The meaning, practice and context of private prayer in late Anglo-Saxon England


Abstract

This thesis is a detailed discussion of the relatively neglected subject of private prayer in late Anglo-Saxon England, mainly focusing on three eleventh-century monastic codices: the Galba Prayerbook (London, British Library Cotton Nero A. ii + Galba A. xiv), Ælfwine’s Prayerbook (London, British Library Cotton Titus D. xxvii + xxvi) and the Portiforium of St Wulstan (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 391). Chapter One provides a background to the following chapters by introducing a wide variety of English and Continental texts from the ninth century. This chapter demonstrates the many different prayer genres, prayer guides and attitudes to prayer which would be inherited by the late Anglo-Saxons. Chapter Two, which focuses on private adaptations of the canonical Offices, examines the different manuscript contexts in which private prayers were found. It argues that series of prayers were combined into increasingly sophisticated ordines for personal devotion, and that it was from these that the Special Offices arose. Chapter Three applies these concepts to prayers to the Holy Cross. After a discussion of the evidence for prayer before a cross, and involving the sign of the cross, it examines private prayer programmes based on the liturgy for Good Friday and those from which the Special Office of the Cross developed. Chapter Four turns to private confessions, arguing that these prayers were somewhat different from those hitherto discussed. It therefore begins with an exploration of the many kinds of confession which existed in the late Anglo-Saxon church, before examining a number of private confessional prayers in detail. Throughout this thesis, emphasis is placed on the bodily experience of prayer in its time and place, and upon the use of each text as it is found in the prayerbooks of eleventh-century England.

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