

BOOKS OF HOURS

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Books of Hours must be among the most familiar of mediaeval objects that have come down to us, and are certainly the best preserved. The copies which we see in museums are usually beautifully written and illuminated on parchment or vellum, and date from between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. But what exactly were Books of Hours? Most people will know that they were some sort of prayerbook—but what did they contain? And were they just for private use, or could they be used in public church services? Many more questions suggest themselves: when, why and by whom were they composed, what sources were used, in what languages and for what classes of society were they written?

The Book of Hours was known in England (but not, apparently, elsewhere) as the *primarium* or *liber primarium*, which in English became "primer" or "pryer". The derivation of the word is doubtful; it may mean "first book" or "best book" or, less likely, "book used for Prime". The name "Book of Hours" (*Heures* in French, *Horae* in Latin) comes from the main constituent of the books: The Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary.¹ These Hours derived from the Divine Office, which arose very early indeed in the history of the Church. The Divine Office is a series of services said or sung throughout the day in monasteries and by the secular clergy (those not bound by a monastic rule). Its parts are long and complicated, and vary with the day or feast, and it is not really suitable for daily recitation by most lay people although breviaries² (books containing the Divine Office) were certainly often used by the laity in mediaeval times. In monasteries, the first service was Matins, the "Night Office" (at midnight, 2 a.m., or a similar time); the "Day Hours" followed—Lauds at dawn, often followed Matins without a break; the "Little Hours" of Prime, Terce, Sext and None were arranged around the main Mass of the day; in the afternoon or early evening came Vespers (Evensong), and lastly Compline. Each Hour consisted of prayers, hymns and psalms, usually with readings from the Scriptures or the Fathers and sometimes with a sermon. There were three or nine lessons (*lectiones*, readings) in Matins, depending on the solemnity and importance of the feast.

Accretions to the Divine Office had arisen in monasteries by about the eighth century. Two sets of psalms, the seven Penitential Psalms and the fifteen Gradual Psalms, came to be said daily in addition to the canonical Hours, as did various groups of prayers modelled on the *Cursus* or Divine Office. The earliest of these was the Office of All Saints; others were the Offices of the Blessed Virgin Mary, of the Holy Ghost, and of the Holy Cross. These were divided into the same eight³ Hours but each Hour was shorter, and less variable from day to day. Each Office gives expression to different devotional leanings, and by far the most widespread of these in the mediaeval world was the love of Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Hence, the Office of the BVM had by the third quarter of the tenth century ousted the earlier additional Office, that of All Saints, for daily recitation in monasteries, and by the mid-eleventh century (earlier than this in England, where there was a great devotion to Our Lady) it was also being used by many of the secular clergy. In the twelfth and thirteenth

centuries the practice of the secular clergy saying the Hours of the BVM (and also the Office of the Dead) publicly each day, as an obligation, spread over Europe, the process being complete probably by the beginning of the fourteenth century. The desire of lay people throughout all periods to imitate the clergy led to the emergence of the Book of Hours, for the use of the laity, by about the middle of the fourteenth century.

Most of the written copies of Books of Hours are in Latin throughout, and in that language could have been easily used when assisting at the public recitation of the Hours of the BVM in church. Others however are known to have been translated into the vernacular, from the end of the fourteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth century. Printed copies became available, in Latin and English, just before the Reformation suppressed the Primer altogether in 1549.⁴

The Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary was the major part of the Primer but it was usually preceded by a Calendar, which took up the first few pages of the book. This was a perpetual calendar, giving the saints' days in each month, and it was almost invariably decorated with pictures of seasonal activities: harvesting, hunting, sowing, and so on. Instructions on how to find the date of Easter, or mnemonic rhymes on the saints' days, are sometimes found with it, as are moralistic verses comparing man's life, from birth to death, with the seasons.

Matins of the BVM begins with the words *Domine labia me aperies*, which is answered *Et os meum annuntiabit laudem tuam* (O Lord open my lips: And my tongue shall announce thy praise). In Books of Hours illuminated for rich patrons this opening page often carries some picture of, or allusion to, the patron in its decoration, perhaps by showing him or her kneeling before Our Lady and her Son. Each of the other Hours, except Compline, begins with the words *Deus in adiutorium meum intende*, and the response: *Domine ad adjuvandum me festina* (O God come to my aid: O Lord make haste to help me). After more versicles and responses come, in Matins, the Invitatory [Psalm 94 (Vulgate): *Venite exultemus Domino . . .*] and a Latin hymn to Our Lady. An antiphon precedes and follows a group of three psalms, and next come the Our Father and three short lessons. Matins finishes with the *Te Deum*. Lauds is slightly different in structure, and is built around eight psalms. In the Sarum *Horae* (Hours of the BVM according to the Use of Salisbury), Lauds is followed immediately by over twenty separate invocations to God and the Saints. These are entirely missing in the York Hours. Prime, Terce, Sext and None are short compared with Matins and Lauds; three psalms are said in each, together with various versicles and responses and a short reading or "little chapter" (*capitulum*). Vespers is rather longer, and includes the *Magnificat*, while Compline which completes the day (its Latin name is *Completorium*) contains the *Nunc dimittis*.

A feature of late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Books of Hours was that the Hours of the Cross were often inserted after each corresponding Hour of Our Lady. These are simple, short prayers on the Passion of Christ from the betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane to the laying of His body in the sepulchre. The seven Penitential Psalms (Vulgate 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129 and 142),

the Litany, the Psalm of Commendation (Vulgate 118)—all these also appear in the "standard" Book of Hours, together with certain Gospel texts and a variety of prayers suitable for different occasions.

I have mentioned, in passing, the Office of the Dead. This was another essential part of the Book of Hours. It was not a full Office, and consisted only of Vespers, Matins and Lauds. The antiphon to the first psalm of Vespers for the dead (Ps. 114) was *Placebo Domino in regione vivorum* (I shall please the Lord in the land of the living), and this gave its name to the service as a whole: *Placebo*. Matins and Lauds of the Dead were together known as *Dirige* (which became *Dirge*) from the first antiphon to Matins: *Dirige Domine Deus meus in conspectu tuo viam meam* (O Lord my God, direct my way in thy sight). Matins consisted of three nocturns, each containing three psalms and three lessons from Job, while Lauds had eight more psalms, and Vespers six psalms plus the *Magnificat*. *Placebo* (Vespers) was said on the night before burial, and *Dirige* early the following morning, preceding the three Masses and burial service.

Until the Sixteenth Century each bishop in the Catholic Church had, and used, the right to regulate public worship in his diocese. In this way *minor* differences in liturgy and practice are evident in service books from the Sees of (say) Lincoln, Paris, Bangor, Salisbury, Meaux or York. This is true of Books of Hours also, and in the absence of a title page specifying (for example) *Hore beate Marie Virginis secundum usum Eboracensis*,⁵ it is often possible to deduce the origin of a particular copy from minor points such as its choice of antiphons, its inclusion or exclusion of a set of prayers, or the saints' days in its calendar.

NOTES

1. Also known as the Office of the BVM, Office of Our Lady, and Little Office.
2. Called in mediaeval times *porteux*, *portuasses*, *portose*, etc.
3. Or seven, counting Matins-with-Lauds as one.
4. 3 & 4 Ed. VI, cap. X. "An Act for the Abolishing and Putting Away of Divers Books and Images." (Repealed 1926.)
5. Hours of the BVM according to the Use of York (from a Primer printed in 1536).

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