

Mortuary Rolls as a Source for Medieval Women's History

by

Teresa Leslie
West Georgia College

Early in July in the year 1113, Mathilda, the abbess of Holy Trinity, a convent in Normandy, lay on her deathbed. Wracked with pain for the past four days, she realized she would not live much longer and called the nuns of her community to her bedside. She comforted them by both by her words and by her actions, as she had done for the fifty-four years she headed this community. After she received extreme unction and took communion, each the nuns stepped forward to give the old abbess the kiss of peace. While her sisters in Christ prayed and wept, she quietly closed her eyes for the last time. Mathilda, the first abbess of Holy Trinity, a nunnery established in Caen by William the Conqueror and his wife, lay dead. One of the nuns described the scene -- Abbess Mathilda had "made the glorious transition from this world, going to reign eternally with Christ."¹

The nun's comment is found on a mortuary roll, an intriguing product of the scriptoria of medieval monasteries. These rolls have been largely ignored by scholars, but can be utilized in a number of ways. The mortuary roll commemorating Mathilda is one of the best examples extant.

In the Middle Ages, when a member of a monastic community died, a lay messenger known as a breviator often would be hired to travel to other monastic houses and religious institutions such as cathedral schools to announce the death and ask for prayers for the soul of the dead.² He would usually carry a short obituary notice known as a mortuary brief, which was written in the scriptorium of the monastery sending the announcement. When a prominent person such as an abbot or abbess died, a more elaborate document known as a mortuary roll would sometimes be sent forth from the scriptorium. The parchment mortuary roll, sometimes called an obituary or bede roll, would include an elegant obituary and lamentation for the deceased, which was often beautifully illuminated.³

The communities that were visited by a breviator with a mortuary roll were expected to say prayers for the dead and to write a memorial of some sort on the roll. A mortuary brief was delivered to each establishment the breviator visited, but when he carried a mortuary roll, it grew as he travelled, collecting entries and ultimately returning the document to the monastery or nunnery that had issued it. Some surviving mortuary rolls contain entries from hundreds of communities spread over a vast geographical area. For example, the mortuary roll commemorating Mathilda has 253 entries from monasteries and nunneries spread throughout northern France and England.⁴

Both the mortuary announcements and the memorial entries from the various communities were written in Latin. Many houses simply added a formulaic "May the soul

of this one and the souls of all the faithful dead rest in peace. Amen."⁵ Scribes of other communities used the occasion to write beautiful verses or other touching remembrances. At some institutions, especially those with literary reputations, more than one writer would add to the roll. For example, the eleventh-century mortuary roll of Wilfred of Cerdana included 14 poems from the cathedral chapter at Liege and nine from the monastery of St. Lawrence in the same city.⁶

As early as the eighth century, some monasteries had begun to send letters to other communities announcing the deaths of monks and soliciting prayers for their souls. These were the forerunners of the more formal mortuary briefs and mortuary rolls. The earliest mortuary roll of which some fragments have been preserved comes from Saint-Martial in Limoges and dates from the late tenth century. At first, the circulation of mortuary rolls seems to have been concentrated in France and Catalonia. The idea later spread to Belgium, Germany, Austria, and England. The monastic communities of Italy, Portugal, and Spain (with the exception of Catalonia) did not follow the practice.⁷

Most of the mortuary rolls that have been preserved date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a period of great interest and growth in monasticism. They include several important rolls for abbesses. Mortuary rolls gradually lost popularity, perhaps due in part to the disruptions in monastic life at the time of the Black Death, but they were still being produced regularly as late as the fifteenth century, especially in England. In the 1460s, a breviator from the Durham priory travelled to 639 religious houses.⁸ A very late mortuary roll is that of John Islip, abbot of Westminster, who died in 1532. This document is one of the best-known because it was apparently decorated by Hans Holbein the Younger.⁹

Approximately 160 mortuary rolls are extant, and the texts of over 320 such rolls have been preserved.¹⁰ The British Museum has several in its collection, as does the Bodleian Library. Most existing rolls are housed in monastic and cathedral libraries, although a few are in private collections.

