

Living and Working in a Twelfth-Century Women's Monastic Community

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This chapter describes a single day in the life of a community of religious women in the late twelfth century. With so many variations in daily routine based on the liturgical season, seasonally dependent work, and local custom, I have chosen a particular day – September 30 – at a particular community – the monastery of Eibingen, just north of the Rhine near the town of Rüdeshheim. The connection between Eibingen and Hildegard's foundation at Rupertsberg, a monastery that lay about seven kilometers to the south, on the opposite side of the Rhine, is unclear. Hildegard may have founded Eibingen in 1165, colonized the new community with nuns from Rupertsberg, and served as *magistra* there until her death in 1179; or she may simply have served as spiritual advisor to a preexisting community of religious women there.¹

Since no ruins remain to suggest the monastery's physical layout and no textual sources survive to document the community's particular daily practices, I rely heavily here on the sixth-century *Rule of St. Benedict* (*RB*), which established the basic pattern of daily life at Eibingen. I also refer to customs associated with the monastery of Hirsau, an influential reforming community in the Black Forest, to suggest further aspects of everyday life at Eibingen.² Both of Hildegard's communities probably used or were influenced by Hirsau's customary, using it either as a source of spiritual inspiration or as a set of guidelines for the proper ordering of their houses.³ I also draw on material and textual sources from contemporary

¹ Matthias Schmandt, "Hildegard von Bingen und das Kloster Eibingen: Revision einer historischen Überlieferung," *Nassauische Annalen* 125 (2014): 29–52.

² *Willelmi abbatis Constitutiones Hirsaugienses*, ed. Candida Elvert and Pius Engelbert, *Corpus Consuetudinum Monasticarum* (CCM) 15.2, 378.

³ Isabelle Cochelin, "Customaries As Inspirational Sources," in Carolyn Marino Malone and Clark Maines, eds., *Consuetudines et Regulae: Sources for Monastic Life in the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period*, vol. 10, *Disciplina Monastica* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), 27–72.

women's communities in German-speaking lands, as well as from similar communities in other parts of Europe.

The last day of September falls within the long period of liturgical Ordinary Time that spans the time between Pentecost (fifty days after Easter Sunday) and the beginning of the new liturgical year marked by Advent (which precedes Christmastide). A weekday with no special ecclesiastical feast to celebrate, September 30 was an ordinary (ferial) day at Eibingen, structured, like every day, around the eight hours of the Divine Office, also known as the *Opus Dei* or the Liturgy of the Hours. Following ancient tradition and taking Psalm 118 [119]:62 ("I arose at midnight to give praise to thee") and Psalm 118 [119]:164 ("Seven times a day I have given praise to thee") as prescriptive, the *Rule of St. Benedict* (RB 16:1–5) establishes eight "offices" of sung communal prayer: Matins (before daybreak), followed by Lauds (at daybreak); the four shorter daytime hours at regular intervals between Lauds and Vespers: Prime, Terce, Sext, None; and, finally, Vespers (at the rise of the evening star) and Compline (as darkness falls). Although the twenty-four-hour clock was not used in medieval Europe, I will adopt it in the following for the sake of clarity. The chanting of the psalms comprises the core of the Divine Office, and the *Rule of St. Benedict* organizes the liturgy so that the nuns sing all 150 psalms in the course of each week, with some of them sung daily.⁴ While the *Rule* mandates the basic parameters for the celebration of the Divine Office, Benedict also left the nuns quite a bit of latitude in terms of their own local liturgical practice. Many liturgical details were prescribed in the Hirsau customary, but these could also be modified or augmented by a particular community.

This chapter, like the monastic day, is organized around this daily cycle of sung corporate prayer, recognizing the fundamental role that the liturgy of the hours played in the spirituality and flow of daily life in this twelfth-century women's community. "Let nothing," Benedict exhorts, "be preferred to the Work of God" (RB 43).

Matins

The day begins with a bell sounding in the darkness of the dormitory, signaling to the sleeping sisters that it is time to rise and proceed to their church to sing their first prayers of the day. It is around 3 a.m., and the first

⁴ For an introduction to the history and structure of the Divine Office associated with monastic communities that followed the *Rule of St. Benedict*, see John Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy from the Tenth to the Eighteenth Century: A Historical Introduction and Guide for Students and Musicians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 78–86.

light of dawn is still a good two hours away on this late September morning. The beds from which the women rise, while not much more than simple straw- or hay-filled pallets, were at least not shared, as they would likely have been in the noble homes from which the majority had come.

