In the late Middle Ages, northern Germany made a distinctive contribution to the literature of mysticism and devotion that has not yet been fully recognized. Indeed, it is almost a century since Wolfgang Stammel wrote the only study on the history of mysticism for this region; a review of the rich material is long overdue. Although the writings of the outstanding visionaries in the 13th century from the convent of Helfta have been the focus of much research, what followed in the subsequent centuries has not. This volume starts with Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mechthild of Hackeborn and Gertrude of Helfta, before turning to the later anonymous devotional writing that feeds off and engages with the mystical tradition. What emerges clearly is the substantial and vibrant nature of the texts produced by communities of women, such as the nuns in the Lüneburg convents, who write learnedly in Latin and fervently in Low German.

Through adopting a flexible concept of mystical culture, the volume plots the texts that are discussed on a spectrum that embraces mysticism and devotion. The continuum that results demonstrates the interconnection of popular devotional works and exclusive mystical writing. Where in previous scholarship the focus on the individual visionaries of Helfta had...
effectively silenced the later communal voice, here a strong case is made for recognizing the significant contribution of the anonymous devotional voice in the transmission of mysticism as a regional phenomenon.

The first part of the volume deals with the beginnings and formations of much of the material which shapes later thinking in northern Germany in the 13th and 14th centuries. It sees the arrival of mystical writing and reading under the influence of the Low Countries, with Mechthild of Magdeburg as an outstanding figure, and the convent of Helfta as an important centre. Part II stretches into the 15th century, tracing the impact of reforms, transformations, and ideas generated in the previous centuries, and foregrounding the devotional aspect of mystical thinking. The surge of different forms of religious movements in the Low Countries, Scandinavia, and East Prussia sees the Hanseatic region as a centre of cultural exchange in the late Middle Ages, not least of texts, ideas, and modes of reading and writing.

In this process of cultural exchange, transmission and translation are key activities, as is the monastic practice of *ruminatio*, a practice revived in the *Devotio moderna*. Gerard Zerbolt van Zutphen, one of the first Brothers of the Common Life (→ Bollmann, p. 263), tells his reader that:

Meditacio vero dicitur qua ea que legisti vel audiisti, studiosa ruminacione in corde tuo diligenter pertractas, et per ea affectum tuum circa aliquod certum inflamas vel illuminas intellectum. (*De spiritualibus ascensionibus*, chapter XLV, → Hascher-Burger, p. 263).

Meditation means to ponder in your heart in studious rumination those things you have read or heard, and through this you will ignite your feelings about a specific matter and you will also enlighten your intellect.

Continuation and amplification become the preferred mode of text production. By following lines of transmission, the two parts of the volume represent different stages in the life of a continuously expanding and changing corpus of texts. Transmission is considered at various levels: from practical questions of how manuscripts transported and changed the focus of texts to the integration of mystical thought into devotional practice.

*The Genesis of the Volume*

The volume had its origins in a shared interest of the Newcastle-based editors in how mystical and devotional texts worked. Of particular interest were potential links between Mechthild of Magdeburg's writing in the