The Liber ordinarius of Nivelles

Liturgy as Interdisciplinary Intersection

Edited by
JEFFREY F. HAMBURGER
and EVA SCHLOTHEUBER

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Introduction

Jeffrey Hamburger / Eva Schlotheuber

In the collection of his papers, *Liturgica Historica* (1918), published almost exactly a century ago, Edmund Bishop, the famous historian of Catholic liturgy, posed the question: "Is the subject 'An Old Prayer Book' a 'dull' one?" Tongue-in-cheek, Bishop wrote that he would prefer the dullest form possible, namely, a tabulation of its contents, adding that "any subject is sure to prove dull to somebody". By Bishop's sardonic definition, a *Liber ordinarius*, which itself offers little more than a list, albeit a complicated one, constituting the *ordo* or order of the liturgy for a given church or community, itself would be a very dull book indeed. This collection of essays, however, devoted to a single, if outstanding, example of the genre, seeks to demonstrate the contrary.

To judge from the recent outpouring of scholarly publications on *Libri ordinarii* – books that, much like the script of a play, lay out the order of the liturgy, complete with instructions regarding its performance, props, staging and setting – such documents, of which a great many survive, currently enjoy a renaissance of interest across a wide array of academic disciplines, including not only the history of liturgy per se, but also of music, monasticism, art and architecture, and religion, in particular, religious institutions. Consisting of little more a seemingly endless series of cues, organized in various ways according to the liturgical calendar, the contents of *Libri ordinarii* are by their nature skeletal in character. Yet they offer a sufficient wealth of information to have permitted those who used them in the past and those who study them in the present to flesh out that skeleton and lend it life. Read attentively, these books provide far more than a mass of raw information, itself a goldmine for scholars interested in the basic historical challenge of reconstruction, whether of the liturgy itself or the architecture and liturgical furnishings of a particular community. More broadly, they also provide critical insight into the history of ideas, attitudes, and mentality as well as the relationships among the various groups that constituted a given community and the liturgical interactions among them, all of which were freighted with social as well as religious significance. In the case of female monastic communities, such as that at Nivelles, a *Liber ordinarius* also sheds light on constructions of gender and conceptions of ritual as they related to gender in the social, political and religious spheres. Detailed descriptions of how ceremony unfolds in time and space, they permit at least a partial reconstruction of elements of historical experience that are otherwise inherently ephemeral.

The *Liber Ordinarius ostendens qualiter legatur et cantetur per totum anni circulum in ecclesia Nivellensis* (i. e., The *Liber ordinarius* showing how [the liturgy] is read and sung through the entire cycle of the year in the church of Nivelles) or, for short, the *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles (LON), which was acquired by the Houghton Library at Harvard University in 2010 and assigned the shelfmark MS Lat 422, served as a guide to the corporate prayer of a community, in this case, the canonnesses of the abbey of St Gertrude in Nivelles in modern-day Belgium. Located between Brussels and Charleroi and no more than about twenty miles from the border with France, the abbey, which today still dominates what is now the rather sleepy town of Nivelles, was, through much of the Middle Ages, a strategically located center of power, closely associated in turn with the Merovingian, Carolingian, and Ottonian imperial houses. Among extant manuscripts, that purchased by the Houghton Library, which had previously been privately held, is the oldest known to survive from an institution that exercised tremendous power and influence over the course of many centuries.

Nivelles was founded in Gaul in the middle of the seventh century, by Ida, the window of Pippin the Elder, and her daughter, St Gertrude. For its time, the foundation was a typical initiative for a widow of the high aristocracy acting under the influence of Irish missionaries. The two female founders mandated the adoption of a fixed rule and enclosure. Among the principal duties of the community were the care of strangers and administering to the needs of the poor, widows, and orphans. The charitable ministration associated with the various hospitals linked to Nivelles had a significant and lasting impact on the abbey throughout its history. Founded on lands that had belonged to the powerful Austrasian *major domus*, Pippin the Elder, Nivelles evolved into one of the most important dynastic monastic houses of the later Carolingian dynasty, which was deeply involved in the Pippinids's retention of power during the difficult period following Grimoald's so-called coup d'état in 656. Nivelles thus acquired its enduring status in cultural memory as the "cradle of the Carolingians," and for many centuries the abbesses of Nivelles most likely remained the most powerful territorial rulers in the region. When in 1798, during the French Revolution the abbey was dissolved, the community of women could look back on a history of approximately 1150 years.