It is unclear precisely how the women would have moved from dormitory to oratory to sing the day's first liturgical office. Responding to contemporary norms and expectations that dictated that all interaction between religious women and men should be carefully limited and controlled, many religious communities devised elaborate systems for enclosing nuns. At the monastery of Lippoldsberg in Lower Saxony, for example, the nuns' oratory was situated on a raised western gallery, accessed only through a second-floor passage and door. In other communities, night stairs led down from the dormitory into the women's oratory on the ground floor, a space that was partitioned by a long dividing wall running east to west or by a screen that enclosed the women in their choir, between the chancel (the space around the altar) to the east and the nave of the church to the west. Whether confined to a raised gallery or to a carefully bounded space below, the women would have been able to see the main altar and hear the celebration of Mass there on the days when a priest could be present to officiate.

The focus in these predawn hours, however, is on neither priest nor altar but on the nun-cantor (*cantrix*), the individual charged with overseeing the execution of the Divine Office. With the community gathered in silence, at her signal, the very first words of this (and every) monastic day ring out from one side of the oratory: *Domine labia mea aperies* (Oh Lord, open thou my lips); and from the opposite side of the oratory comes the response: *et os meum adnuntiabit laudem tuam* (and my mouth shall show forth thy praise). Matins was the longest of the eight hours of the Divine Office. On this summer (falling between Easter and November 1) ferial day, the nuns sing two nocturns – the first comprising six psalms with antiphons, a versicle and response, and a short lesson from scripture with a respond; and the second comprising six psalms with antiphons, a short reading from the church fathers, and a versicle and response. In her own commentary on the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Hildegard notes that committing the necessary passages from scripture to memory makes it possible for the nuns to recite the lessons even in the darkness of the hour or with no book to read.⁵ The office concludes with the nuns chanting the *Kyrie eleison*, the *Pater noster* (the Lord's Prayer), the *Preces* (a series of verses from the psalms

⁵ Hildegard of Bingen, *Explanation of the Rule of Benedict*, trans. Hugh Feiss (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1990), 24–25.

sung as versicles and responses between the *cantrix* and the choir), a collect (a prayer), and the closing salutation or blessing *Benedicamus domino* (Let us bless the Lord).⁶

The *cantrix* was also responsible for overseeing the use and storage of the numerous books required for the proper execution of the Divine Office: a Psalter (a book of psalms), a lectionary (containing the necessary readings from scripture), various books containing patristic and hagiographical readings, a collectar (containing the collects, or prayers, for the office), as well as an antiphoner and troper (with the required musical texts in a format large enough to be seen by a choir).

Lauds

Immediately after Matins, the women have time to leave the oratory to use the toilet, a break to facilitate what the *Rule of St. Benedict* discreetly refers to as “seeing to the needs of nature” (*RB* 8). We can imagine the nuns’ latrine (*necessarium*) at Eibingen standing somewhere close to the dormitory, perhaps connected to it by a short passage extending off the western range. A short walk back to the area of the dormitory, then, leads the nuns to their toilet, which likely comprised a few cubicles, perhaps separated by curtains. In wealthier communities, human waste would drop down into a channel that was fitted with a sluiceway that could be opened periodically to flush it with a rush of water diverted from a stream or spring, from wastewater piped in from kitchens and workshops, or from the rainwater collected from the roofs from the various monastic buildings. Although archaeological evidence for upper latrine structures, seats and cubicles made of wood, are scant for both women’s and men’s communities, surviving evidence for toilets in women’s monasteries suggests that they were generally not as advanced as those in (often wealthier) male communities.⁷

At about 5 a.m., as dawn begins to break, the nuns return to the oratory to sing the office of Lauds. Here, again, their focus is on the *cantrix* as they chant the invitatory lines of the office, a verse from Psalm 69, sung as a versicle (a short verse) and response:

⁶ Psalm 150:17; on the specifics of monastic Matins following the pattern established in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, see Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy*, 90–93.

⁷ Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 125–126; on the management of water and wastewater in medieval monasteries more generally, see J. Patrick Greene, *Medieval Monasteries*, Archaeology of Medieval Britain (Leicester and New York: Leicester University Press and St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 109–132.

