) concerns the life and sanctity of a woman named Haseka, a recluse in the church of Schermbeck, in today's North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany. The author praises Haseka's pious way of life and inclination against human company before describing a miracle in which Haseka (through God's intervention) changes rancid butter into fresh, and then relating the conflict between monasteries over the right to bury Haseka's dead body. Once finally buried, Haseka appears to a widow in her sleep. The *vita* ends by foretelling the popular veneration of this holy recluse.

As a recluse, Haseka adopted a type of religious life which centred around her physical enclosure inside a small dwelling. This form of life existed throughout the European Middle Ages; terms for such enclosed, devotional people include anchorite, anchoress, and solitary. In the later Middle Ages it was common, as in Haseka's case, for women recluses to live in a house or cell attached to a parish church. The recluse was expected to lead an exemplary holy life and pray for the souls of those who offered her donations and alms. Frequently, recluses could also exercise a kind of charismatic authority, offering advice or teachings to interested passersby.

Since recluses were bound to their dwellings, they needed the support of outsiders to stay alive and to minister to their daily needs. It is interesting to note the prominent role played by Haseka's attendant in this spiritual biography. The author calls her "Sister Berta," and does not call her a servant as such but rather "ministra." He also portrays her as very close to the recluse: Berta has influence over Haseka's goods (when she tries to remove the rancid butter), and eats with her at the same table. Both Berta, the recluse's attendant, and the nameless, pious widow, to whom the postmortem Haseka appears, suggest a rich landscape of non-cloistered religious women, existing alongside recluses and monasteries in this period.

Introduction to the Source

This spiritual biography was written between 1450 and 1479 by Hermann Greven (Hermannus Gresgenius), a Carthusian monk in Cologne. It is part of a martyrology, or catalogue of martyrs and saints, authored by Greven and based on a ninth-century text by the monk Usuard. The present translation is based on the Latin edition in the *Acta sanctorum*. More information on the text and the original manuscript is available [here](#).

About this Edition

This new translation of this short *vita* is based upon the edition in the *Acta sanctorum* ("De beata Haseka virgine reclusa in Westphalia." AASS 26 January, vol. 3, pp. 373–374).

Further Reading

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Beata Soror Haseka de partibus Rheni oriunda, in virginitatis puritate et gloria perseverans, juxta ecclesiam in Schermbecke, quae est proxima monasterio Sichemensi, triginta et sex annis inclusa permansit. Quae inde stipem cotidianam percipiens victus sui, et labore possibilitatis suae, in multa simplicitate et patientia singulari vitam suam transegit: studiose semper providens et procurans quidquid ei Deus in collatione gratiae singularis contulisset, occultans, et in coelo sudores laborum suorum repnens, non in infida custodis arculae labiorum ac orium humanorum, ne eam extolleret magnitudo revelationum.

Quae autem Dominus voluit revelari pro nominis sui gloria, haec cognita sunt conscripta. Cum enim quadam vice propter Deum et pro labore suo et conservae suae donatum esset butyrum prae vetustate sua foetidum ac corruptum, et post dies aliquot in cista locatum, cum foetorem Soror Berta ministra sua nec posset aut vellet tolerare, paravit illud a se quomodolibet elongare. Quod Soror Haseka cum comperisset, positis genibus suis, dixit: Domine butyrum istud qualemque sit, in nomine tuo comedemus. In ditione tua cuncta sunt posita; potestate et virtute tua de malo elicis, cum volueris, bonum : bonum etiam, si volueris, efficere poteris hoc butyrum. Cum igitur ad mensulam tenuem pro loci opportunitate, una intra, altera vero extra assedisset, prolatum butyrum ita recens est inventum, ac si eodem die lacte agitato fuisset elixum. Benedicentes igitur omnipotentem Deum, deinceps illud in cordis jubilo atque tripudio singulis diebus comederunt.

Cum autem beata Soror Haseka apud monasterium Sichemense, tamquam eidem loco sancta obedientia obligata, quia ipsum quem elegerat portans toto conversationis suea tempore habitum monachorum, sepulturam eligisset, et anno gratiae millesimo ducentesimo sexagesimo primo, VII. Kal. Febr. in Domino obdormisset, Fratres monasterii tam monachi quam conversi cum vehiculo venerunt, et corpus alumnae suea ad sepelendum tollere voluerunt. Quod niger quidam monachus eo tempore divina ibi celebrans, nomine monasterii sui procurans, accersito sibi brachio et robore rusticorum fieri non permisit; et sic Fratribus injuriam suam dissimilantibus eam in ecclesia dia tertia sepelivit.

Blessed Sister Haseka, who came from the regions of the Rhine and persevered in the purity and glory of virginity, lived for 36 years as a recluse next to the church in Schermbeck, which is near the monastery of Sichem. She considered as her sustenance a daily offering,¹ and she conducted her life in great simplicity and singular patience by the work which was possible for her.² She was always eagerly making provision for and attending to whatever God conveyed to her in the collection of singular grace; she hid herself³ and restored the weariness of her lips in heaven, rather than in the faithlessness of human company,⁴ so that He might raise her up by the greatness of revelations.

Indeed the Lord wanted to be revealed to her for the glory of his name, and these things which are known are written down here. On a certain occasion, for God and for her work and that of her attendant,⁵ butter was donated which was stinking and rancid because of its old age. After it had been placed away in a coffer for some days, Sister Berta, Haseka's attendant, was no longer able or willing to tolerate the stink. She prepared to remove it from her presence in any way possible. When Sister Haseka realized this, kneeling, she said: "Lord, may this butter be such that we will eat it in your name. All things are in your sovereignty; by your power and goodness you extract the good from the bad when you desire: if you want to, you are able to make this butter good." When they sat down at the little table (thin enough to fit the space), with one inside and the other outside,⁶ the said butter was discovered to be fresh, as if it had been churned that same day. Blessing the all-powerful God, in jubilation and festivity of the heart, they ate it every day.

