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'EO VERO NOCTE HILTEGART…': NOCTURNAL ACTIVITIES AND THE DEAD IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Given the abundance of studies stressing the close relationship between sunlight and the agricultural activities of pre-modern European societies on the one hand, and the negative connotations of darkness in hagiography and demonology on the other, it seems obvious that no-one would like to underline a bright side to a night associated so intimately with the dead, demons, and death[1].

1. Cf. e.g. Nancy Mandeville Caciola, «'Night is conceded to the dead': Revenant Congregations in the Middle Ages», in Louise Nyholm Kallestrup and Raisa Maria Toivo (eds.), *Contesting Orthodoxy in Medieval and Early Modern Europe. Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft*, Cham, Palgrave, 2017, 17-33. Jennifer Vanessa Dobschenzki, *Von Opfern und Tätern. Gewalt im Spiegel der merowingischen Hagiographie des 7. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 2015, 79-94. Tzotcho Boiadjiev, *Die Nacht im Mittelalter*, Würzburg, Königshausen und Neumann, 2003, esp. 99-269. Deborah Youngs and Simon Harris, «Demonizing the Night in Medieval Europe: A Temporal Monstrosity?», in Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (eds.), *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, Cardiff, University of Toronto Press, 2003, 134-54. Aline G. Hornaday, «Visitors from Another Space: The Medieval Revenant as Foreigner», in Albrecht Classen (ed.), *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, New York/London, Routledge, 2002, 71-95. Tzotcho Boiadjiev, *Loca nocturna: Orte der Nacht*, in Jan A. Aertsen and Andreas Speer (eds.), *Raum und Raumvorstellungen im Mittelalter*, Berlin/New York, De Gruyter, 1998, 439-51, and, following Boiadjiev, Axel Rüth, *Imaginationen der Angst. Das christliche Wunderbare und das Phantastische*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2019, at 105, discussing here exempla by Caesarius of Heisterbach. Christian Livermore, *When the Dead Rise: Narratives of the Revenant, from the Middle Ages to the Present Day*, Woodbridge, Boydell & Brewer, 2021, 43. It might well be that the night only developed into a more negative time frame during late medieval discussions, as was

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This article tries to confront this view, emphasizing and outlining a more ambivalent place of the night in medieval thought and mentality[2]. There was at least one very positive nocturnal activity that must be highlighted in this discussion, although it has achieved less attention in the context of the evaluation of the night: the making, the creation, of saints. Challenged by the unanimity of research, I argue in this paper that, for medieval contemporaries, only the night offered the possibility of reorganizing the social fabric in regard to these very special dead. Consequently, my point of departure is to doubt that medieval contemporaries feared the dead in the first place. In fact, medieval European societies sought out physical closeness with their ancestors, as is obvious in many daily practices: in the establishment of churchyards in city centers[3], in the very haptic element of the cult of relics[4], and in ghost stories alike[5] – this was a soci-

shown by Frank Rexroth, *Das Milieu der Nacht. Obrigkeit und Randgruppen im spätmittelalterlichen London*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999, for London. I do thank my students, Simon Heyne, Gianni Pignone and Patrick Wintermantel, for helping me through this vast bibliography of works related to the medieval concept of night and its relation to the other world, and Aaron Vanides for his critical comments on this paper.

2. Mary W. Helms, «Before the Dawn. Monks and the Night in late Antiquity and Early Medieval Europe», *Anthropos*, 99/1 (2004), 177-92, made the point that the night played a central part in medieval monastic life, especially since it was a prime time for prayer. Nevertheless, here too the night does not seem to be an enabler or a positive, bright time of day, since Helms underlines its symbolic attachment to the dark time before Creation, thus opening yet another way of thinking about medieval perceptions of the night. Jean Verdon, *La nuit au Moyen Age*, Paris, Pluriel, 1994, already stresses some more positive sides of the night as well (esp. in his third chapter, «Dieu ou la nuit sublimée»), but mostly he underlines the negative connotations of the medieval night, too.

3. Probably the best overview on this is provided by: Michel Lauwers, *Naissance du cimetière. Lieux sacrés et terre des morts dans l'Occident médiéval*, Paris, Aubier, 2005.

4. Arnold Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien. Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart*, Hamburg, C. H. Beck, 2007², 149-66. Peter Dinzelbacher, *Mentalität und Religiosität des Mittelalters*, Klagenfurt/Wien, Kitab, 2003, 124-83. On the problem of closeness, haptic qualities, and representation of relics, cf. Urte Krass, *Nah zum Leichnam. Bilder neuer Heiliger im Quattrocento*, Munich, DKV, 2012.