While the majority of the rolls were written in memory of abbots and other men, several rolls eulogizing monastic women are also available. The roll of Mathilda of Caen is considered one of the most important of all existing mortuary rolls, because of the great number of entries it contains, their variety and quality, and the large geographical area covered. Other rolls of interest include two thirteenth-century rolls of English prioresses--that of Lucy of Castle Hedingham, which is magnificently illuminated and preserved in the British Library; and that of Amphelisa of Lillechurch in Higham, which can be seen at the library of St. John's College, Cambridge.¹¹ In 1866, Leopold Deslisle of France published a collection of the texts of several dozen mortuary rolls, still the most complete set of such texts to have been printed. Besides Mathilda's roll, several other women's mortuary rolls are included in Deslisle's collection. Among these are the rolls for Haide, abbess of the convent of Saint-Armand in Rouen, who died in 1225; for Marie de Noyers, abbess of a small convent in Normandy, who died in 1398; and for Elizabeth Sconinck, an abbess in Brussels, who died in 1458.

Mortuary rolls can be studied in a number of ways. The documents can be analyzed to yield information in the areas of paleography and codicology, diplomatics, and prosopography. The rolls also provide biographical information about their subjects,

as well as information about the monastics who contributed entries to the rolls.

Medievalists interested in paleography and codicology can use individual rolls to study the variations in scripts used by different monasteries and in different geographical areas. They can compare rolls to study the changes in scripts over time as well. Mortuary rolls can be studied for their illumination. Also, the use of abbreviations and the evolution of punctuation are illustrated by these rolls.

Orthographic and linguistic changes between regions and time periods are also illustrated by the entries on the rolls. For example, on Mathilda's roll, most entries which mention her by name spell her name Mathilda, as does the obituary notice produced in Caen. Several others spell her name Matilda, without an 'H'. Two monasteries, located in Rochester and Malling, England, spell her name Macthilda.¹²

The rolls can be studied by codicologists, who would be interested in the document's material (usually parchment), as well as the inks and writing instruments used by the scribes at various houses. The preference for rolls, rather than the more common codices-- sheets of papyrus or parchment folded and sewn together at the spine-- requires explanation. By the eighth century, when mortuary rolls developed, the codex was far more widely used than the roll, or rotulus.¹³ Rotuli were more convenient for appending additional material as the roll grew larger. Also, rotuli were frequently the format of choice for travellers and pilgrims and were apparently easier for the breviators to carry.¹⁴

Diplomatics, at its most basic, is the application of literary criticism, both internal and external, to documentary sources. Leonard Boyle, head of the Vatican Library, suggests that to understand fully a medieval document, such as a mortuary roll, the historian should ask the basic questions which he labels "*Quis, Quid, Quomodo, Quibus auxiliis, Cur, Ubi, Quando?*"¹⁵ These correspond roughly to the modern journalist's "who, what, when, where, and why." Who wrote the document? What type of document is it? What standard format does it follow and when does it deviate from the norm? Why was it written? Where? At what time?

The nature of mortuary rolls means that some of these questions are far easier to answer than others. We know what type of document mortuary rolls are, and why they were written. We know that they were written by monks and nuns, although we seldom have the names of the individual writers. Some writers used an obvious formula to contribute to rolls, but others used a wide variety of styles to express themselves. There were no set rules to follow. Often it is hard to locate and identify the houses contributing to a roll. There are, for example, dozens of houses dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and on some rolls they do not identify themselves further. Identifying which community made a particular entry on a roll is sometimes a matter of studying maps showing monastic houses of that period and using the locations of other houses whose entries are close to that of the community in question to determine its location. Dating the rolls is sometimes a challenge as well. Some rolls do not include any date, or refer only to the number of years of a particular abbot or abbess's leadership, or to the number of years since the abbey was established. Determining such specific information is one of the most challenging aspects of working with mortuary rolls.

