dúc duna requié, Et lux

Sális híe diligenter sans qua

dies dui hait sur uá inoste

veniet Cu cui divaít par et securitas

tuit repetitans eis supuaniet inter

itus et hait dolor in uero habé

tis et non essuget. Dus auté híe

nó esse u ténebris ut vos dús u

la tanchí sur cóprehendat. Quíes

cui uós híus luas ehs et híus dús.

H eam morum: qui in dúo imóqu

Ieram dúc de morte eterno-

in die illa tremëda Quádo cénimone

di sui et terra

D iés üa die súe die s alamí

trans et usere die s magnum et a
The Office of the Dead is a cycle of prayers and orations recited during funeral services and during regular commemoration of deceased members of a congregation. The material qualities of the fifteenth-century Office of the Dead on display at the University of Guelph exhibition, *Illuminating Life: Manuscript Pages of the Middle Ages*, attests to centuries of active use within the Church of St. Kunibert in Cologne, for which it was commissioned.¹ A good death and a well-attended funeral demonstrated that a person was cared for by their family and friends, which made dying well of utmost importance for medieval Christians. The ideal medieval funeral was an elaborate affair that consisted of several stages; these were considered important steps to ensure that a person’s soul after their death would continue to be of concern for those who cared for them. Completed in 1487, the Office of the Dead (Use of St. Kunibert) and the appended

necrologium (begun in 1727) helped to maintain a sense of security and continuity in the face of death among the members of the medieval community that it served.

This Office of the Dead was commissioned for use within a specific community in Cologne, Germany, and its appended necrologium demonstrates concern for the wellbeing of community members for centuries after their deaths. While the Church of St. Kunibert was consecrated in 1247, its foundations date centuries earlier. According to a hagiographic account, St. Kunibert (ca. 595–663) became the first archdeacon of the church at Treves, was elected to the bishopric of Cologne, and later became the archbishop of the city. Kunibert is said to have founded the church where he was later buried, which he dedicated to St. Clement. However, by the ninth century, St. Kunibert himself had become associated with the church, which eventually came to bear his name. Following its consecration in 1998 by Pope John Paul II, the church became known as the Basilica of St. Kunibert, as it remains today.

As described in the book’s colophon, the Office of the Dead (Use of St. Kunibert) was donated to this collegiate church in 1487 by Johannes Ehrlich of Andernach, archbishop of Trier. The archbishop’s donation was a demonstration of piety, as well as a means of benefitting his soul and those on whose behalf the prayers were recited. It is likely that the book remained within the Church of St. Kunibert from the time of its creation until the late eighteenth century, as there are inscriptions from canons who maintained the book, and the eighteenth-century necrologium appended to the end of the book records dates of death until 1767. The necrologium was produced in ink on paper, and it lists the dates of death for those associated with the church of St. Kunibert and select members of the local community. This necrologium functioned as a perpetual calendar, marking when prayers should be recited for the dead. It lists the year of death, the date—in this case, ranging from as early as 1362 to 1767—and the person who is to be remembered, sometimes also listing their burial location. This practice of noting the death dates and burial locations of the deceased marks an ongoing desire to commemorate the members of the St. Kunibert community. After the eighteenth century, this Office of the Dead seems to have entered into private collections.

September page of the necrologium, eighteenth century addition.
The material qualities of the Office of the Dead (Use of St. Kunibert) further suggest its long and active use within the church. The book’s current binding is a later addition: a lovely sixteenth-century tooled leather cover over wooden boards with metal bosses at the corners. The desire to rebind the book indicates that the church wanted to strengthen the manuscript’s enclosure to ensure its long use. Medieval books were often fastened shut to keep parchment leaves flat, as they could wrinkle and change shape with humidity. Though the strap is no longer attached to this codex, a metal clasp shows where it would have been closed at the middle of the foredge. A small piece of parchment fastened with metal fittings on the cover indicates the book’s contents and describes it as for use in the choir by the dean. The spine is bound in a paler leather than that of the boards; though soiled heavily, the dark leather cover depicts stamped figures in decorative panels, including the detail of a seated figure raising their finger in an outdoor setting with clouds overhead. The care taken in the binding and external decoration attest to the value the medieval Christian community placed on this volume.