5. The close relationship between medieval memoria, society, and the returning dead has already been underlined by Jean-Claude Schmitt, *Les*

ety that lived with their dead. To a large extent, the returning dead are not appearances by nameless representatives of rather abstract monster categories such as zombies or vampires[6]. Mostly, these are apparitions of concrete family members, saints, and fellow Christians[7]. In this perspective, interacting with the dead at night might be an option, and you do not need to be a necromancer to do so.

«Ea vero nocte hiltegart»[8] – with these words, Gerhard of Augsburg (fl. late tenth century) opens a passage of his *Vita sancti Uodalrici*, the life of Bishop Ulrich (d. 973). The scene is set in the year 973, after the funeral procession has taken place and the bier of the saintly bishop has already been solemnly transported from the cathedral to the church of Saint Afra in Augsburg. But the funeral itself is postponed for one day, owing to the fact that the bishop of Regensburg, Wolfgang (d. 994) (himself, it is said, a man of saintly virtue), has only recently arrived and is chosen by the clergy to conduct the rites of the interment himself. But what happened during the night between the procession and the actual interment? Gerhard reports:

In this night, Hildegard, the very pious wife of the already mentioned Count Richwin [Richwin – or *riuuinus*, as the original has it – is the nephew of the deceased] arrived and brought a shirt with her, which was infused with wax. And she asked the most sublime clergymen to shroud the saintly body with care and secretly within it, so that the priestly vestments that he was dressed in should not be consumed by the earth all too quickly. She did so because he had ordered, still in his lifetime, not to bury his body in a wooden coffin, but to lay him in

revenants. Les vivants et les morts dans la société médiévale, Paris, Gallimard, 1994, e.g. in his introduction, 17-19, and in ch. VIII, 197-221.

6. On the complex medieval evidence, cf. e.g. Thomas M. Bohn, *Der Vampir. Ein europäischer Mythos*, Cologne/Weimar/Vienna, Böhlau, 2016, 31-56. Romedio Schmitz-Esser, «Leben mit dem Tod in interdisziplinärer Perspektive: Aktuelle Forschungsfelder, neue Fragen», *Beiträge zur Mittelalterarchäologie in Österreich*, 35 (2019), 13-26, here 18-20.

7. On this complex picture, cf. – other than the already-mentioned seminal book by Jean-Claude Schmitt – the ideas further outlined in: Romedio Schmitz-Esser, «The Revenge of the Dead. Feud, Law Enforcement and the Untameable», *Acta Histriae*, 25 (2017), 121-30.

8. For the full quote, see the following note.

plain earth, and to seclude him with a wooden cover. And they shrouded the saintly body with the shirt according to her wish[9].

As this was compiled during the late tenth century, Gerhard knew the saint he was writing about, and therefore the episode featuring Countess Hildegard (d. around 976) can be credited with some veracity. In the following analysis, I would like to use Gerhard's account to discuss the place of the night in medieval interactions with the dead.

There is little doubt that the night was linked by contemporaries to the dead. They do, after all, appear during the night, and this is the time when their corpses are punished or moved. Since it is none other than Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) who tells such tales in his *Dialogi*, these ideas were common to the medieval mind[10]. Thietmar of Merseburg (d. 982) issued adamant

9. «Ea vero nocte hiltegart uxor praefati riuuini comitis quamvis nupta, tamen satis religiosa venit, camisaleque caera perfusum attulit, et sublimissimos clericos petiit, ut sacro corpori caute secreto circumdaretur, ne sacerdotalis paratura qua indutus erat cito a terra consumeretur, quia ipse adhuc vivens praecepit, ne tabulatum lignum corpori eius subposuissent, sed purae terrae imponerent, et ligneo operculo cooperirent. Qui secundum eius petitionem camisale sacro corpori circumdederunt». Gerhard von Augsburg, *Vita Sancti Uodalrici. Die älteste Lebensbeschreibung des heiligen Ulrich*, ed. by Walter Berschin and Angelika Häse, Heidelberg, 1993, 298. On this passage, cf. as well Thomas Meier, *Die Archäologie des mittelalterlichen Königsgrabes im christlichen Europa*, Stuttgart, Thorbecke Verlag, 2002, 144. Cécile Treffort, *L'église carolingienne et la mort. Christianisme, rites funéraires et pratiques commémoratives*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires Lyon, 1996, 74-75. Alwin Schultz, *Das höfische Leben zur Zeit der Minnesänger*, Leipzig, Hirzel, 1889², II, 466.

10. Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, ed. by Adalbert de Vogüé and transl. by Paul Antin, Paris 1979, III, 176-84 (ch. IV, 52-56). Just to mention but one example, cf. an episode in the account of the foundation of S. Vicente monastery in Lisbon, Portugal: *Indiculum fundationis*, ed. by Sofia Seeger, in Klaus Herbers, Lenka Jiroušková and Bernhard Vogel, *Mirakelberichte des frühen und hohen Mittelalters*, Darmstadt, wbg Academics, 2005, 288-95, here 292. Cf. also Verdon, *La nuit au Moyen Âge*, 67-88 and 221-46. A nightly vision to an abbot at Florence leads to the repositioning of the Margrave Hugo of Tuscany in his grave, as Petrus Damiani tells his correspondent in a letter, written around 1060; Petrus Damiani, *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani*, ed. by Kurt Reindel, Munich 1988, II, 297 (No. 68). Authors such as William of Newburgh testify that people believed that the devil helped the extremely bad to rise from their tombs during the night: «operatione, ut creditor, Sathanae, noctibus egrediebatur ex tumulo», and «Noctibus enim

warnings about the dangers of night: A priest who obstructed a liturgy held by the dead in his church at night was killed by their congregation. Thietmar concludes: «As the day belongs to the living, night is conceded to the dead»[11]. Hence, research on the medieval concept of night and the rise of the dead has noticed that nightfall was associated with a kind of disintegration of the material world, in analogy to the fading of human visual acuity in darkened environments. Thus the door to the otherworld of the dead opens; they return and their ghosts dominate the night as the living reign over the day. Such verdicts are rampant in the literature about medieval attitudes toward the night, always stressing the negative qualities of the night and their closeness to death, demons, the devil, and sin[12].

But this is not the case here with Hildegard. A great many of our medieval sources do not accentuate Thietmar's black and white picture of day and night but tend toward a decidedly ambivalent approach to the dark side of day. This is particularly the case in hagiography, underlining that the night is at least as much associated with the saints as it is with demons and the devil. According to Abbo of Fleury (d. 1004), Saint Edmund is close to his own body during day *and* night[13], and we could easily stress further examples[14]. Nightly vigils are held for the

operatione Sathanae de sepulcro egredient», William of Newburgh, *Historia rerum Anglicarum*, ed. by Hans Claude Hamilton, London 1856, II, 184 and 189 (ch. V, 23-24).

11. «Ut dies vivis, sic nox est concessa defunctis». Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, ed. by Robert Holtzmann, Berlin 1935, 19.

12. Cf. the quotes in n. 1.

13. «De quo constat, sicut et de aliis sanctis omnibus iam cum Christo regnantibus, quod, licet eius anima sit in caelesti gloria, non tamen per uisitationem die noctuque longe est a corporis presentia, cum quo promeruit ea quibus iam perfruitur beatae immortalitatis gaudia». Abbo of Fleury, *Life of St. Edmund from Ms Cotton Tiberius B.ii*, in *Three Lives of English Saints*, ed. by Michael Winterbottom, Toronto 1972, 65-87, here 86.

14. The choir of angels is heard during day at night close to the resting place of Saint Hubert: «Quem nos videntes et audientes ipsum lectum cum strepitu resonantem, quando circa ipsum adstantes eramus, et multi alii, qui nobis testati sunt, quando ibi oracionem facientes, tamquam in die et in nocte sancti illius chori crepitantem crebrius audierunt, et ipsi in timore et pavore conversi, non audebant diutius persistere in basilica; sed pavefacti foris egressi, dicebant: 'Numquam talia vidimus nec audivimus'». *Vita Hug-*

dead, often as early as during their transport home[15]. And, frequently, the saints interact at night. One of the eleven thousand virgins leaves her reliquary after an abbot failed to offer her the promised shrine in silver, and this happened during the night at the time of the matins prayers[16]. According to Gregory the Great, Saint Germanus (d. 576) was taken to heaven by a huge fireball, and of course this happened at night[17], and a similar

berti episcopi Traiectensis, ed. by Wilhelm Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. 6, Hannover/Leipzig, 1913, 471-96, here 493. The intestines of Bishop Otto of Bamberg are interred in a chapel so that the monks at day and at night are reminded of his saintly lifestyle; «Et ne quid exuviis vigilantissimi pastoris devoto gregi deesset, etiam intestina eius, dum aromatibus condirentur, excisa et in urnam missa, in medio capellae Dei genitricis terrae mandata et rotundo lapide signata sunt, ut, dum fratres ad celebranda divinae servitutis munia illuc nocte dieque accurrunt, dilecti patris memoriam prae oculis habeant, et beatissimam eius animam assiduis precibus in alta coelorum sustollant». Ebbo, *Vita Ottonis episcopi Bambergensis*, ed. by Rudolf Köpke, MGH SS 12, Hannover, 1856, 822-83, here 881.