Gertrud and Itta had placed the pastoral care of the women in the hands of Irish monks for whom they founded the monastery of Fosses. With time a community of canons with the unusually high number of thirty members was established in Nivelles; its role was to support an aristocratic community of approximately forty canonesses. The *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles, including the documents and records that it contains, reflects the formative beginnings of the monastery, its important traditions and rituals as well as its religious, political, and charitable functions into which both the female and male communities were integrated. Given its liturgical function, the manuscript necessarily documents

the performance of the liturgy in great detail. More than that, however, it permitted the community not simply to preserve but also to shape and structure its memory and understanding of itself in terms defined by liturgy. The manuscript permits us to see how the liturgy was put to use not only for religious but also for political and social reasons. Indicative of this context was the decision of the Chapter of Nivelles to add to the *Liber ordinarius* crucial documents regarding the interaction of the female and male communities that for the most part are not documented elsewhere.

The abbey's religious, political, and social importance alone would suffice to make its *Liber ordinarius* a document of commanding interest. It takes on added significance, however, in light of what is now over a generation of scholarship devoted to questions of gender as they relate to the history of medieval monasticism. One salient feature of the *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles is that its contents are addressed primarily to the requirements of its primary community of canonnesses rather than those of its secondary community of canons. Rarely does a document provide such direct insight into the particularities that distinguished a female from a male community as well as the many ties that bound them together.

When it originally surfaced at an auction at Sotheby's, London, in 2008, the *Liber ordinarius*, which the catalogue described in misleading fashion as the "Hausbuch" of the Abbess Elizabeth de Bierbais, was dated to within her lifetime, ca. 1280, in large part on the basis of documents included among the liturgical texts proper. Such a date would link the *Liber* to period of tremendous turmoil in the abbey's history, years which witnessed quarreling not only between the abbey and citizens of the town over taxes (the proverbial town-gown struggle), but also among the abbess and the canonesses over jurisdiction and management of the abbey's considerable estates, the complicated relationship to the dukes of Brabant as well as other duties and obligations. These struggles culminated with the opening of the tomb of St Gertrude by Abbess Elizabeth de Bierbais on 8 July, 1292. To situate the *Liber* within, let alone characterize it as a witness to, these dramatic events certainly lends the book a certain melodramatic character. Its origins, however, prove to be much more complicated – and perhaps still more interesting – in ways which underscore that the liturgy, far from the timeless reflection or embodiment of eternal praise, which is how it is described in idealizing accounts, in fact represents a highly contested and ever-changing field of social as well as religious action.

Such changes are not simply reflected in but shaped by the material record in the form of manuscripts. The *Liber ordinarius* from Nivelles provides one very concrete and vivid example of this phenomenon. One striking feature of the manuscript is that all of the documents incorporated into its pages can be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century; the latest date that can be attached to any of them is the year 1300. The dating of this material to the latter half of the century contradicts the date assigned to the Lambert Table. If credence can be

lent to an inscription in the calendar as well as the accompanying Lambert Table for calculating the date of Easter, both of which provide the date 1346 (and both which are written in the same script, if not necessarily the same hand, as the rest of the manuscript), then the entire book dates not to the later thirteenth, but rather to the middle of the fourteenth century, a shift of at least half a century.

The history of the manuscript's creation and the transmission of the materials it contains can briefly (if somewhat summarily) be reconstructed as follows. As occurred quite frequently, the liturgical customs of the abbey of Nivelles owe their having been recorded to ongoing conflicts within the community. Very often, significant information is only set down and codified when it is, for whatever reason, perceived as being in peril. In the particular circumstances that gave rise to the manuscript, a struggle broke out between the abbess and the Chapter of the canonnesses and the canons of Nivelles, which at its heart revolved around the ancient status of the abbey as self-governing under the Empire. It appears that the compilation of the liturgical customs of the abbey, i. e., the original version of the *Liber ordinarius* that in turn most likely was based in part on still older models and that served in turn as the exemplar for the extant manuscript, was assembled and commissioned by the Chapter of women during the second half of the thirteenth century. Into this manuscript, which no longer survives, were entered the internal decisions of the Chapter in these years. The *Liber ordinarius* thus served to record the collective memory of the Chapter of Nivelles and of the decisions and debates that marked its conflict with the abbess. In a certain sense, then, the *Liber* represents the beginning of the Chapter's independent administration of its own affairs. By documenting its own self-governance, the Chapter took an important step in the direction of taking over responsibility for the complex fabric of Nivelles's ritual and, by extension, political life and, in so doing, challenging the abbess's sovereignty. With the exception of two documents and the record of the opening of Gertrude's grave in 1292, the added documents contained in the manuscript are otherwise unknown. Together with a critical apparatus and a translation, they receive their first edition as an appendix this volume of essays.