Features within the codex confirm that it was intended for active use by the clergy. This Office of the Dead is inked on parchment in Latin, with later additions on paper. The parchment pages contain a number of features that would have been familiar to the medieval reader and were designed to make this book easy to work with. For example, the text is arranged in a single column with most pages nineteen lines in length. The lines are ruled in ink, not only to ensure an even line from the scribe, but also to provide a visual guide to the reader. The large size of the gothic bookhand used in this text further supports it was intended for use within the church, likely by priests officiating the service, while the soiling of the book’s pages (especially at the lower corners) attests to its extensive use over the ensuing years. The size of the script is large enough that people could have stood around the text as it was read and sung during the canonical hours. Sections are marked with decorated initials embellished with pen flourishes that run vertically down the page.
Though some are evident, the decorative elements in this manuscript are limited, as the clarity and content of the text was prioritized over ornamentation since it was intended for practical use within the church. For ease of reading, the scribe or another worker created a rubric consisting of alternating red and blue initial letters that are larger and stand out from the rest of the text. This aids the reader in noting when versicles and responsories should be sung. This text also includes music with four-line hufnagel notation that indicates the notes to be sung by the priest and choir during the service. Signs of the longstanding use of this text are abundant. In addition to the soiling already noted, corrections have been inserted in ink. Moreover, pages have been repaired charmingly by sewing in several places, including a hand-stitched insert that replaces a lost section of parchment. Where the text has been worn out, it has been rewritten for clarity. Though the Office of the Dead (Use of St. Kunibert) had been in active use for centuries, it was lovingly cared for and repaired when needed. The appended necrologium indicates specific community members for whom the Office would have been recited, though this volume would have been used in countless funerals over the centuries of its use.

Initially, the Office of the Dead was developed as a means of commemorating the deaths of monks and nuns in closely related monasteries before its use by and for the laity. In the Middle Ages, Christian liturgy was divided into two parts: the Mass (contained in the Missal) and the Divine Office, a cycle of daily devotions divided by canonical hours recited by monks (the compendium of these is the breviary). In the eighth century, the Office of the Dead was developed to enable Christians to pray for recently deceased members of closely related Frankish monasteries. The practice of reciting the Office was later adopted in England, Germany, and the rest of France in the ninth century and continued to spread through its use by confraternities. By the tenth century, recitation of the Office of the Dead was a common feature in Benedictine monasteries, and in the eleventh century, the abbey at Cluny began commemorating their dead on 2 November as All Saints’ Day; this was a practice that would subsequently spread across western Europe. After the twelfth century, the Office of the Dead began to appear regularly in books of hours and eventually, commemoration of the dead became an expected part of clerical training. The Office of the Dead became one of the few texts that was identical in both the breviary used by the clergy and the book of hours used by the laity. This interest in honouring the beloved dead among the laity rose in conjunction with the development of the idea of Purgatory and concern for the souls that were not yet in Heaven.

Mortuary rolls, bederolls, obits, and other written texts transmitted notifications of death between monasteries in order that prayers could be said on behalf of the deceased members of the community. For example, the 1458 mortuary roll of Elizabeth Sconinex, the Abbess of Forêt, is forty-two feet long and includes the names of the monastic houses to which it was taken, which totalled three hundred and eighty-three by 1459. Personalized masses served as a kind of personal
Hodie illustratus erat quod sanctitate di
ligerne mereamur. P. Colla

Haur nobis quod duxis et gratia
spus taque corda et corpus tuae
ter expungere et ab obris mortis ad ulisse.

Ut egisse spus tuis Colla
quia et cor tuum dux ilux per
ut hic casto corpore serviam? et mund
orde placarum? P. Collerat.

Deus qui corda te dedi spus il
lustra ac duxit. De nobin
cord spus recta latere et de eis laup
Dorsolatione gaudet. P. Colla

Deus qui nob sub sanctorum
bibi paschis tue meruisti tranquill
tribuit eos in nos corpus et laugus
tu sanctum noster vicerin ut redha
osis tue fruam in nobisigit securi? ex
grandis quod duxit suprema Colla.
advocacy on behalf of the deceased. Last wills and testaments often made explicit the deceased’s wishes for periodic or perpetual prayer on their behalf, and donations to the church would ensure this. Indeed, monastic communities drew up contracts of commemoration, sometimes performing vigils at the anniversary of the person’s death, or on the first of every month, as well as on a special day reserved for the commemoration of all souls.

For lay people, wills made explicit the desire for prayers to be said on the deceased’s behalf for a period of time, and one obligation of confraternities was regular prayer for the dead. Membership in a confraternity provided assurance regarding one’s afterlife, as confraternities often provided the coffin or bier that would be used to transport the deceased from the home to the cemetery, as well as ensure additional mourners at the deceased’s funeral service. Prayers from the Office of the Dead would have been recited on the third, seventh, and thirtieth day following death to commemorate the deceased and pray for their soul. Occasional and commemorative masses were relatively inexpensive to purchase, though they could become more elaborate with the purchase of perpetual masses. The summary of these contracts may be represented in the necrologium, and demonstrates a desire to lessen the time a deceased person would spend in Purgatory.