15. Here are some examples, starting with Landgrave Ludwig IV of Thuringia, who died in 1227: «Per totam autem viam reditus sui, quacumque se civitate vel oppido nocturno tempore receperunt, ossa in ecclesia collocantes, orationes ac vigilias per totam noctem a devotis et fidelibus personis fieri procuraverunt». *Cronica Reinhardsbrunnensis*, ed. by Oswald Holder-Egger, MGH SS 30/1, Hannover 1896, 490-656, here 612. The monks of Souvigny hold vigils for Abbot Odilo of Cluny in 1049: «Hinc corpus eius, ut fuit lotum et aromatibus conditum ac hisdem vestibus, quibus ipse vivendo iusserat, indutum, delatum est in ecclesia et positum ante altare apostolorum Petri et Pauli, ubi maximus dolor et luctus actus est ab illis, qui excubias ante eius feretrum illa nocte peregerunt». *Epistola monachorum Silviniacensium de obitu Odilonis abbatis et notitia de electione Hugonis abbatis*, in *Iotsald von Saint-Claude: Vita des Abtes Odilo von Cluny*, ed. by Johannes Staub, MGH SS rer. Germ. 68, Hannover, 1999, 283-90, here 287-88. A similar case is provided for by the sources on the death of Archbishop Giseler of Magdeburg in the year 1004: «Delatum est corpus archiepiscopi ad sanctum Iohannem [= Kloster Berge] ibique proximam noctem dignis servatur honoribus. Postea autem die cum ad sanctum portaretur Mauritium [= Magdeburger Dom], adveniente tunc ibidem rege, ab eo omnique clero et populo suscipitur secundamque noctem diligenter custoditur». Thietmar of Merseburg, *Chronicon*, 266.

16. Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea con le miniature dal codice Ambrosiano C 240 inf.*, ed. by Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, Florence, Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2007, II, 1210.

17. «Germani eiusdem urbis episcopi animam nocte media in globo igneo ad caelum ferri ab angelis aspexit». Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, III, 42 [ch. IV,8].

brightening of the night is accounted for Bishop Liudger of Münster (d. 809)[18]. If we trust Beda Venerabilis (d. 735), the resting place of the body of the first abbot of Wearmouth-Jarrow was disclosed by a light that miraculously illuminated the place at night[19]. In the cult of relics, too, the night is crucial, and I would like to argue that it is not only the abstract association of the night with the dead but the physical reality of night that plays a central role here. Both aspects, the realm of social associations and the reality of darkness and calm in the night, provided the framework for the medieval approach to nocturnal activities regarding the dead.

18. «In ipsa igitur exitus sui hora clementiae suae Dominus dignatus est ostendere signum. Nam Gerfridus presbiter, nepos eius et successor, cum nocte eadem una cum fratribus gratia visitandi ad illum festinus properasset, et paululum adhuc itineris remaneret, viderunt ante se lumen magnum, quasi ignem, in sublime ascendere, ac cunctas tetrae noctis illius effugasse tenebras. Et per hoc statim indicium intelligentes sancti ac venerabilis viri obitum, quod reliquum erat viae cum magna velocitate peregerunt, iamque eum defunctum invenerunt; et subtiliter requirentes, agnoverunt, quod eodem momento veri luminis assiduus speculator et amator migravit ad Dominum, quo eis fuit per lumen ostensum». Altfried, *Vita S. Liudgeri episcopi Mimigardefordensis*, ed. by Georg Heinrich Pertz, MGH SS 2, Hannover, 1829, 403-19, here 414. It is not only the saints that are returning at night with fiery lights. A German chronicler recounts the appearance of a man burning like a torch on several nights of the year 1120: «Media fere nocte videbatur utriusque castelli vigilibus, non imaginarie sed vere, persona viri a muro unius progrediens, et ad alterum per totam campi interiacentis latitudinem procedens, toto corpore in modum faculae vel massae candentis exardens, quae etiam prope castellum oppositum disparuit. Haec visio non semel, sed bis vel tercio similiter apparuit». *Ekkehardi Uraugiensi chronica*, ed. by Georg Waitz, MGH SS 6, Hannover, 1844, 1-267, here 256. Cf. Christa Agnes Tuczay, «'swem er den tôt getuot, dem sûgents ûz daz warme bluot'. Wiedergänger, Blutsauger und Dracula in deutschen Texten des Mittelalters», in Julia Bertschik and Christa Agnes Tuczay (eds.), *Poetische Wiedergänger. Deutschsprachige Vampirismus-Diskurse vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Tübingen, Francke, 2005, 61-82, here 63-64.