As the conflict between the Chapter and abbess regarding the abbey's position in the Empire once again came to the fore in the middle of the fourteenth century, it would appear that the Chapter commissioned a more or less exact copy of the *Liber ordinarius*, the manuscript that is now housed as MS Lat 422 at the Houghton Library of Harvard University. This manuscript contains extensive traces of use and in the fifteenth century received a new binding. As this binding demonstrates, no later than the fifteenth century and possibly earlier, the *Liber ordinarius* was secured to a lectern by a chain, i. e., in a place where it would have been accessible equally to the communities of canonnesses and canons, possibly within the church of St Gertrude. The editors know of no comparable example of a *Liber ordinarius* that was chained in comparable fashion; such books were nor-

mally housed in the sacristy. The manuscript's singularity in this respect underscores the extent to which the manuscript had come to serve a special, indeed, exceptional function. A remark made by Geldolphus van Ryckel, abbot of St Gertrude in Louvain and author of a life of the saint printed in 1637, indicates that the women's choir at Nivelles housed one or more lecterns with chained books of which one contained a record of the opening of Gertrude's tomb ("Haec ex libro qui catenatus extat ad stallum dominarum in choro").[1] From the seventeenth century there also survives a text, printed by Jules Fréson in 1890, which alludes to detailed instructions in "the ordinal of the Ladies" (*l'ordinaire des Damosselles*) regarding the abbess's obligation to provide the canonnesses with salmon cut according to precise specifications (no doubt the text in MS Lat 422, f. 95r).[2]

The manuscript's relatively modest decoration, in the form of flourished penwork initials, discussed briefly by Jeffrey F. Hamburger in his description of the manuscript, supports or at least in no way contradicts a dating of the manuscript to the middle of the fourteenth century. As detailed in the contributions to this volume by Albert Derolez and Rowan Dorin, the manuscript is almost certainly a copy; there is no other satisfactory way to explain the manuscript's particular combination of scribal and codicological irregularities. If accepted – and in this volume Walter Simons's essay represents a dissenting voice – the manuscript's dating not to the late thirteenth but rather to the middle of the fourteenth century has profound implications, not only for how it was made, but also for the historical circumstances of its making, which here are discussed in greatest depth in the essay by Eva Schlotheuber, together with the historical background and the development of the charitable institutions that also shaped the community‹s identity and therefore were also reflected and negotiated in its liturgy on an ongoing basis.

To unpack the ordinal's potential as an historical witness proves an exceptionally complicated task, one requiring collaboration among a large group of historians representing many different areas of specialization: hence the subtitle of this volume: "Liturgy as Interdisciplinary Intersection". The abbey's ordinal provides an unexpected opportunity to shed light on the social and political setting, the shaping and interaction of gender in space, architecture, furnishings, customs, music and, not least, the liturgy of one of the most important female monastic houses in all of medieval Europe. Whereas Andreas Odenthal's essay mines the ordinal for liturgical data that can be used to reconstruct the layout

[1] Van Rijkel, Historia (1634), 406.

[2] Fréson, Histoire (1890), 41: "Premes que la Dame sa vie durant paierat des ore en avant les herens crus; Item payerat le pièche de Saumon crue, de telle longheche, et largesche, entre le boudine et le teste, sans queue et sans teste, que contenu est en l'ordinaire des Damoss[s] sans point detrainer ne debestournerwetet, mais tout ouvert deseure et desoubs, si on ne trouve du contraire par bonnes gens qui a ce se cognoisteront." Our thanks to Walter Simons for bringing to our attention both this passage as well as that in van Ryckel, cited in the previous note.

and function of various spaces within and among the churches that constituted its immediate "family," Klaus-Gereon Beuckers explores the building against the broader historical foil represented by older and contemporary structures. By recounting the history of the relics of St Gertrude, Bonnie Effros traces her cult to its origins in the Merovingian period and through successive transformations, of which the events documented in the ordinal were among the most dramatic in its history. Alison Beach analyses the very interesting and detailed information given in the documents about the election and investiture of the abbess of Nivelles in late thirteenth century. Margot Fassler and Louis van Tongeren investigate different aspects of the community's traditions of ritual performance: Fassler, the cult of St Gertrude as expressed in a previously unexplored corpus of chant (both music and texts), van Tongeren with a focus on the celebration of Easter, an examination brought into sharp focus through systematic comparison with the Easter rites specified in other *ordinaria* from the region. Looking out from the abbey towards its urban and rural contexts, Charles Caspers inquires into the processions that radiated out from the abbey and which inscribed into local topography the networks within which it was embedded by ritual and legal obligations. Drawing in part on information provided by the *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles, Walter Simons's detailed discussion of the region's beguinages, which represent a radically different tradition of female religious practice, as well as the interaction of these much more modern institutions with the great and venerable abbey, succeeds in shedding new light on accepted narratives regarding the very origins of the beguine movement.