Mortuary rolls can be invaluable in identifying individuals who had positions of

prominence in the religious community, including not only abbots and abbesses but also such people as bishops and archbishops. Thus they add to prosopography, a field of historical study which has grown in popularity among medievalists in recent years. This area of study has been described by George Beech:

Its object is the identification and study of the influential people of a given period, the people who held the positions of power in their society. More specifically, it seeks biographical data about their place and family of origin, their friends, acquaintances, and other personal contacts and about their careers.¹⁶

The potential for use of mortuary rolls in a prosopographic study is illustrated by Mathilda's roll. For example, the first entry was written at St. Stephen's monastery in Caen, a community for men established by William the Conqueror simultaneously with Holy Trinity. At the conclusion of his memorial, the author asks that readers add to their prayers for Mathilda prayers for several prominent people associated with St. Stephen's, including not only founder William the Conqueror, two abbots and several monks, but also the archbishops Lanfranc and William. Prominent laymen and women, usually generous benefactors of the communities listing them, are frequently mentioned in the rolls.

A related topic of study is the relationship among various religious houses. By studying the names of the monasteries where various rolls were presented, the historian can determine which communities maintained relationships with one another. Other clues to the ties between communities appear in the relative effusiveness of the entries on a roll. Many houses, as mentioned earlier, simply entered a perfunctory "Rest in peace" on the rolls. This might mean that the house was not closely connected to the community sending the roll. Some rolls from the High Middle Ages also begin to include entries from the friars of various cities. Perhaps there is a relationship between the type of monastery sending out a roll-- Benedictine or Cistercian, for example-- and the inclusion or exclusion of mendicants among the memorializers.

Even the travel patterns of the breviators can be studied.

A map of the communities visited by a particular breviator, showing the order in which their entries were added to the roll, will show patterns of travel. Certain routes may have been more popular than others. Geography may have influenced the breviator's route; he might turn back when he reached a major mountain range, or whether he crossed the English Channel might depend upon the time of year. Routes followed by different breviators, either from different communities or from different time periods, can be compared. For example, Durham Priory in England has a large collection of rolls which were circulated by the priory over the centuries.¹⁷ It would be interesting to see if the messengers of different eras followed the same route, and, when they did not, to try to determine what prompted the change. Perhaps new roads were built linking growing cities, perhaps warfare or outbreaks of disease caused them to alter their routes for safety's sake.

These types of historical study can be fascinating, but mortuary rolls also lend themselves to simple study as medieval texts. To illustrate the type of historical

information to be extracted from a mortuary roll text, a close examination of the obituary notice of Mathilda's roll is valuable. It begins by reminding its readers that sin and death are a part of this world, "introduced," says the writer, "by the ambition of Eve and the disobedience of Adam."¹⁸ Then the author discusses Mathilda's early life, when she was raised "in the cradle of Christ" where she "suckled the sweetest milk filled with the nourishment of the sanctity of faith" and "the sacred church warmed her."¹⁹ This seems to indicate she was raised in a convent. Her decision while still quite young to take the veil and live a monastic life is detailed. She was chosen to serve as the first abbess of Holy Trinity, whose foundation by William the Conqueror and his wife is described. The couple are described as "rex Willelmus, qui de Normannis regnum Anglorum primus obtinuit, et uxor ejus regina Mathildis...", "king William, who of the Normans first obtained the kingdom of the English, and his wife queen Mathilda."²⁰ Their dedication of their daughter Cecilia as a child-oblate at Holy Trinity is included. This little girl grew up to serve as the monastery's second abbess.

Next there is a poetic description of abbess Mathilda as a laborer in the fields of the Lord, sowing wheat in her youth and reaping the grain for the Lord's storehouse in her old age. She is characterized as a wise leader and instructor of the nuns in her care. Then her death is described in detail. The author boasts that her funeral was magnificent. The donations to the local poor and prayers offered on her behalf are then outlined.

The obituary concludes by soliciting the prayers of the readers not only for abbess Mathilda, but for several others attached to the abbey, beginning with Queen Mathilda, her daughters Adelaide, Mathilda, and Constantia, and including several nuns and four men who were probably priests attached to the nunnery.

There is a bit of a mystery attached to abbess Mathilda's identity, however. Deslisle identifies her as the daughter of William the Conqueror, an identification repeated by noted medievalist R. W. Southern.²¹ However, if she were the legitimate daughter of William and Mathilda, she would have been eight or nine years old at most when she became abbess, not a likely scenario.²²

I believe the confusion stems from abbess Mathilda's roll, and that Deslisle confused the discussion of Cecilia's dedication as a child-oblate with Mathilda's similar circumstance. The roll also mentions a daughter of Queen Mathilda, with the same name, among those for whom prayers were solicited. I do not believe that daughter is the abbess, both because of the problem of her age and because the abbess is never identified in the roll as the daughter of William, although Cecilia clearly is identified as such.