19. «Primus autem eiusdem monasterii abbas Petrus presbyter fuit, qui legatus Galliam missus demersus est in sinu maris, qui uocatur Amfleat, et ab incolis loci ignobili traditus sepulturae. Sed omnipotens Deus, ut qualis meriti uir fuerit demonstraret, omni nocte supra sepulchrum eius lux caelestis apparuit, donec animaduertentes uicini, qui uidebant, sanctum fuisse uirum qui ibi esset sepultus, et inuestigantes unde uel quis esset, abstulerunt corpus, et in Bononia ciuitate iuxta honorem tanto uiro congruum in ecclesia posuerunt». Beda Venerabilis, *Histoire ecclésiastique du peuple Anglais*, ed. by Michael Lapidge and transl. by Pierre Monat and Philippe Robin, Paris, Les Belles Letres, 2005, I, 260.

It is noteworthy that Gerhard characterizes Hildegard as tender and affectionate. She asks for a kind of intimacy, sorrowful for the body of the saintly bishop. There is tension here: maybe, the lay woman and her chaste uncle-in-law should not discuss such corporeal matters. In this perspective, it is with care and full intent that her actions are explicitly aimed only to preserve the garments of the saint, not his body itself. After all, she is not characterized as a saint herself, rather on the contrary: «uxor […] nupta, tamen satis religiosa» – it seems that, for our hagiographer, Hildegard is pious *although* she is married, meaning that the regular nocturnal activities associated with her marital status were definitely not positive in the eyes of our clergyman, and Gerhard cared to take such thoughts away from the reader's doubtful mind. In his view, the nocturnal request had nothing to do with dirty sex, but with intimacy in the care for the saint. And the social and physical distance to the corpse is stressed by the qualification of those who answer to her petition: «sublimissimos clericos petiit» – she asked the most sublime clergy to reply to her request. This wording underlines once more the moral distance between Hildegard, the lay woman, and the clergy of Augsburg.

Given all these layers of implication that the hagiographer tried to interlace into his textual fabric, it is astonishing that Gerhard aligned Hildegard's pious activity, aimed at the preservation of the chaste bishop, with the night. What prevented her from doing the same thing during the day? There is no need to argue for a late arrival here, since the clergy sent an envoy to the archbishop of Salzburg to perform the burial ritual for Ulrich well before the actual funeral took place, and Bishop Wolfgang (who arrived in place of the archbishop) comes late himself, leaving plenty of time for Countess Hildegard to arrive. Here, Gerhard definitely wanted to use the concept of night and all the associations it entailed. And it is not disorder or chaos that characterizes the night, as Tzotcho Boiadjiev argued. In our example, we find the place for social reconfiguration regulated by the elite, the inclusion of the dead as saints within the fabric of society[20].

20. Boiadjiev, *Die Nacht im Mittelalter*, esp. 61–66.

It is only during the night that the lay woman and the chaste bishop can become intimate with each other, since the loosening and dissolution of social barriers occurs during the night. In the Middle German tradition of the *Tagelieder*, starting in the later twelfth century, the dawn is the enemy of the lovers, still reunited in bed[21]. Represented by the rising sun and its rays, or a member of the night watch formally ending the night and heralding the start of a new day, it is exactly this quality of the night as suspender of the social order that allowed for the corporeal pleasures of the lovers. Consequently, they mourn the daybreak and wish that the night with its positive faculty of overcoming the barriers that hold society in place and the lovers apart may last much longer. In the earliest Occitan traditions, this bright side of night already appears as clear as daylight: «Dawn has broken. Oh, Mother, he comes alone! Since I walk to him, alas, night watchman, take the clarity of day as darkness», writes the poet of the *Aube bilingue* of Fleury, who might just have been a contemporary of our hagiographer, Gerhard of Augsburg[22]. The positive side of night could be celebrated, after all.

As already noted, although Hildegard and Ulrich are not lovers in the corporeal sense, their intimacy is part of Gerhard's story. After all, in a medieval tradition that culminated in the mystic accounts of corporeal reunion, embracing, or espousal with the very physical body of Christ, the bond between a believer and her savior could be viewed as a kind of love affair[23].

21. On this aspect, see the paper by Agnes Rugel in this volume.

22. Versions and translations of this short but complex text vary substantially, cf. Paul Zumthor, «Un trompe-l'oeil linguistique? Le refrain de l'aube bilingue de Fleury», *Romania*, 105 (1984), 171-92, who quotes no less than 19 versions and as many different translations, *ibid*. 182-86. I base my translation on Zumthor's versions, but there is room for interpretation on the exact meaning of the text. The basic point for our argument, though, seems to be untouched by this complex discussion: Night is somewhat positive and allowing for love, daybreak is feared by the lover.

23. «It is more than evident that the mystical love between god and the soul mirrors that between human partners, and that the relation between contemporary theological and worldly love texts is an almost exact analogy». Peter Dinzelbacher, *Structures and Origins of the Twelfth-Century 'Renaissance'*, Stuttgart, Hiersemann, 2017, 158-59. A good example is Mechthild of Magdeburg, cf. Peter Dinzelbacher, *Deutsche und niederländische Mystik des Mittelalters. Ein Studienbuch*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2012, 95-103.

But Gerhard is cautious and leaves no doubt that there is a moral distance between Hildegard and Ulrich. This is not astounding given Hildegard's gender and her being a lay person, although she is of noble birth and a direct in-law of the saint for whom she is caring. Certainly, as one of the closest female family members, special care for Ulrich's dead body was part of her role in the eyes of our writer. Nevertheless, the dead bishop is in wiser hands, so we must ask why Hildegard acts at all. Would it not have been easier to simply omit her care for her relative in the hagiographic account?

On the surface, Gerhard's account of Hildegard deviates from its author's general strategy of propagating Ulrich's sanctity. But I suggest that there are two points supporting the inclusion of the countess in the story. First, the care for the future state of the corpse is not without consequence. There is an overall ambiguity in the attitude toward the saint's body in the Middle Ages, which Gerhard mirrors here. On the one hand, he stresses the will of the deceased to have no special treatment, especially in regard to the conditions of his resting place after death. Knowing that the lack of a coffin and the placement directly in an earth pit will lead to quicker decomposition of the body, Ulrich's will underlines his humility and disregard for the body, and thus his sanctity. But then the community of the clergy of Augsburg is left with the conundrum of how to honor and preserve the body of their future saint without breaking his pious will. Breaking his will denies one of the aspects of his holiness, but a quick decay of his body does not produce another sign of sanctity, the *corpus incorruptum*, the wondrous preservation of the corpse. But medieval saints are stubborn in this regard: The seventh-century Bishop Ansbert of Rouen (d. 695) is said to have moved his head on the attempt of someone to lay a waxen shroud over his face, the corpse showing how superfluous such an attempt at protecting the dead body from decay was[24].

But what if Hildegard were to appear on the stage and ask for a mitigation of the will? She would be just the person to do so: A noblewoman, kin to Ulrich. But even then she asks only for

24. *Vita Ansberti episcopi Rotomagensis auctore qui dicitur Aigrado*, ed. by Wilhelm Levison, MGH SS rer. Merov. 5, Hannover, 1910, 613–41, here 636.

the preservation of the garments, not the body – only this curious restraint makes it possible for the clergy to accept her offer to protect the body. The same trick is used more widely by writers of the time. The above-mentioned Thietmar of Merseburg notes with some insecurity the desecration of the tomb of Charlemagne (d. 814) by Emperor Otto III (d. 1002) in Aachen. In doing so, he comments only indirectly on the state of the body of Charlemagne: Otto took a golden cross and some of the preserved garments from the tomb of his great predecessor. Thietmar chose his words carefully here: The garments were *imputribilium*, «not putrefied». Given the insecurities about the sanctity of Charlemagne in the eleventh century, Thietmar uses the same trick as Gerhard of Augsburg: Avoid saying something about the corpse; tell them about the garments instead. In this context, it might be interesting to note that the theft of vestments from the dead is among the nocturnal activities that are frequently mentioned in our sources: Burchard of Worms (d. 1025), in line with older canonical rulings, included grave robbery and especially the withdrawal of clothes amid the sacrileges he listed, and he explicitly places the scene of such thefts at nighttime[25]. When the corpse of Pope Innocent III (d. 1216) was robbed of its vestments on the bier in the cathedral of Perugia in 1216, Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) adds that this happened during the night[26]. Although I hesitate to count this among the brightest sides of nocturnal activities, it seems that robbing the dead was very much linked to the dark hours of the day.

25. «Violasti sepulchrum, ita dico, dum aliquem videres sepelire, et in nocte infringeres sepulchrum et tolleres vestimenta eius»? Burchard von Worms, *Decretorum libri XX. Ex consiliis et orthodoxorum patrum decretis, tum etiam diversarum nationum synodis seu loci communes congesti*. Ergänzter Nachdruck der Editio princeps Köln 1548, ed. by Gérard Fransen and Theo Kölzer, Aalen, 1992, fol. 193r (ch. XIX,5).

26. «Post hoc veni in civitatem quandam que Perusium nuncupatur, in qua papam Innocentium inveni mortuum, sed nundum sepultum, quem de nocte quidam furtive vestimentis preciosis, cum quibus sci(licet speliendus) erat, spoliaverunt; corpus autem eius fere nudum et fetidum in ecclesia relinquerunt. Ego autem ecclesiam intravi et ocul(a)ta fide cognovi quam brevis sit et vana huius seculi fallax gloria». *Lettres de Jacques de Vitry (1160/70-1240), évêque de Saint-Jean-d'Acre*, ed. by Robert B. C. Huygens, Leiden, 1960, 73.

With Gerhard's account, however, a second aspect comes into play: We are looking at a text, and the text itself brings into the bright daylight what happened during the dark of night. Here, the story of Hildegard shows its full potential within the hagiographic narrative: It adds the air of directness, truthfulness, and singularity to the text, which, even in medieval times, was often seen as topical, somewhat unreliable, or at least stretching the truth. The impression given here to the reader is of the unveiling of night, the intimacy of participation in the act of burial and what it implied. In this sense, the text speaks to a clerical elite interested in the concrete act of burial. It is only indirectly addressed to laymen, as the Latin in which it is written already implies the need of an intermediary to translate it into the vernacular first.

This leads us to yet another aspect of our story: The night not only loosened social ties, it could also bind a group of agents together. The historian Knut Görich has noticed that exhumations of the saints in the course of a *translatio* – the transfer of a saint's body – were often explicitly described as being performed «clam»; that is, in secret[27]. To open a tomb, examine the bones, or inter a saint by night provided secrecy. But since it is only the texts we are taking this information from, we can see that it was a limited secrecy that – again – had more to do with intimacy and the forming of an in-group that especially cared for the body of the saint. These extraordinary dead were handled by the clergy of the church, and the night gave them the possibility to gather and to pre-visit what was left of the bones. In a twelfth-century text describing the 'elevation' of the bishops Godehard (d. 1038) and Bernward of Hildesheim (d. 1022), the reason for the nocturnal search of their tombs is explicitly stated: It is the fear of being unable to find the tombs quickly during the ceremony in front of the believers in daylight[28]. Moreover, the night

27. Cf. Knut Görich, «Otto III. öffnet das Karlsgrab in Aachen. Überlegungen zu Heiligenverehrung, Heiligsprechung und Traditionsbildung», in Gerd Althoff, Ernst Schubert (eds.), *Herrschaftsrepräsentation im ottonischen Sachsen*, Sigmaringen, Thorbecke, 1998, 381-430, esp. 389-92.

28. As to this case, see the recently published article by Esther-Luisa Schuster, «Die heimliche *inventio* der Reliquien Godehards und Bernwards von Hildesheim im 12. Jahrhundert», in Stephan Conermann, Harald Wolter

offered the opportunity to prepare the body for interment. This also included embalming, as I was able to show for several early and high medieval translations, where re-embalming is frequently mentioned. The fragrant odor and the uncorrupt state of the saints is by no means only a topical feature of hagiography but also a result of very physical and concrete measures taken in handling these corpses. The intimacy of night had the advantage that a limited group could prepare the corpse, and do so unseen by the public eye. Thus, signs of sanctity were arranged for in secrecy, and – in the case of a *translatio* – the state of the relics could be first supervised before showing the results to the public. Again, this helped in raising the correct expectations, often important to the performative side of these events. According to Donizo (d. after 1136), writing in the early eleventh century, Bishop Gottfried not only found Saint Apollonius's uncorrupt body in Brescia, but he cut its still-bleeding arm off[29]. If we are to take this account seriously, the performance of showing the extant and bleeding arm of a saint who had died eight centuries earlier seems to be the trick here. Better you made sure beforehand that such miracles were happening in front of a wider public.

This leads me to the last point, a more empathic reading of accounts of nocturnal activities. Even a little imagination suffices for this: In a medieval church, at night, only the dim, flickering light of candles illuminated the scene[30]. Opening a tomb under

von dem Knesebeck and Miriam Quiering (eds.), *Geheimnis und Verborgenes im Mittelalter. Funktion, Wirkung und Spannungsfelder*, Berlin/Boston, De Gruyter, 2021, 237–53.

29. Donizone, *Vita di Matilde di Canossa*, ed. and transl. by Paolo Golinelli, Milan, Jaca Book, 2008.

30. Cf., e.g., Vera Henkelmann, *Künstliches Licht im Kontext mittelalterlicher Gebetspraxis*, in Mirko Breitenstein and Christian Schmidt (eds.), *Medialität und Praxis des Gebets*, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2019, 431–57. Vera Henkelmann, «Künstliches Licht im mittelalterlichen Sakralraum. Eine erste Annäherung», *Liturgisches Jahrbuch*, 68/3 (2018), 173–96. Vera Henkelmann, *Spätgotische Marienleuchter. Formen, Funktionen, Bedeutungen*, Regensburg, Schnell und Steiner, 2014, and the remarks by Livermore, *When the Dead Rise*, 43. That the physical perception of the night plays a major role for its understanding has already been underlined by Helms, *Before the Dawn*. In this context, she underlines the importance of sleep deprivation as a method of monastic asceticism, *ibid*. 186–87. On this, cf. also Jerome Kroll and Bernard

these circumstances, it is not unlikely that the body under scrutiny looked fresher, livelier; that the herbs and the incense used for embalming did their trick and made the corpse smell fragrant and somewhat exotic. This disquieting light mirrored the discomfort of being in church at night, adding to the excitement and exceptionality of the scene. At the same time, the relative silence of night sharpened the senses, as medieval authors argued, and made people more susceptible to divine messages[31]. Again, it is the ambivalence that made the night work as a meeting space between the living and the dead, and once more this is not merely and straightforwardly a negative, scary occasion, nor is it only bright, light, and happy. At nighttime, intimacy, meaningfulness, and the otherworld merged into medieval daily life.

In this essay, I have underlined that the night was an ambiguous time of the day. The dead could come to life, but this was not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, it was a time when social ties loosened, allowing for a reconfiguration of order, and this could entail the making of a saint. Simultaneously, the night was a time of anxiety *and* an enabler of sanctity. Nocturnal activities could even prepare miracles, and the darkness shrouded the efforts of embalming and pre-inspecting holy bodies. At the same time, the dark of night bound together the elitist group that promoted a potential saint, and the physicality of a dimly lit church opened the possibility for a suggestive perception of events.

This said, I would like to conclude with another quotation from Gerhard of Augsburg. At the moment when Ulrich felt his life drawing to a close, he asked for a cross of ashes to be laid out on the floor of the church, allowing for him to lie himself

Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind. The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics*, New York/London, Routledge, 2005, 75-82, and their statistical analysis of saints' lives on this behavior, *ibid.* 214-15. See also the paper by Anne-Lydie Dubois in this volume.

31. A Carthusian monk of the fifteenth century from Erfurt, Jakob von Paradies, underlined that the cessation of the disturbances of daily life at night helped in perceiving the divine messages and visions at night; Christoph Fasbender, *Von der Wiederkehr der Seelen Verstorbener. Untersuchungen zu Überlieferung und Rezeption eines Erfolgstextes Jakobs von Paradies*, Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag Winter, 2001, 58. In this, Jakob follows an old tradition, cf. Verdon, *La nuit au Moyen Âge*, 263-65.

down on it in a last gesture of humility[32]. He did so «in that very night, before dawn», and remained in this position until dawn illuminated the whole breadth of the world, as Gerhard put it[33]. Only then, when the sun had risen, did he die, thus aligning the daylight with the saint's ascension to heaven. The ambiguity of the night faded, the unambiguous bright day dawned, and the saint was created.

32. This was a widespread medieval custom, cf. Romedio Schmitz-Esser, *Der Leichnam im Mittelalter: Einbalsamierung, Verbrennung und die kulturelle Konstruktion des toten Körpers*, Ostfildern, Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2014, 596-98. The passage from Gerhard's account is an early example of the concept of the 'ascetic night,' already discussed by Craig Koslofsky, *Evening's Empire. A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, 75-79, for the early modern period.

33. «In illa nocte antequam aurora sextae feriae bene cognosci potuisset, asperso cinere in modum crucis, et aqua benedicta aspersa se deponi fecit, et sic iacebat usque dum aurora cunctam latitudinem orbis inluminaret». Gerhard of Augsburg, *Vita*, 290.

ABSTRACT

Romedio Schmitz-Esser, *'Eo vero nocte hiltegart…': Nocturnal Activities and the Dead in the Middle Ages*

In contrast to the traditional picture of a dark night associated to the dead, demons, and death in most medieval studies, this article argues that nighttime was more ambivalent than this. The dead themselves were not necessarily seen as negative in medieval society, and major steps in the creation of saints were directly linked to the night. Using a passage from the 10th century *Vita sancti Uodalrici* as an example, the article shows how nighttime activities helped in preparing a future saint's body for burial and (later) translation, and how gender played a part in this process. In this perspective, the night is not simply bright nor dark, but an ambiguous time of day that loosened and at the same time allowed for a reconfiguration of social ties.

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