Over and above the rich vein of liturgical information it supplies, which fills a notable gap in our knowledge of Nivelles, the documents in both French and Latin that the ordinal includes along with its more conventional liturgical texts undoubtedly represent its most unusual feature. It was, of course, hardly uncommon for documents of all kinds to be inscribed in blank spaces within manuscripts, whether inside the binding, on fly leaves or on blank folios. Parchment was precious, and occasionally the documents thus included were actually pertinent to and augmented a book's contents. The documents incorporated into the *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles, however, of which this volume includes both an edition and a translation, are anything but casual additions. Codicological and paleographical evidence indicates that they are of a piece with the rest of the manuscript. They therefore represent a carefully considered supplement whose content can only be explained by the particular political circumstances of the manuscript's making. These circumstances are explored here in the essays by Eva Schlotheuber and Rowan Dorin. To their analysis, which situates the manuscript amidst the crisis of governance faced by the abbey in the mid-fourteenth century, Thomas F. Kelly supplies an analysis of the abbey's personnel as referenced in the *Liber ordinarius* and the terminology used to do so, to which Virginie Greene adds a consideration of the legal language deployed in the documents written in

the manuscript's particular version of the French vernacular, detecting in it literary as well as purely linguistic and legalistic elements. In turn, Hannah Weaver provides the necessary linguistic analysis of the French, disentangling the various strands that lend it its local accent.

The contributors, all of whom attended a workshop originally convened in the Spring of 2015 by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and generously made possibly by Harvard's Radcliffe Institute, have taken the brief represented by the book's subtitle as seriously as it was intended. To the extent that there is overlap among the essays, it is in ways that are mutually reinforcing. As the contributions make clear, the history of the liturgy, far from being an obscure adjunct to other areas of historical inquiry, is central to an understanding of medieval history in many of its facets. In the case of the *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles, those facets include topics as varied as the ordering of the liturgy in all its layers, the processions that extended beyond the family of churches that connected the abbey to the surrounding urban landscape, and relations between the laity and the abbey in the High Middle Ages as well as between the canonesses, an ancient form of female community, with the more modern form represented by the beguines. Ecclesiastical and liturgical history are closely intertwined. To these topics are added other areas of focus, all interrelated: the architecture of the church, which was frequently rebuilt and remodeled throughout its history and which was so grievously damaged during World War II; the layout and function of liturgical furnishings, not to mention the terminology employed to describe them; the complex spatial ordering of a church shared by female and male communities as well as, on occasion, the laity; the music that would have resounded in these spaces, articulating and lending resonance to the community's devotions; and the community's cult of the saints, which in turn was rooted in its ancient history and political affiliations.

And then there is the physical fact of the manuscript itself: in its original binding, but somewhat battered and unassuming in appearance, certainly not a lavish liturgical manuscript of the kind that undoubtedly adorned the abbey's altars. These books – the abbey's graduals and antiphonaries, missals and breviaries, not to mention a host of other service books – have largely been lost over the course of the centuries. Their disappearance and destruction, however, lends the surviving of the *Liber ordinarius* that much more significance. Its content permits, if not a complete, then at least an extensive reconstruction of portions of the abbey's ritual, ceremonial and musical life. Written in an idiosyncratic script, the manuscript offers little for the eye beyond the regular alternation of simple red and blue lombard initials of a kind commonly found in Gothic manuscripts, of which a few are enlivened by elaborate fleuronnée decoration, to which must be added among the manuscript's most endearing features, its inclusion (in two versions) of a measure, painted prominently in red, for the salmon that the abbess is to distribute to the canonesses during Lent [Pl. 12,

p. 496, f. 95r]. Moreover, the manuscript's structure, a sequence of utterly regular gatherings, combined with the irregular organization of its contents, provides a genuine historical conundrum. Why, must one ask, is the content of a liturgical book clearly dated 1346 interrupted by not one but two sets of documents placed between the Temporale and the Sanctorale and, again, at the end of the Sanctorale. And why are these documents, which deal largely with the obligations of the both the abbess and the *custos*, as well as the conflict between Abbess Elizabeth de Bierbais (r. 1272–1293) and the chapter of Nivelles, which by the time the manuscript was made, lay quite far in the past, recorded in Old French? Why this particular selection of documents, too scanty to have formed part of a customary? Why the strange character of the script, for which no precise parallels are forthcoming, either in other surviving documents from Nivelles or in other manuscripts of the period? Why are certain ceremonies included and others not? Each of these questions generates still more. These are just some of the puzzles for which the following pages propose possible answers.

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