The detail of the listing of three of Queen Mathilda's daughters does provide an interesting sidelight, however. Biographers of William the Conqueror are uncertain of the number and identity of the daughters of the king. Various medieval chroniclers give differing accounts. William Douglas even includes in his biography of William an entire appendix devoted to untangling the evidence. He mentions that only the Domesday Book makes any mention of a daughter named Mathilda, making her existence strictly a matter for conjecture.²³ However, this mortuary roll clearly lists a daughter Mathilda, as well as Constantia, another daughter who is often omitted from lists of William's offspring.

Mathilda's roll is also a source of information about the attitudes and ideas of the

various monks and nuns who wrote the commemorations. The roll is filled with fascinating entries that offer tantalizing glimpses into the lives of their writers. One such entry, in fact, was the catalyst which sparked my own interest in mortuary rolls and led me to investigate them further. I was reading the classic *The Making of the Middle Ages*, by R. W. Southern. He devoted a few pages to the subject of mortuary rolls, including a discussion of the variances in style which are apparent between regions. Southern characterized the entries from southern Europe as generally scholarly, elaborate, and dignified in tone, while suggesting that entries from northern Europe reflect a more playful, loose, individualistic style of writing.

He then quoted, as an example of the northern style, an entry on Mathilda's roll written by a nun in Auxerre. My own attempts at translating this bold little verse cannot compare with Southern's own flowing translation, so I will quote the poem as I stumbled upon it in Southern.

All Abbesses deserve to die
Who order subject nuns to lie
In dire distress and lonely bed
Only for giving love its head.
I speak who know, for I've been fed,
For loving, long on stony bread.²⁴

Upon reading that intriguing verse, I knew I wanted to learn more about mortuary rolls, and to see if there were other little treasures tucked away in these obscure documents. I am pleased to say that there do seem to be quite a few, although I have so far only translated a portion of the 253 entries on Mathilda's roll, as well as a dozen or so entries on other rolls.

For example, when I began to study Mathilda's roll in its original Latin, I located the "All Abbesses deserve to die" entry, which is number 217 on the roll. I then read entry number 218, and was surprised to see that this entry, written by a monk who lived in an Auxerre monastery, also had little to say about Mathilda. Instead, the anonymous author took the nun from Auxerre to task for using the roll to complain. His entry reads:

The foolish nun laments if she feels deeply vexed,
For only one nun has died of the innumerable ones available.
If death did not snatch these women from the ranks of the nuns,
The whole world would not have to endure these things from
them.²⁵

My current focus is on mortuary rolls as a source for medieval women's history. Mortuary rolls can tell historians much about female monastics of the Middle Ages. Most obviously, they can be used as sources of biographical information for the abbesses who are the subjects of the obituaries. These obituaries also frequently provide information about the history of the convent, such as the date of its foundation, the abbesses who had preceded the abbess being commemorated, and important events in the convent's history which occurred during the abbess's tenure.

In mortuary rolls of both men and women, entries from nunneries may provide rare examples of the writing of medieval women, although this is not always the case. Many nunneries did not maintain scriptoria and relied on priests or monks to do their writing for them. Since the writers of the roll entries rarely identify themselves, historians must be careful not to assume that an entry was written by a woman simply because it was written at a nunnery. Further investigation of the individual house is required.

Beyond these obvious applications, these underutilized sources also help flesh out our picture of medieval convent life in broader ways. A study of the names of the abbesses and nuns mentioned in the rolls confirms the aristocratic nature of the membership in most nunneries. Evidence of the close connection between the royal or noble families which founded convents and the leadership of the houses themselves is also abundant. The jury is still out on whether Mathilda of Holy Trinity was a princess, but certainly Cecilia, the second abbess there, was the daughter of William the Conqueror. Evidence from the mortuary roll of Lucy, abbess of Castle Hedingham, seems to indicate that she was related to the de Vere family who founded the abbey and that she was the daughter of the first Earl of Oxford.²⁶

