

Liturgical Latin in Early Medieval Gaul¹

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The study of Christian and, more specifically, liturgical Latin during the twentieth century has been dominated to a great extent by the so-called *École de Nimègue*. Founded by Joseph Schrijnen, this school prospered under the inspiring leadership of its most important teacher, Christine Mohrmann. Mohrmann developed and extended the ideas of Schrijnen concerning the language of the Christian Church from the first centuries through the Middle Ages. Although the ideas of Mohrmann have been criticised, she has left a significant collection of studies on various linguistic features of Christian culture. During the second half of her scholarly career (that is, during the 1950s), Mohrmann occupied herself intensively with the language of the liturgy, in particular the language and style of the Latin liturgy. It is this part of her work that I shall focus on in this article.

From the examples Mohrmann chose it is clear that her theories concerning liturgical Latin were founded primarily on Roman liturgical texts. One of her favourite objects of study was the Roman Mass Canon, composed between 400 and 600. Nowhere, however, does she explicitly exclude early medieval liturgical texts coming from other regions from her conclusions. The unsuspecting reader, therefore, could easily interpret her findings in this field as applying to Latin liturgical texts in general. It is my intention to test Mohrmann's theories concerning the language and style of liturgical texts by investigating the situation in early medieval Gaul, broadly before the reformation of its liturgy, a process which started around 750 at the latest. For my investigation, I shall use the most important representative of the Gallican liturgy, the *Missale Gothi-*

¹ I would like to thank Arpád Orbán and Irene van Renswoude for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article.

cum.² The name of this book, added by a late medieval or even postmedieval scribe, is misleading, for the book is neither a missal nor Gothic. It is a sacramentary, containing the presidential prayers of the mass only. The book was written around 700 in a script related to that of Luxeuil, most likely for the church of Autun.³

Liturgical Latin, in Mohrmann's view, forms an important part of Christian Latin, which is marked by a set of characteristic features. Mohrmann emphasizes the difference between liturgical Latin and colloquial Christian language. "The basis and starting point of Liturgical Latin", she states in a tripartite lecture on the subject, "is the Early Christian idiom, which, however, through the use of features of style drawn from the Early Roman sacral tradition mingled with biblical stylistic elements, has taken on a strongly hieratic character, widely removed from the Christian colloquial language".⁴

In her work, Mohrmann repeatedly draws a comparison between the language of the Latin liturgy and the language of Greek epic poetry, with Homer as its most important representative. Considering the prayer texts of the Latin liturgy, Mohrmann is struck by the same pursuit of distinction from everyday language which can also be found in the epic work of Homer. Liturgical Latin and Homer make the same use of standard formulae to form the basic units of construction. In the early Christian era the liturgical framework was filled in through improvisation.⁵ Greek epic poetry as well as the early Latin liturgy are marked by a distinctive lexicon of their own. In this vocabulary, words are used which are unique for this specific field of language, while other words do not occur, being too trite or too common.

Mohrmann, then, arrives at a definition of "the earliest liturgical Latin" as

² *Missale Gothicum* (Vat. Reg. lat. 317), ed. E. ROSE (Turnhout, 2005: CCSL 159D).

³ A summary of the discussion of the origin of the *Missale Gothicum* and its place in the Gallican liturgy is given in ROSE, "Liturgical Latin in the *Missale Gothicum* (Vat. reg. lat. 317): A reconsideration of Christine Mohrmann's approach", *Sacris Erudiri* 42 (2003), pp. 97-121, at pp. 104-107, and EAD., "Liturgical commemoration of the Saints in the *Missale Gothicum* (Vat. reg. lat. 317): New approaches to the liturgy of medieval Gaul", *Vigiliae Christianae* 58 (2004), pp. 75-97, at pp. 77-81, but mark the printing error on p. 77 where the date of the manuscript should read "between 690 and 710".

⁴ C. MOHRMANN, *Liturgical Latin: Its Origins and Character* (Washington DC, 1957), pp. 53-54.

⁵ C. MOHRMANN, "Notes sur le latin liturgique", in: EAD., *Études sur le Latin des chrétiens*, 4 vols. (Rome, 1961-1977: *Storia e letteratura* 65, 87, 103, 143), 2, *Latin chrétien et médiéval*, pp. 93-107, at pp. 103-104. On improvisation see: MOHRMANN, *Liturgical Latin*, p. 54.

a strongly stylized, more or less artificial language, of which many elements – for instance the Orations – were not easily understood even by the average Christian of the fifth century or later. This language was far removed from that of everyday life, a fact which was certainly appreciated, since, at the time, people still retained the *sens du sacré*.⁶

Mohrmann, as we see, emphasizes the hieratic character of liturgical language, which raises the language of liturgical texts above the everyday language. Elsewhere Mohrmann, following scholars of ancient epic literature, adopts the idea of ‘artificial language’, *Kunstsprache*, to describe the character of liturgical language. The Latin of the liturgy is apparently a good example of this kind of “stylized language” used by a more or less closed community with a shared tradition.⁷