Blessed Sister Haseka chose her place of burial at the monastery of Sichem, just as she was bound by holy obedience to the same place because of the habit of the monks which she had chosen, carrying it for the whole time of her religious life. On 26 January 1261 she died. The brothers of the monastery, both monks and lay brothers, came with a vehicle and wanted to carry off the body of their ward for burial. A certain black monk who was at that time celebrating the office there, ministering in the name of his monastery, did not permit this to be done, flailing his arms and boorishly red in the face⁷—and so on the third day he buried her in the church. Meanwhile the brothers⁸ concealed their injury.



Cum autem res ad notitiam Episcopi dioecesani deve-
nisset, paecepit etiam per litteras in virtute obedientiae monasterio dari corpus. Cum igitur ad susceptionem corporis ad portam monasterii solenniter occurrentibus monachis, adessent saeculares utriusque sexus, viderunt faciem Virginis sacrae, quae mortua et sepulta fuerat diebus multis, ita vividam et rubentum, ut quasi juvencula balneata, non vetula mortua videretur. Fuitque tam expers omnis foetoris ejus corporis gleba, ut omnes qui aderant et viderunt eam in sepulcro locatam et mox terra operiendam valde mirarentur. Obiit autem beata Soror Haseka nocte proxima post diem Conversionis S. Pauli Apostoli, et sepulta est sub lapide latiore ad introitum domus capitulo Sichemensis monasterii tertia decima mensis Martii, cuius meritis et precibus apud Dominum nos credimus et confidimus adjuvari.

Apparuit vero sacra Dei famula, postquam defuncta fuit, in somnis cuidam nobili ac devotee viduae, dicens ei : Noli dubium gerere, sed firmissime crede, et nullatenus dubites, quin quicunque ad mei memoriam configerint, in suis sint necessitatibus et angustiis auxilium per Dei gratiam obtenturi. Porro illa excitata a somno et visioni congratulans, cum secundo tenuiter obdormisset, vidi iterato beatam Virginem eadam constantissime repetentem, ut repetitio sermonis esse probaretur affirmatio veritatis. Nec hactenus tantum extentam credimus Dei manum, sed magis adhuc pro nominis sui gloria extendendam. Jam enim ad ejus tumulum fideles luminaria transmittunt, et pro incommodis sublevandis accedunt. Amen.

When this was brought to the attention of the diocesan bishop, he ordered in a letter that Haseka's body should be given to the monastery by virtue of her obedience to them. When the monks arrived solemnly at the door of the monastery to receive her body, there were laypeople there of both sexes. They saw the face of the holy Virgin, who died and was buried for many days, but now seemed lively and rosy, as if she were a freshly-bathed girl and not an aged, dead woman. The soil was so lacking in any stench from her body that all who were there and saw her placed in the tomb and soon covered by earth marvelled greatly. Blessed Sister Haseka crossed over⁹ the next night, after the feast of the conversion of St Paul the Apostle, and was buried under a very wide stone at the entrance to the chapter house of the monastery of Sichem, on the 13th of March. We believe in her merits and prayers before God and we are confident that she will be helped.¹⁰

This holy maidservant of God appeared, after she had died, to a certain noble and devoted widow in a dream, saying to her: "Do not doubt, but believe most firmly, and do not ever doubt that anyone taking refuge in memory of me may be held fast by the grace and the help of God in their necessities and in their anxieties." Then the widow, awoken by the dream and vision, rejoiced. When again she fell lightly asleep, she saw again the same blessed Virgin, constantly repeating, so that the repetition of the word was proven to be the affirmation of the truth. Thus far we did not believe that the hand of God was so much extended, but it is about to be extended more for the glory of his name. Already the faithful cast their eyes on her tomb, and approach it in order to lighten their troubles. Amen.

Critical Notes

- 1 Most likely an offering of food or goods, i.e. she lived on alms.
- 2 The author most likely means prayer here, but recluses were also known to engage in some work which could be done from the cell, such as embroidery or copying manuscripts.
- 3 i.e. from people.
- 4 *custodis arculae labiorum ac orium humanorum*: literally, "of the keeper of the little box of human lips and mouths." I interpret this as referring more generally to human company here.
- 5 *Conservae suae*: literally, "her co-servant." This may be the author imparting more humility to Haseka, by implying that she is a servant (presumably, of God). I translate "conserva" as "her attendant" here since it seems that this woman was actually Haseka's attendant of some kind (she is later called "ministra"). It was common for recluses—unable to leave their dwellings—to have servants or attendants who could run errands and manage the recluse's affairs outside of the anchorhold.
- 6 This may imply something like Haseka sitting inside the anchorhold while Berta sat outside; nevertheless they share a table. This may also imply that the anchorhold was too small to accommodate both of them and the table.



- 7 *robore rusticorum*: literally, “with the redness of country people.” “*Rusticus*” can refer simply to a peasant or country person, or, in the case of a value judgement, a coarse, brutish person or lout. In this case, I suspect the author is implying that this monk is an unmannered person, casting doubt onto his monastery’s claims to Haseka’s body.
- 8 Of the monastery of Sichem.
- 9 *obiit*: since Haseka is already dead, I translate “*obiit*” as “crossed over” rather than “died.” The author may be implying that, once buried in the graveyard of her choice, Haseka’s earthly remains can truly be considered at rest.
- 10 *adjuvari*: i.e. helped to attain salvation.