Deus in adiutorium meum intende . . .
Domine ad adjuvandum me festina.

O God, make speed to save me . . .
O Lord, make haste to help me.⁸

Following the versicle are psalms (some with antiphons), a canticle (a hymn or chant based on a biblical text), a short reading from scripture, a short respond, a hymn, a second versicle and the *Benedictus* canticle with antiphon, again the *Kyrie*, *Pater noster* and *preces*, a prayer, and the *Benedicamus domino*. On some weekdays, when a priest can be present to officiate, Mass follows Lauds. Because the women are not permitted to enter the chancel, the area around the altar, the consecrated host is passed into their enclosure through a specially designed turning window.⁹

The nuns next make their way from their oratory to their chapter house in the eastern range along the cloister walk, the covered arcade that encloses the monastery's central green space (cloister garth).¹⁰ They enter and take their respective seats along the stone benches that circle this rectangular room. One of the nuns stands and reads aloud a chapter of the *Rule of St. Benedict* (a practice from which the room takes its name) from the manuscript on the stand at the head of the room. This chapter house book also contains two calendars: a martyrology (which contains the names and brief biographies of prominent and locally important saints on the day of their death) and the necrology (a calendrical list of the names of deceased members of the community, including its patrons, on the day of their death). The day's reading from the martyrology for September 30 recounts the torturing and beheading of Saints Victor and Ursus, surviving members of the legendary fifth-century Theban Legion who had fled to Solothurn (modern Switzerland), and commemorates the death of Saint Jerome (d. 420) in Jerusalem. The names of the more ordinary dead listed in the necrology are next spoken aloud. This communal naming of the dead, a form of liturgical remembering, makes present those sisters, family members, and patrons who had died on that day, allowing them to live on among the living.¹¹ Evoking the names of the dead also emphasizes their dependence on the prayers of the living for their purification in Purgatory – prayers that are vital to their

⁸ On the office of Lauds, see Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy*, 97–98.

⁹ Gisela Muschiol, "Gender and Monastic Liturgy in the Latin West (High and Late Middle Ages)," in Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin, eds., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2:803–815.

¹⁰ Paul Meyvaert, "The Medieval Monastic Clastrum," *Gesta* 12, no. 1/2 (1973): 53–59.

¹¹ Patrick J. Geary, *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 87.

eventual salvation. The chapter meeting continues with a short sermon that offers an interpretation of a passage of scripture. The nuns of the double monastery of Admont (in modern Austria) had a small barred window in their chapter house through which their spiritual advisor, a monk from the men's community, delivered this sermon on ferial days. On feast days, when the monks were busy with their own observances, one of the nuns preached.¹² Hildegard may well have developed her own skills as a preacher, which she exercised beyond the monastery walls, in this context. The meeting concludes with a discussion of pressing matters of business relating to the life and functioning of the community, including the distribution of the day's work assignments. Some of the nuns head off into the various workspaces (kitchen, cloister, workshops, etc.) within their monastic precinct during the short interval before Prime, while others step forward to confess faults to the *magistra* and are assigned penalties in accordance with the severity of their sins.

Prime

At approximately 6 a.m., the nuns gather again in their oratory to sing Prime, the first of the day's four short minor offices. Because September 30 is a ferial day in Ordinary Time, all of the minor offices follow the same pattern; following the invitatory (the same one that opened Lauds), the nuns sing a hymn, chant three psalms, read a passage from scripture and from patristic or hagiographic works, and share concluding prayers (*Kyrie*, *Pater noster*, etc.), always ending with the *Benedicamus domino*.¹³

With Prime over by around 6:15 a.m., the women turn to the day's first period of manual work, just under four hours long and interrupted briefly by the singing of the minor hour of Terce at 9 a.m. Manual labor is central to the spirituality expressed in the *Rule of St. Benedict* and work indeed fills a significant portion of the day, with both economic and spiritual functions. The *Rule* specifies that the nuns work until the fourth hour of the day (at that time of year, around 10 a.m.). At Eibingen, the nuns likely engaged in a number of activities in support of the material, spiritual, and intellectual life of their community. The nature and extent of their manual work depended on the season and the needs of the community, as well as on the availability of the various lay servants who served the monastery, living just

¹² Alison I. Beach, *Women As Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). See also Peter V. Loewen, Chapter 6, this volume.

