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**Review: Elaine Stratton Hild, *Music in the Medieval Rituals for the End of Life* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2024), 240 pp., ISBN: 9780197685914**

*Kristin Hoefener*

What first struck me about Elaine Stratton Hild's study is how it illuminates a dimension of medieval life most scholars pass by in silence—those intimate moments around death when liturgy met daily life. While we have long had studies of the Office of the Dead, her focus on the rituals at the deathbed and the journey to the church feels like uncovering a missing layer of medieval time. Hild's study examines liturgical practices around death in the medieval period, focusing on rituals performed at the deathbed, immediately after death, and during the procession to the church, rather than those conducted within the church or convent between death and burial. This particular segment of death rituals—distinct from the Mass, Offices, and the final procession to the tomb—has not been previously studied in depth.

These rituals were frequently recorded in portable, unbound *libelli* for use at the bedside. However, fewer of these manuscripts survive compared to bound volumes preserved in churches and libraries, and many deathbed practices—especially among the laity—may have disappeared undocumented. Organised around various institutional sources, *Music in the Medieval Rituals for the End of Life* explores medieval deathbed chants, with the first four chapters presenting detailed case studies. The chants are transcribed in modern notation and analysed for their text-melody interplay and ritual function, with editions preserving single manuscript readings. The variations in chants and melodies across different traditions make this a particularly compelling study.

Chapter 1 (pp. 14–58) examines Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Arch. Cap. S. Pietro F 11 pt. A, a source of what scholars call Old-Roman chant, dating from the first half of the twelfth century and likely used at Saint Peter's Basilica. This manuscript was employed by priests for Mass, Baptism, and rituals for the sick. Hild focuses on the *commendatio anime*, which begins on f. 33r with seven *psalmi speciales* and a litany. The rubrics frame the liturgical

items (see Appendix: *Content of Individual Ritual*), including ‘Incipit commendatio anime’, ‘In primis dicantur VII psalmi speciales cum letania’, ‘In primis dicantur’, and ‘post hec’ (f. 33r), concluding with ‘quando Ingrediuntur ecclesiam’ (f. 42v). Based on conventions for psalm singing and plural forms in the prayers, Hild argues that the ritual was performed by a group of celebrants, beginning at the bedside and ending with the entry into the church for Mass. The author’s approach is notably personal and embodied, guiding the reader through the ritual while simultaneously analysing it.

Chapter 2 (pp. 59–82) centres on Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 934 (ff. 113v–116r), a late twelfth-century source from Sens Cathedral containing a deathbed ritual from Saint Amand. This manuscript demonstrates the persistence of a specific chant repertoire, the chants and psalms edited by Andrieu as part of *Ordo XLIX*.<sup>1</sup> Likely created for the archbishops of Sens, the manuscript suggests that the deathbed ritual may have been used by members of the archbishopric. The opening rubric reads:

*Incipit commendatio anime cum igitur anima in agone sui exitus dissolutione corporis uisa fuerit laborare cum uenire studebunt fratres uel clerici quique fideles et agatur hoc modo commendatio*

[The commendation of the soul begins when therefore the soul, in the struggle of its exit, in the dissolution of the body, has been seen to be laboring when the brothers, or clerics, all the faithful eagerly strive to come and in this way the commendation ought to be conducted. (Trans. by Hild)]

This rubric explicitly indicates the participants—monks, clerics, and the faithful—reinforcing the communal nature of the ritual. Unlike the Roman ritual discussed in Chapter 1, the Sens rite omits penitential psalms, consisting instead of a responsory, prayers, and two antiphons with psalms. The ritual concludes with the body being carried into the church while singing (‘*Tunc ponatur corpus in feretro et portetur in ecclesiam canendo*’). Hild again analyses the melodies in relation to their texts and associated psalms and prayers.

Chapter 3 (pp. 83–109) analyses Bourg-Saint-Pierre, Hospice du Grand-Saint-Bernard, Ms. 3, an early fourteenth-century manuscript from Orsières (Valais, Switzerland), a village of 300 to 400 inhabitants situated on a pilgrim route to Rome. This small, well-worn book was intended for priestly use. The rubric differs from the standard *commendatio anime*, instead reading *comendatio anime communis* (the public’s commendation of the soul begins). Hild contextualizes this by referencing contemporary manuscripts that also mention monks and laity. The rubric continues: ‘*Prius faciat aquam beneditam et aspergat super astantes et per domum deinde super corpus*’ [First he ought to prepare the blessed water and sprinkle on those gathered and throughout the home then over the body].

1 Michel Andrieu, *Les ordines Romani du haut moyen âge: Les Textes; Ordines XXXV–XLIX* (Louvain, Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1956).

This directive not only describes the performative act of sprinkling holy water but also references the gathered mourners and the home of the dying (*corpus*). The ritual begins with the responsory *Subvenite sancte dei*, though only empty red staves appear above the text. Hild compares text spacing to extrapolate melodic structure, but without notation, she can only contrast the texts with versions from Sens and Rome. The ritual concludes with *convenient omnes* (likely the entire village) and the procession to the church while singing the antiphon *In paradisum deducant te angeli*. While the chapter's conclusion is detailed, a stronger focus on the fourteenth-century spiritual context might have been preferable.

