

Nocturns

Introduction

The divine office, or liturgy of the hours, consisted of eight daily services of worship, prayer, and reading:

Time of Day	Office
c. 2am	Night Office (i.e. Nocturns/Matins)
before dawn	Lauds
1st hour	Prime
3rd hour	Terce
6th hour	Sext
9th hour	None
sunset	Vespers
end of day	Compline

For daily timekeeping, the day was divided into twelve hours between sunrise and sunset; their length thus varied from season to season. The Modern English word *noon* derives from the word for the ninth hour, but came to be associated with the sixth (i.e. 12 noon) at a later point in time.

The following passage is from a longer composition on the divine office under the rubric *De ecclesiasticis officiis* (“The Ecclesiastical Offices”). At no point does the author address the liturgy of these services; instead, the objective of the text is to provide a scriptural basis for all eight services, which after all arose by tradition and not from a direct scriptural mandate.

The text also survives in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 121, fols 54v–55r in a slightly more complete redaction (see notes below).

Manuscript

Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 201, pp. 113–114 (s. xi med.)

Text

De nocturnali caelabratione

(1) On uhtan we sculon God herian, ealswa Dauid cwæð: *Media nocte surgebam ad¹ confitendum tibi super iudicia iustitie tue*, (2) þæt is on englisc, “To middere nihte ic aras and andette drihtenes doma rihtwisnesse.”

(3) And Crist silf bead þæt we georne wacian scoldan. (4) He cwæð, *Uigilate ergo quia nescitis quando ueniet dominus*, (5) ðæt is on englisc, “Wacigað georne, forðam þe ge nitan hwænne eower drihten cymð.” (6) And eft he cwæð, *Beati serui illi² quos cum uenerit dominus*, (7) þæt is on englisc, “Eadige beoð þa men þe se hlaford wacigende gemet þonne he sylf tocymð,” (8) þæt is, ure drihten þonne he to dome cymð þonne he wile witan hwa wacigende beo on godum dædum.

(9) Us is eallum micel þearf þæt we georne wacian and wære beon, (10) forðam nele deað na cyðan hwænne he cuman wile ðe ma þe þeof, (11) ac he cymð þonne man læst wenð. (12) Þonne bið he swiðe gesælig se þe bið þonne wacigende. (13) Se bið wacigende se ðe aa smeað ymbe his agene þearfe, and on ðam geendað.³

(14) Ðonne age we micle þearfe þæt we georne wacigan (15) and wære beon wið deofles costnunga, (16) and þæt we to Gode georne clipian, (17) and to him geearnian þæt he us gefilste þurh his mildheortnesse, (18) þæt we on urum endetiman swa wacigende beon on godum dædum (19) þæt we siððan aa us gerestan magan and motan on ecere reste, amen.

¹MS &.

²MS omitted.

³The other witness has Se bið wacigende se ðe a smeað ymbe Godes willan, and ymbe his agene þearfe, and on ðam geendað; and se bið sleac and slæpende se ðe fullgæð eallum his lyðrum lustum ðurh deofles lare, and on ðam geendað.