¹³ On the office of Prime, see Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy*, 98–100.

outside the nuns' inner precinct. Customaries from the Carolingian period reflect the common use of lay servants and reveal that manual work in some communities was primarily symbolic, particularly as liturgical obligations expanded to fill more of the monastic day.¹⁴

Work may have presented the occasion for the nuns to leave the monastery and to interact with various servants, as well as lay sisters and brothers who also carried out some of the work of the monastery and who were a common feature of houses with connections to Hirsau. Some communities also supported one or more *inclusae*, religious women who lived a solitary life in the general orbit of the monastery. *Inclusae* would not have participated in the residential or liturgical life of the monastery, but as members of the monastic community, they would have required a certain amount of upkeep, including the provision of food (presumably sourced in the monastery kitchens).

Twelfth-century religious women were also known for their expert needlework, and periods of work at Eibingen would almost certainly have included cloth work including embroidery, sewing, and perhaps also spinning and weaving. The beautifully embroidered altar cloth produced with Byzantine silk and costly dyes at Rupertsberg in the thirteenth century is a well-known example of the textile work associated with Hildegard's monastic circle, a tradition that surely had roots in the twelfth century. The women of the Swabian monastery of Zwiefalten (f. 1089) were avid embroiderers and donors of liturgical textiles in the twelfth century, and they are known to have sent their work as gifts to other monastic communities in their circle; the Chronicle of Petershausen notes the gift of a chasuble, alb, and stole from Zwiefalten in the aftermath of the devastating fire in 1159.¹⁵ Examples of the needlework of Zwiefalten's nuns are preserved today among the monastery's surviving manuscripts in the form of a decorative and protective silk cover for one of their liturgical books, as well as in the skillful and decorative repairs they made to the parchment in a number of their surviving manuscripts. Embroidery and other textile work were ideally suited to enclosed religious women, as they could do this sort of work in a variety of locations without leaving the monastic enclosure, and the objects that they produced were of practical,

¹⁴ Isabelle Cochelin, "Monastic Daily Life (c. 750–1100): A Tight Community Shielded by an Outer Court," in Beach and Cochlin, *Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, 1:542–560.

¹⁵ See Alison I. Beach, Shannon M. T. Li, and Samuel Sutherland, *Monastic Experience in Twelfth-Century Germany: The Chronicle of Petershausen in Translation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), A.45, 174.

economic, and spiritual value to the community. Textile work was also closely associated with noble women of the sort enclosed at Rupertsberg and (perhaps to a lesser extent) Eibingen.¹⁶ Religious women were also often charged with the cleaning and maintenance of liturgical textiles. When an altar cloth or priest's vestment needed cleaning, however, a male custodian would have had to pass these out to the nuns from the screened-off chancel, a space from which women were excluded for reasons of ritual purity.¹⁷

Another important type of manual labor practiced by nuns in many medieval religious communities was the copying and painting of books. At wealthier communities in which book production was extensive, there might be a separate workspace designated as a scriptorium, but book copying, decorating, and binding could also be undertaken in one of the ranges of the cloister walk, which had the advantage of good ventilation, protection from rain, and ample natural lighting.

While some women's communities produced simple, utilitarian manuscripts for devotional reading, nuns in wealthier houses are known to have produced richly illuminated liturgical books and biblical texts. The scribal and artistic talents of some religious women attracted the attention of abbots, priests, and bishops often quite far afield who might send materials and instructions for the production of particular books. Between 1140 and 1168, for example, the monk Sindold of Reinhardsbrunn commissioned a matutinal (a book for the celebration of the night office) from the nuns of Lippoldsberg, providing them with the parchment, pigment, and leather that they would need to produce the volume.¹⁸ The names of some of the female scribes and artists who produced these books in the High Middle Ages are occasionally preserved in booklists, necrologies, and in the prefaces to texts that they helped to take down in dictation and copy. In some rare cases, a nun-scribe identifies herself in a colophon (a copyist's identifying mark) or a female artist paints and labels herself in a self-portrait. The nuns of Rupertsberg produced at least one expertly copied and lavishly

¹⁶ Stefanie Seeberg, "Women As Makers of Church Decoration: Illustrated Textiles at the Monasteries of Altenberg/Lahn, Rupertsberg, and Heiningen (13th – 14th c.)," in Therese Martin, ed., *Reassessing the Roles of Women As "Makers" of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 2 vols. (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 1:375–84.

¹⁷ Muschiol, "Gender and Monastic Liturgy," 806.

¹⁸ See Sindold's Latin letter (including specific instructions for page layout), to the nuns in *Collectio Reinheresbrunnensis*, ed. Friedel Peeck, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica Epistolae Selectae* 5:34–35, and the letter of an anonymous nun to Sindold giving her explanation for the slight delay in the completion of the volume, 80–81.

illustrated manuscript of Hildegard's visions in her (now lost) visionary text *Scivias* (*Know the Ways*).¹⁹

While Eibingen's nuns are not likely to have engaged in heavy agricultural labor outside their enclosure, many of them, drawn from local families, would have grown up around the many vineyards that lined the hills along the Rhine, some of which certainly would have belonged to the monastery. Wine was vital to monastic life as well as to the monastic economy. According to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, each nun was to receive approximately a half-liter of wine to drink per day, but wine was also required for liturgical and medical use. Hildegard herself seems to have known quite a bit about wine.²⁰ She wrote about the difference between "frentsch" and "heunisch" grape varieties and sang the praises of wine as an aid to health, calling it the "blood of the earth" and incorporating it into many of her medical recipes.²¹ The participation of Eibingen's twelfth-century nuns is not documented, but it stands to good reason that they would have taken a strong interest in the growing and harvesting of the grapes on their lands and in vinification, which would have included the selection of fruit, fermentation, and storage.²² The nuns of modern Eibingen, which was refounded in 1904, produce wine under the supervision of a master nun-winemaker, and the nuns do some of the physical labor in the monastery's vineyards.

Terce

Those in a position to set their work aside return to the oratory at 9 a.m. to sing the minor office of Terce; but a nun in the middle of a delicate book illustration, for example, would be permitted to skip Terce and continue working until the fourth hour of the day, when the *Rule of St. Benedict* prescribes the start of a period of devotional reading that ends with the singing of the minor office of Sext.

While the *Rule* does not dictate a fixed location for private devotional reading, a nun might return to her bed in the dormitory to read or sit in the oratory or the cloister. The customary of Hirsau gives specific instructions for proper posture while reading; readers were to keep their arms to themselves and their feet on the ground. One or two nuns were assigned

¹⁹ See Campbell, Chapter 12, this volume for further detail.

²⁰ Victoria Sweet, "Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 73, no. 3 (1999): 381–403.

²¹ Tom Scott, "Medieval Viticulture in the German-Speaking Lands," *German History* 20, no. 1 (2002): 100. Sweet, "Hildegard of Bingen and the Greening of Medieval Medicine."

²² Scott, "Medieval Viticulture in the German-Speaking Lands."

the job of circulating among their reading sisters to be sure that nobody was sleeping. These watchful *girones*, also mandated by the *Rule of St. Benedict*, would also have had an aural cue to the diligence of individual readers, as monastic reading was private but not silent. The nuns were expected to pronounce each word quietly in order to build greater understanding of the meaning of the text, and there would have been a certain level of noise when more than a few readers were gathered together.²³

The type of meditative reading of a biblical text practiced in a monastic setting was sometimes undertaken in conjunction with the reading of a patristic commentary. In this *lectio divina* (sacred reading), the reader reads each verse carefully, sometimes over and over again, considering various points of interpretation with the help of the commentary – a form of prayer that medieval authors compared with a cow ruminating, chewing its cud.²⁴

The evidence for the book collections at Admont, Lippoldsberg, and Zwiefalten suggests that religious women in German-speaking lands could have access to extensive book collections well-suited to the practice of *lectio divina*. Surviving book lists from women's houses in German-speaking lands document a number of extraordinary twelfth-century libraries particularly geared toward an extensive and in-depth study of the Bible.²⁵ The nuns of these three relatively well-documented communities had access to an impressive array of works by patristic standbys like Jerome and Gregory the Great and by more contemporary theologians and exegetes such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh of St. Victor, Gerhoch of Reichersberg, and Rupert of Deutz.²⁶ The nuns of Admont wrote letters to regional experts in biblical exegesis, including Gerhoch, suggesting that they were engaged readers of many of these books and perhaps composed exegetical works of their own, including some of the sermons that they preached in their chapter house.

Sext

With the morning periods of work and devotional reading over, the nuns again gather in their oratory to sing the minor office of Sext and then head

²³ Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading*, Cistercian Studies Series, no. 238 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2011), xiv and 93–94.

²⁴ See *ibid.*, 98. ²⁵ Beach, *Women As Scribes*.

²⁶ On Lippoldsberg, see Julie Hotchin, "Women's Reading and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Germany: The Library of the Nuns of Lippoldsberg," in Alison I. Beach, ed., *Manuscripts and Monastic Culture: Reform and Renewal in Twelfth-Century Germany* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 139–189. On Zwiefalten, see Constant Mews, "Monastic Educational Culture Revisited: The Witness of Zwiefalten and the Hirsau Reform," in George Ferzoco and Carolyn Muessig, eds., *Medieval Monastic Education* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 2000), 182–197.

immediately along the cloister walk toward the refectory. Each woman stops at the *lavabo* (the small stone trough supplied with running water) just outside it to wash her hands before entering and taking her seat for the day's single meal. In many contemporary monasteries, lead pipes distributed water to the various parts of the monastic precinct including the *lavabo*, kitchens, and workshops. Another pipe carries the water from the *lavabo* into a larger drain, where it joins wastewater from other parts of the monastery and is later used to flush the channel under the latrines, carrying the human waste out into the main precinct drain.²⁷

Although the *Rule of St. Benedict* stipulates that the nuns should be offered two cooked dishes at their meal, the menu was subject to the discretion of the abbess and to availability based on economics and the season. The *Rule* also provides for a generous pound of bread and about a half-liter of wine per woman per day. If we assume that the hand signals designated in the Hirsau customary for communication during periods when speaking was not permitted reflect the most commonly eaten foods, then we can imagine a menu that often included cheese, bread, milk, eggs, cake, bread fried in a pan, meat (although the *Rule* concedes this only to the ill or elderly), various oils, honey, and *pulmentum*, a simple form of soup or porridge based on vegetables, with the possible addition of legumes, grain, eggs, fish, meat, or cheese – the type of cooked dish (*pulmentaria cocta*) prescribed by Benedict.²⁸ In her commentary on the *Rule*, Hildegard notes that, when there was sufficient fish, eggs, or cheese for a third dish, this should be considered a special treat.²⁹

Bioarcheologists have begun to offer a new window on the monastic diet that is an important complement to this sort of textual evidence for monastic foodways.³⁰ Techniques such as stable isotope analysis of bone collagen (its main structural protein), the morphological and chemical analysis of teeth and bones, and microanalysis of calcified dental plaque (calculus) offer new ways to reconstruct the monastic diet and to detect nutritional stress. Stable isotope analysis of human remains excavated from the cemetery at the Cistercian Dunes Abbey in Koksijde (on the coast of modern-day Belgium), for example, suggests a diet heavily reliant on

²⁷ Greene, *Medieval Monasteries*, 115.

²⁸ Massimo Montanari, *Medieval Tastes: Food, Cooking, and the Table* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 33.

²⁹ Hildegard of Bingen, *Explanation of the Rule of Benedict*, 32.

³⁰ Clark Spencer Larsen, "Bioarchaeology: The Lives and Lifestyles of Past People," *Journal of Archaeological Research* 10, no. 2 (2002): 119–166.

marine food, a finding supported by the large quantity of fish bone and mollusk shell found within medieval layers of the monastery's medieval garbage.³¹ Excavated refuse piles and cooking areas sometimes yield further archaeobotanical evidence for diet, suggesting the consumption of wheat, oat, barley, rye, peas, and beans. Although not frequently excavated and analyzed, deposits of waste from the same sort of latrines that the nuns of Eibingen visited in the interval between Matins and Lauds have the potential to provide further evidence for monastic diet and health. Archaeological finds from toilets and drains include, among other things, seeds and pits, which suggest the consumption of fruit, and whipworm and roundworm eggs, signaling the presence of intestinal parasites resulting from the contamination of food and water supply and populations at risk for malnutrition.³²

While the nuns eat this single meal of the day, one sister reads aloud to the community, with edifying selections drawn from scripture, patristic writings, or saints' lives. This reading is intended not only to edify but to prevent idle chat as the women sit together to eat.³³ Only the voice of the daily reader was to break the silence in the refectory. At the conclusion of the meal, some of the nuns return to the dormitory to rest on their beds until None. Those who opt to return to their private devotional reading are enjoined to take care not to disturb the rest.

None

After singing None, the last of the day's four minor offices, around 3 p.m., the women return to their assigned work in the cloister walk, gardens, and workshops that lie beyond the north range of the monastery.

Vespers

With the setting of the sun, at about 6 p.m., the nuns gather in their oratory for Vespers. Like Prime, Terce, Sext, and None, Vespers opens with the invitatory:

³¹ Caroline Polet and M. Anne Katzenberg, "Reconstruction of the Diet in a Mediaeval Monastic Community from the Coast of Belgium," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 30 (2003): 527–528.

³² Evilena Anastasiou and Piers D. Mitchell, "Human Intestinal Parasites from a Latrine in the 12th Century Frankish Castle of Saranda Kolones in Cyprus," *International Journal of Paleopathology* 3, no. 3 (2013): 218–223.

³³ Teresa Webber, "Reading in the Refectory: Monastic Practice in England, c. 1000–c.1300," London University Annual John Coffin Memorial Palaeography Lecture (February 18, 2010). Unpublished paper.

Make haste, O God, to deliver me . . .
make haste, O Lord, to help me.

Longer and more complex than the preceding minor offices, Vespers has a structure similar to that of Lauds; the nuns chant four psalms with antiphons, followed by a reading from scripture, a hymn, a versicle and response, the *Magnificat* (canticle) with an antiphon, a chanted *Kyrie* and *Pater noster* (Our Father or Lord's Prayer), collect, and the blessing.³⁴

After Vespers, the nuns gather in the north cloister walk, where a chest (*armarium*) containing some of the monastery's books is kept. With the lamps lighted, the women sit together for a period of private devotional reading known as Collations.³⁵ The *Rule of St. Benedict* (RB 42) prescribes this period of silent reading after Vespers, specifically mentioning the reading of the Conferences (*Collationes*) of John Cassian, but the women could also choose from a range of patristic and early monastic texts.³⁶

Compline

Shortly after Vespers, the nuns return to their oratory one last time for the day and sing the short office of Compline, opening with the versicle and response:

Converte nos deus salutaris noster . . .
et averte iram tuam a nobis

Convert us, O God our savior . . .
and turn your anger from us.³⁷

The end of Compline marks the beginning of a long period of silence, prescribed in the *Rule of St. Benedict* (RB 42), to be broken only the next day by the opening of Matins, when the daily cycle of the Divine Office begins anew.

The discipline of silence was a central feature of traditional monasticism and its cultivation was thought to lead to the nun's increased ability to hear the voice of God. Restraint in speech reduced the distraction that resulted from idle talk and fostered the monastic virtues of humility and obedience. Even during the great period of silence that began after Compline,

³⁴ On the monastic office of Vespers, see Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy*, 101.

³⁵ Eva Schlotheuber and John T. McQuillen, "Books and Libraries within Monasteries," in Alison I. Beach and Isabelle Cochelin, eds., *The Cambridge History of Medieval Monasticism in the Latin West*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 975–997.

³⁶ Webber, "Reading in the Refectory," 9.

³⁷ On the monastic office of Compline, see Harper, *The Forms and Orders of Western Liturgy*, 102–103.

however, the nuns could communicate. The Hirsau customary details an elaborate system of hand gestures that could be used not only in the refectory and during periods of work but also during the silent hours of the night.³⁸ Like all monastic rules and regulations, however, the rule of silence could be bent and interpreted. For example, Gertrude, the twelfth-century nun who wrote the *Life of an anonymous magistra* of the monastery of Admont, praised her for never speaking in the vernacular (German) during the night silence. Instead, she responded to the requests of the young girls in her charge for short poems by dictating them only in Latin.³⁹

As the nuns return to their individual beds (around 7:30 p.m. at the end of September), their day comes to an end. One or two stay awake, of course, keeping the time in order to rouse the community for Matins and the start of the new day.

Further Reading

Latin Editions and English Translations

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³⁸ Scott G. Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism: The Cluniac Tradition, c.900–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³⁹ Jonathan Reed Lyon, ed., *Noble Society: Five Lives from Twelfth-Century Germany*, Manchester Medieval Sources (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

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