Chapter 4 (pp. 110–36) examines Reigate (Surrey), Parish Church of St Mary Magdalene, Cranston Library, Ms. 2322, a small book from a female community of Poor Clares at the Abbey of Saint Mary the Virgin and Saint Francis without Aldgate,<sup>2</sup> adapted from a male community in the second half of the fifteenth century. Changes such as *ora pro eo* to *ora pro ea* reflect its adaptation for female use. Unlike earlier examples, this ritual omits penitential psalms, beginning directly with the litany (f. 117v). It includes more detailed rubrics, such as *In exitum anime* (during the exit of the soul), *Si anxiatu adhuc anima dicantur hii* (in case of anxiety, these should be performed), and *Egressa anima de corpore dicatur hoc* (at the soul's departure from the body), followed by instructions for washing the body (f. 123r). Hild interprets this as a 'self-sufficient' ritual, meaning the sisters could perform the ritual by themselves. The sisters then carry the body to the church while singing (*sorores portent corpus ad ecclesiam decantando*). The chants present minor textual and melodic variations.

Chapter 5 analyses (pp. 137–66) traces the development of these rituals before the performance of the Office of the Dead. Drawing on her expertise in eighth- and ninth-century repertoires, Hild distinguishes four traditions (Frankish, Benedict of Aniane, early liturgies, and the later addition of the responsory). She argues for a Frankish rather than Roman origin of Andrieu's *Ordo XLIX*, positioning later sources as continuations of early traditions. While her analysis is very thorough, a deeper exploration of contemporary contexts would have been opportune. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of text-music relationships.

Hild's background in notation and text-music relationships, perfected through her dissertation<sup>3</sup> and work with *Corpus Monodicum* (University of Würzburg),<sup>4</sup> ensures meticulous

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2 See also an article by the author on another Franciscan manuscript transmitting liturgy for the end of life: Elaine Stratton Hild, 'The Role of Music in a Franciscan Liturgy for the End of Life, as Evidenced in Manuscript Newberry 24', in *Death and Disease in the Medieval and Early Modern World: Perspectives from across the Mediterranean and Beyond. Health and Healing in the Middle Ages*, edited by L. Jones and N. Varlik, (Boydell & Brewer; 2022), pp. 151-76. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800107861-011>.

3 Elaine Stratton Hild, «Verse, music, and notation Observations on settings of poetry in Sankt Gallen's ninth- and tenth-century-manuscripts» (PhD dissertation, University of Colorado, 2014).

4 Elaine Stratton Hild (ed.), *Tropen zu den Antiphonen der Messe aus Quellen französischer Herkunft, Corpus monodicum, Die einstimmige Musik des lateinischen Mittelalters, II-1* (Basel, Schwabe Verlag, 2017).

transcriptions. The melodic analyses in Chapters 1–4, produced using software employed by *Corpus Monodicum*, are clear and could also serve practical performance purposes.

The conclusion, titled ‘Final Considerations: Why Sing?’ (pp. 167–74), begins unconventionally with the author’s personal connection to her subject before addressing scholarly contributions. Hild moves from Plato’s view of music as a divine gift to medieval beliefs in chant’s restorative properties, framing it as ‘music intended for moments of crisis and transition’ and observes with great subtlety: ‘By chanting, the community used the intangible medium of its breath to create a flow of beauty. As one person’s breathing became irregular and ceased, the community’s breathing continued audibly.’ (p. 172)

The book includes an appendix with text editions (pp. 175–92), a bibliography, and indexes of manuscripts, chants, and general terms.

What distinguishes this book is Hild’s willingness to engage with contemporary perspectives on music for the dying. During her research, she spent a semester at Notre-Dame University, where she participated in a short film reflecting on music’s role in end-of-life care.<sup>5</sup> The film recounts how, as a young viola player, she played ‘Amazing Grace’ for a dying person, enabling them to ‘ride that hymn right to heaven’. Today, Hild combines musicological research with practical service, offering music (on viola or harp) for the dying and their families. This personal dimension enriches her scholarly work and merits acknowledgment in this review. In the end, the author gives us more than just excellent musicology—she helps us learn, across centuries, how communities used music to face what we still struggle with today. That’s an achievement beyond most scholarly works.

**Kristin Hoefener** is a musicologist specializing in medieval sacred chant, particularly within female Dominican communities. She is a researcher in the Early Music Group at the Centre for Music Studies at NOVA University Lisbon, working on the project ‘Chant Culture in Female Dominican Convents with a Focus on Portugal: Repertoire, Sources, and Practical Performance’, and an associate researcher at IRHT and IReMus in Paris. She previously held a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellowship at NOVA with the project ‘The Revival of Salve Regina’. Hoefener holds a PhD from the University of Würzburg and master’s degrees in musicology (Amsterdam) and history (EPHE).

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<sup>5</sup> See YouTube video ‘Coda: Elaine Stratton Hild studies Medieval chants for the sick and dying’ <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vnc1pIdWgMo>> (accessed 17 February 2026).