An examination of the entries clearly written by women shows that the level of education enjoyed by female monastics in no way compared with that of monks. There were few nunneries where scholarship was emphasized. No medieval convent produced a chronicle, for example, compared to the hundreds written in monasteries all over Europe. In Women Religious: Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest, Sally Thompson has pointed out that many nuns in late medieval England could not even read Latin.²⁷ Those who could read and write Latin were not always particularly skilled at doing so. Thompson mentions the mortuary roll of Amphilisa of Lillechurch, a large roll with 378 entries. She characterizes the entries for several nunneries, such as that at Wroxall, as "written in an unformed and sprawling hand suggestive of a beginner in the art of writing."²⁸

Women's entries can also offer glimpses into the psyche of individual nuns. The resentful nun from Auxerre is perhaps a reminder that many women in monasteries were not there by choice. Convents in the Middle Ages were often convenient dumping grounds for illegitimate daughters, "excess" legitimate daughters, repudiated wives, and the female relatives of conquered enemies. Of course, other nuns truly felt called to the monastic life, and some of their memorial verses reflect the joy and serenity they had found in their convents.

These seldom-studied medieval documents are sitting in the archives, waiting to be rediscovered. They lend themselves to a wide variety of historical approaches. Further study of these sources can add to our understanding of medieval monasticism in general, and of female monastics in particular.

NOTES

"...glorioso transitu magravit a seculo, sine fine regnatura cum Christo." Leopold Deslisle, ed.,

Roleaux des Morts du IXe du XVe Siecle (Paris: Jules Renouard for La Societe de l'Histoire de France, 1866; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint, 1968), 181.

² N.R. Ker, "Mortuary Briefs," *Worcestershire Historical Society, Miscellany I* (1960): 53.

³ A variety of terms were used for the breviator and the brief as well. Other terms for the messenger include 'brevigerulus', 'breviger', 'brevitor', and 'brevillator'. The brief was sometimes referred to as a 'breviculum' or 'breve'.

⁴ Deslisle, 177-279.

⁵ "Anima ejus et animae omnium fidelium defunctorum requiescant in pace. Amen."

⁶ R. W. Southern, The Making of the Middle Ages (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 23.

⁷ Jean Dufour, "Les rouleaux des morts," Codicologica 3 (1980): 97.

⁸ R. B. Dobson, Durham Priory 1400-1450, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, third series, no. 6 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 249.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dufour, 98.

¹¹ Sally Thompson, Women Religious: The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 11.

¹² The text of Mathilda of Holy Trinity's roll can be found in Deslisle, 177-279. The Rochester and Malling entries are numbers 54 and 55, on page 203.

¹³ James J. John, "Latin Paleography," in Medieval Studies: An Introduction, ed. James W. Powell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1976), 49.

¹⁴ Bernhard Bischoff, Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages, trans. Daibhi O. Croinin and David Ganz (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 33.

¹⁵ Leonard E. Boyle, "Diplomatics," in Powell, 80.

¹⁶ George Beech, "Prosopography," in Powell, 151.

¹⁷ Dobson, 249.

¹⁸ "Evae ambitione et Adae inobedientia introduxit." Deslisle, 178.

¹⁹ "...ipsam nimirum intra Christi cunas ecclesiae sanctae fovit mamilla, et evanglici plenius alimenti suavissimum lac in omnem morumet fidei sanctitatem nutrit." Ibid., 179.

²⁰ Ibid., 180.

²¹ Deslisle, 177; Southern, 24.

²² David C. Douglas, William the Conqueror: The Norman Impact upon England (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 394.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Southern, 24. The Latin text, as it appears in Deslisle, 276-77:

Abbatossae debent mori,
Quae subjectas nos amori
Claudi iubent culpa gravi.
Quod tormentum jam temptavi.
Loco clausa sub obscuro,
Diu vixi pane duro.
Hujus peonae fuit causa
Quod amare dicor ausa.

²⁵ The Latin text, from Deslisle, 277:

Insipiens plorat monachae si forte gravantur;
Pro monacha sola defuncta mille parantur.
Si quas non raperet mors de numero monacharum,
Non orbis totus numerum sufferret earum.

²⁶ Thompson, 180-181.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁸ Ibid., 15.