

The Significator Horarum

The Rule of St Benedict of Nursia has guided the daily lives of monks of the Benedictine order since it was penned in the sixth century AD. The Rule calls for organized communal prayers seven times a day (The Daily Office, or *Opus Dei*). This habit was built upon the traditional Jewish custom of praying at the third¹, sixth, and ninth hours of the day. Benedict added prayers at sunrise, sunset, and midnight (when Paul and Silas sang in prison). These times were also in accord with the Psalm CXIX “seven times a day do I praise thee” (verse 164) and “at midnight I will rise to give thanks unto thee” (verse 62). The times of the prayers were Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline.

Liturgically, the day began at sundown with the service of Vespers ushering in the new day. This custom was based on ancient Jewish practice rooted in the formula from the first chapter of Genesis “and the evening and the morning were the [first, second, etc] day”. Compline was then said at midnight. Lauds (Latin ‘praises’) began at sunrise. Prime (from Latin for ‘one’) was the first hour of the day. Similarly Terce was the third hour, Sext the sixth hour, and Nones the ninth hour completing the cycle of the day.

Benedict did not include instructions in his Rule on how to determine the time to observe the Hours. He gave the responsibility of determining the proper times to the abbot who could in turn delegate the duty to a conscientious brother (Rule chapter 62). This Brother was referred to at the *significator horarum*². This Brother was strictly charged by Peter Damian (1007-1072 AD) in *De Perfectione Monachorum* to “not listen to stories, or to hold long conversations with any one, not to inquire what is done by persons engaged in secular pursuits. He must be always intent upon his duty, and never relax his observation of the revolving spheres, the motion of the stars, and the lapse of time. He must acquire a habit also of singing psalms, if he wishes to possess the faculty of distinguishing the hours; for, whenever the Sun or stars are obscured by clouds, the quantity of psalms which he has sung will be a sort of clock for measuring time” (Lewis, p. 501).

Clocks did not become common until the 14th century, and then initially only in the richer abbeys. A manuscript known as the *Regula Magistri* from c. 520 AD stated that a *horelogium* be assiduously observed day and night.

¹ The day was divided into 12 equal-length hours. The night was also divided into 12 hours, but the night hours would necessarily be a different length (except at the equinoxes when all 24 hours were equal in length). Since the length of day and night varies through the year, this system is known as ‘unequal’ or ‘seasonal’ hours. The term ‘hour of the day’ refers to the number of unequal hours since sunrise. Thus the first hour of the day would be the first 1/12 of the length of daylight starting at sunrise.

² *Significator* is Latin for one that signifies, indicates, or shows. *Horarum* indicates time, thus one that ‘calls the hour’ or ‘marks the time’.

Unfortunately, *horelogium* could refer to any device used to measure the passage of time. Rarely were more specific terms such as ‘clepsydra’ (water clock) or ‘sundial’ used to help determine the type of apparatus. A sundial was probably standard method of telling the hours, and numerous examples still exist of dials that indicate the prayer times. Astrolabes and quadrants could have also been used after their introduction into the western world sometime after the 11th century. The difficulty ensues when the sun isn’t shining such as during the night or cloudy days. Any instrument that uses the sun is rendered useless.

On clear nights, tables existed to tell the observer which constellations would rise at each hour. An astrolabe or nocturnal could have been used to give the time. In cloudy weather (day or night) the significator horarum could rely on a candle marked to indicate hours as it burns, a clepsydra (if the abbey could afford it), or, as noted by St. Damian, by singing psalms. The brothers typically had the psalms memorized from frequent repetition, or at least could recite a large number from memory. With diligent practice, he would have been fairly accurate in telling time by singing the psalms to himself through the night. This is seen in other medieval literature where someone will mark the passing of time by the number of *pater noster*s (Lord’s Prayer) they could recite. This is very similar to the modern practice of saying ‘one potato, two potato’ to count seconds or singing *Happy Birthday* through twice to mark the proper length of time to properly wash your hands.

Once the significator horarum had determined the hour for prayer had arrived, he would likely have awakened the Sacristan who was tasked with awakening the brethren. The Sacristan was occasionally called the *horoscopus* when functioning in this capacity. The brethren would proceed to the chapel to recite the Office for that Hour.

The monastic day revolved around the structure of the prayer cycle of the *Opus Dei*. The position of the trusted Brother who was tasked with calling the abbey to prayer held a very important position in the life of the community, one that is rarely acknowledged by history.

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Bible quotes are from the 1769 Authorized Version (King James Version).

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