While Purgatory is not mentioned by name in the Christian Bible, the concept of the Bosom
of Abraham had given rise to the idea of a resting place where those souls not immediately destined for Heaven or Hell might remain while awaiting Last Judgement and resurrection. The Bosom of Abraham is mentioned in the story of Lazarus, a poor man, and an unnamed rich man in the New Testament (Luke 16:19-26). Lazarus is described as resting in Abraham’s bosom, while the rich man was tormented below. In twelfth- and thirteenth-century artistic representations, the Bosom is often depicted as a literal place, with Abraham in heavenly clouds and souls coming to rest in his bosom.\(^1\) Between the second and fourth centuries, the Church Fathers concluded that some sinners’ souls might be saved following a trial of some sort. The development of this idea over the intervening centuries eventually produced the idea of Purgatory: a place where sins could be purged by fire. This idea became formally accepted doctrine at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, and this established the responsibility of the living to pray on behalf of those whose souls resided in Purgatory.\(^2\)

While Heaven and Hell were held to be permanent destinations, Purgatory was temporary, and most medieval Christians expected to reside there for a period of time. Only martyrs and saints were envisaged as immediately soaring to Heaven at their deaths, and only those who had committed mortal sins were presumed to go directly to Hell.\(^3\) The majority of medieval Christians anticipated a cleansing of sins in Purgatory prior to the Last Judgement, when they would then ascend to Heaven. Records of indulgences show that people expected to spend thousands of years in Purgatory; however, this time was not fixed, and a soul’s ascension to Heaven could be accelerated by the prayers and support of family and friends.\(^4\) As historian Paul Binski notes wryly, "self-improvement opportunities ceased with death," which left this responsibility to the living.\(^5\) Therefore, in order to lessen the time their loved ones would spend in the torment of purgatorial fires, people would pray regularly on their behalf. The Office of the Dead provided prayers that could be recited at three canonical hours: Vespers (4:30 pm), Matins (2:30 am), and Lauds (5:00 am).\(^6\) Clergy would recite the appropriate prayers from the Office of the Dead at these times, and the laity could either recite them from their books of hours at the same time, or whenever they wished to pray for loved ones who had passed on. Additional evidence of this call to help the souls in Purgatory is found facing the donor information in the St. Kunibert Office of the Dead. Here, a prayer attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) enjoins the reader to pray for the dead in order to minimize their torment, which was one of the primary purposes in reciting this Office. Indeed, one of the marks of medieval piety was concern for the welfare of deceased members of the community.\(^7\) Death, as historian Denis Renevy puts it, was understood as a transition “from the community of the living into the community of the dead.”\(^8\) By praying for these souls, one could lessen the time family and friends would spend in Purgatory, and thereby lessen their suffering. In this way, souls in Purgatory remained intimately connected to the living through prayer.

Time spent in Purgatory was far from the only concern of a dying person. Following a series of deadly plagues, medieval Christians became increasingly concerned with dying well, and the fifteenth century saw the development of a new genre of literature, the _ars moriendi_ ("the art of
dying”), which were instructions for how to have a good death. These texts are optimistic; as Sister Mary Catharine O’Connor notes, "There is little stress upon hell, only hope of heaven." Two forms of the *ars moriendi* survive, the *Tractatus artis bene moriendi* or *Speculum artis bene moriendi*, and the *Ars moriendi*. The former is longer and divided into six parts, while the latter is shorter and consists of woodcuts detailing the various stages of dying, including sickness, prayer, and the moment of death itself. The origins of the text can be traced to Jean Charlier de Gerson (1363-1429), a chancellor at the University of Paris, and follows questions for the dying attributed (perhaps incorrectly) to St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). These questions were asked of the dying person in order to confirm their commitment to Christianity, contrition, piousness, forgiveness, and related subjects to ensure their soul would be at rest when the time came. O’Connor suggests that "after Gerson had brought his *De arte moriendi* to the Council of Constance (1414-1418), the [*Tractatus artis bene moriendi*], inspired by it, was written in the Constance locality." From there it spread and was soon brought to Italy, France, Netherlands, England, Spain, and elsewhere, and it became a popular text in the later Middle Ages.

These texts advise both the dying and those who care for the dying on how to best ensure a peaceful transition from this world to the next. They cite psalms, advise against temptation, explain how to ward against despair, and warn of the Devil’s tricks in one’s last moments. In ideal circumstances, prayers would be given during one’s last hour before death. According to the *ars moriendi*, the sick and the dying should make peace with God prior to their departure, and if the person was too ill to speak, then those who attended the dying might do so on their behalf. Prior to death, medieval Christians expected to receive their last rites, including last confession, communion, and extreme unction. The person would then die peacefully at home, surrounded by family and friends and perhaps attended by clergy and a physician, with signs of divinity showing that the
deceased's soul had been received.33 In the woodcuts, these signs of divinity might be a heavenly light shone from above, or the ascension of the deceased person towards Heaven. Both women and men could attend to the sick and dying as well as the funeral service and demonstrate their grief and communal support. Following death, prayers would be recited from the Office of the Dead at Vespers. This would be the first stage of the ideal five-act funeral.

Between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries Christian funerals became more complex, though during the Black Death these rituals were abandoned out of necessity.34 However, following the fourth wave of the plague in 1375, there was a renewed increase in enthusiasm for the revival of more elaborate funerals; this is particularly reflected in the visual depictions of death that began to appear in literature, churches, books of hours, and other religious contexts during this period.35

In the twelfth century, care of the dead was incorporated into the Six Corporeal Works of Mercy.36 These Works or Acts of Mercy were derived from the New Testament (Matthew 25:31-46). The Six Corporeal Works are feeding the hungry, supplying drink to the thirsty, providing for strangers (often interpreted as aiding pilgrims), clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and attending to those in prison. Mortuus sepellitur (burying the dead) was added to these, becoming a seventh Work.37 Christian dead were normally buried in the parish of their birth, though this was not always the case. In some parishes, mortuary fees had to be paid to the parish of one's birth, even if one died and was buried elsewhere.38

The ideal medieval Christian funeral was an elaborate affair consisting of five parts. Following the good death described above, prayers from the Office of the Dead would be recited at home by family members and friends. The following day, a procession would take place during which the
body would be escorted by family and friends from the deceased’s home to the church, where
the funeral would take place.39 Along the way, alms might be distributed to the poor in exchange
for their attendance at the funeral, as stipulated in the deceased person’s will or as donated by
the deceased’s confraternity—associations of laypeople formed with services for the dead as their
primary concern—should the person have belonged to one. At the church, the priest would sing
the Requiem Mass from the Office of the Dead, either from a standalone volume—such as the one
created for use in St. Kunibert—or a breviary. Those in attendance might follow along with their
books of hours, if they had them.

A procession to the cemetery would follow, with prayers once again said or sung along
the way. A grave would have been prepared in advance for the deceased to be placed in after final
prayers were said at the site (usually by the confraternity). At the burial site, wooden coffins were
usually reserved for aristocrats, who occasionally had stone sarcophagi instead. Even in these cases,
coffins were reused out of necessity. Instead, it was more common for Christians to be buried in the
deuce, wrapped in a sack or shroud, and placed directly into the ground. This was a show of humility
and a demonstration of the transience of the human state.40

Regular commemoration of the dead was an act of piety for medieval Christians, and it
was an important means by which the living could continue to honour those they cared for. The
practice of reciting the Office of the Dead was a hopeful one, as the expectation was that it would
ultimately help the soul reach its final destination in Heaven with God. Through prayer, the living
sought to lessen the time the souls of their beloved dead spent in Purgatory. In this way, the living
could keep alive the memory of those they had lost and continue to pray for a better afterlife for
those they cared for.

---

Notes

1 Office of the Dead (Use of St. Kunibert), Cologne, Germany: 1487 and 1727 (with later additions), MS, Les
Enluminures TM 664. All references in this paper to the Office of the Dead (Use of St. Kunibert) refer to this text.
3 Baring-Gould, Lives of the Saints, 305.
4 There is a record of this codex being sold to a collector at a Christie’s auction in June 2012 (no. 5334). Les
Enluminures has had the manuscript since at least 2019 and continues to list it at the time of this writing in March
2020 (TM 644).
Caie and Denis Renevey (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 115.
6 John Plummer, Liturgical Manuscripts for the Mass and the Divine Office (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library,
1964), 32.
7 Michael S. Driscoll, "Death, Dying, and Burial: Liturgical Considerations from the Early Middle Ages," The Jurist
59 (1999): 229-231. Roman usage of the Ordo defunctorum is reflected, but there are also arguments for it being of Frankish origin. Though James W. McKinnon has traced its origins as early as the eighth century in "The Origins of the Western Office," in The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages: Methodology and Source Studies, Regional Developments, Hagiography, eds. Rebecca A. Baltzer and Margot E. Fassler, 63-72 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).


11 Binski, Medieval Death, 31.


13 Paxton, Christianizing Death, 136.


15 Aries, Hour of Our Death, 185.

16 Paxton, Christianizing Death, 136.


19 Ottosen, Responsories and Versicles, 45-47.

20 Le Goff, Birth of Purgatory, 133.


23 Matins and Lauds may be recited together.


29 O'Connor, Art of Dying Well, 50.

30 O'Connor, Art of Dying Well, 54.

33 Duclow, "Dying Well," 383.
34 Fiero, "Death Ritual," 272.
36 Binski, Medieval Death, 122.
38 Binski, Medieval Death, 55.
39 Aries, Hour of Our Death, 165.
40 Fiero, "Death Ritual," 284.