An important addition to the above-mentioned categorization of liturgical Latin is found in a treatment of the word *missa* by Mohrmann. In this study, Mohrmann presents several explanations of the word and its etymology. The suggestion that the word would be a vulgar paraphrase of a Greek original is rejected. According to Mohrmann,

*la présence d'un vulgarisme dans la formule est très peu compatible avec le caractère général de la langue et du style de la liturgie latine: langue hiératique rigoureusement stylisée et très peu populaire.*⁸

Not only is the liturgical language characterized by this hieratic style, but the early liturgical vocabulary, according to Mohrmann, is also dominated by a manifest aversion to words with a special meaning in pagan cults. Rather than use a word associated with the pagan religion, Christians formed a new word, or introduced a loan word from Greek or Hebrew. This fear of pagan elements diminished when the Christian religion was firmly in charge. According to Mohrmann, the various ‘renaissances’ played an important part in this development. Words rejected by the early Christian literature would be rediscovered in these periods of admiration for the classical tradition.⁹

⁶ MOHRMANN, *Liturgical Latin*, p. 54.

⁷ C. MOHRMANN, “Le latin médiéval”, in: EAD., *Études*, 2, pp. 181-232, at pp. 194-195.

⁸ C. MOHRMANN, “Missa”, in: EAD., *Études sur le latin des chrétiens*, 3, *Latin chrétien et liturgique*, pp. 351-376, at p. 358.

⁹ C. MOHRMANN, “Quelques observations sur l’évolution stylistique du Canon de la messe romain”, in: EAD., *Études*, 3, pp. 227-244, at p. 241: “Cette innovation est pour une large part due aux ‘renaissances’ successives qui ont laissé leurs traces dans nos textes liturgiques”. Elsewhere, however, Mohrmann dates the beginning of the acceptance of pagan terms earlier, in the

In this article, I shall demonstrate the existence in the *Missale Gothicum* of vulgar elements of various kinds. Furthermore, I want to demonstrate the liberty of the Gallican liturgists in using words originating in a pagan context. Finally, I will present a few examples indicating that the language and vocabulary of liturgical texts may well be less hieratic and nearer to daily life than Mohrmann would have us believe.

Vulgar elements

When I mention the occurrence in the *Missale Gothicum* of vulgar elements of *any* kind, I do not exaggerate. Most interesting vulgar features in both orthography and grammar can be found in this early medieval sacramentary. In the limited space of this article, I will concentrate on one important syntactic feature of vulgar Latin texts, namely the use of the ablative absolute and similar constructions.¹⁰

The use of the ablative absolute, so popular in classical literature, changed during the early medieval period, as authors used it in an incorrect way, or resorted to the less complicated solution of a subordinate clause.¹¹ The construction is used incorrectly when the subject of the ablative absolute coincides with the subject of the main clause. Gregory of Tours, for instance, does not hesitate to use the construction in this way.¹² In the *Missale Gothicum* an example of such a practice is found in the *Exultet*, the Easter light hymn.

Quapropter adstantibus uobis, fratres karissimi, ad tam miram sancti huius luminis claritatem, una mecum, quaeso, dei omnipotentis misericordiam inuocate ut
 ...¹³

Here, the subject of the ablative absolute “*adstantibus uobis*” corresponds to the subject of the verb in the main clause, “*inuocate*”.

fifth and sixth century. C. MOHRMANN, “Le problème du vocabulaire chrétien: Expériences d’évangélisation paléo-chrétiennes et modernes”, in: EAD., *Études*, 1, pp. 113-122, at p. 121: “*on peut expliquer de cette manière pourquoi, à partir du cinquième et du sixième siècle, certains termes techniques du culte païen firent leur entrée dans la liturgie chrétienne. L’adoption de ces mots est un symptôme de la victoire du christianisme*”.

¹⁰ See for a more elaborate treatment of the matter ROSE, in: *Missale Gothicum*, pp. 94-98, and EAD., “Liturgical Latin in the *Missale Gothicum*”.

¹¹ V. VÄÄNÄNEN, *Introduction au Latin vulgaire* (Paris, 1981), pp. 166-169.

¹² M. BONNET, *Le Latin de Grégoire de Tours* (Hildesheim, 1968), pp. 558-568.

¹³ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 225, p. 437.

In addition to the decline of the ablative absolute, the development of two other absolute constructions in Late Latin can be observed.¹⁴ In the *Missale Gothicum* examples of both the accusative absolute and the nominative absolute are found. In general, the subject of the accusative absolute quite often coincides with the subject of the main clause. This is, however, not the case in the examples found in the *Missale Gothicum*.

*Deus bonarum actionum et inspirator et doctor, qui uoluptates per inedia ieiunii corporalis restrictas agnitionem tuam nostris cordibus tribues, da ...*¹⁵

In the second example, the ablative absolute is employed correctly, next to a pure accusative absolute.

*In ieiuni humilitate substratis, omnipotens sempiterne deus, absterge omnem labe peccati, ut mundata nostri cordis arcana cum abstinentia cyborum, iurgiorum etiam inquietudines exclusas dileccio tua et proximis nostris in cordibus pura succrescat. Per ...*¹⁶

The development of the nominative absolute is an almost logical result of the decline of the ablative absolute and the rise of the accusative absolute. As the absolute function of the construction is felt less and less, the need for an ablative to express this distinguishing function is no longer acknowledged. The difference between a nominative absolute and a mere anacoluthon, though, is often difficult to determine, which is obvious in the two following examples from the *Missale Gothicum*.

*[Deus] praesta ut hic populus tuus in praeceptis oboedienter ambulans, sicut est partus uirginis singularis, ita eos benedictionum tuarum ueri luminis ymbrem infundas.*¹⁷

*In quo [sc. Saturnino] proficiens fidei latitudo, dum cathedram suscipit sanctitatis coronam rapuit passionis.*¹⁸

As the rules are observed less strictly, confusion increases. In the *Missale Gothicum*, many instances of ablative and accusative within one construction

¹⁴ VÄÄNÄNEN, *Introduction*, p. 166.

¹⁵ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 193, p. 425.

¹⁶ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 335, p. 479.

¹⁷ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 8, p. 353.

¹⁸ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 124, p. 400.

are found. It is often difficult, however, to distinguish confusion of constructions from vulgar orthography, changing under the influence of phonetic developments in the spoken language.

*Deus, qui per unigenitum Iesum Christum filium tuum dominum nostrum sanctificationem salutis aeternae aquas regenerantibus praestetisti ...*¹⁹

Within the construction “*aquas regenerantibus*”, accusative and ablative are clearly confused. In the following sentence the inconsistency is obviously caused by an orthographic mistake.

*... et intercedentem*²⁰ *beata Maria genetrice tua contra cotidiani hostis insidias cotidiana nos protectione defende.*²¹

Examples such as these of syntactical vulgarisms could be multiplied. In the next section I will examine some features of the vocabulary of the *Missale Gothicum* which contradict the alleged aversion to pagan vocabulary in liturgical language.

Vocabulary

In the *Missale Gothicum*, a book written in a period in which the classical literary tradition is sometimes considered to have been at its very nadir, several quite rare classical words occur. I will show some of the most striking examples.

In a pagan context, the word *altare* was normally used as a *plurale tantum*. Therefore the Christians preferred the singular form.²² In the *Missale Gothicum* both plural and singular occur alike:

*Sit nobis, domine, quaesumus, medicina mentis et corporis quod de sancti altaris tui benedictione percipimus.*²³

¹⁹ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 77, p. 380.

²⁰ Mohlberg in his rather inaccurate edition erroneously omits the final *-m*, which is nevertheless clearly visible in the manuscript (*Missale Gothicum*, ed. L.C. MOHLBERG (Rome, 1961), p. 23).

²¹ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 102, p. 391.

²² M.P. ELLEBRACHT, *Remarks on the Vocabulary of the Ancient Orations in the Missale Romanum* (Nijmegen, 1963), pp. 19-20.

²³ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 24, p. 359.

*Et hos, quos recitatio commemoravit ante sanctum altare ...*²⁴

*Offerentium nominibus recensitis, qui deuota altaribus munera humilitatis ieiunio mentis et corporis a domino depraecantur.*²⁵

For the word ‘prophet’, the Christians preferred the Greek loan word *προφήτης* to the Latin words *uates* and *fatidicus*.²⁶ In the *Missale Gothicum*, however, forms of *propheta* and *prophetia* occur, but so do the forms *uates* and *uaticinium*, although the latter are in the minority.²⁷

The same goes for the words *martyr* and *testis*. To denote those who died for the faith, the Christians generally used the Greek loan word *martyr*. In the *Missale Gothicum* the Latin equivalent *testis* is found as well, which was also used in Christian poetry.

I could give many more examples. A final and most striking example is found in the *Benedictio* of the vigil for Epiphany. This feast day commemorates, among other miracles, the water made wine at the marriage in Cana.²⁸ In the benediction, the wine is called *falernus*:

*Conuerte ad te quaerendum stupidas mentes hominum, qui nuptiale conuiuio uertisti laticis in falernum.*²⁹

Falernus is a classical image for the best wine, produced in the area of Falernus, Campania, a region famed for its wines. Such a classical household word, used for example by the poet Horace, would hardly be expected in a Gallican Christian liturgical text.³⁰

²⁴ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 198, p. 427.

²⁵ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 160, p. 414.

²⁶ C. MOHRMANN, “Quelques traits caractéristiques du latin des chrétiens”, in: EAD., *Études*, 1, pp. 21-50, at p. 42.

²⁷ *Missale Gothicum*, Nos. 11, 198 and 384.

²⁸ On Epiphany as the Gallican celebration of the *tria miracula* see: H. AUF DER MAUR, *Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit, 1, Herrenfeste in Woche und Jahr* (Regensburg, 1983: *Gottesdienst der Kirche: Handbuch der Liturgiewissenschaft* 5.1), p. 158.

²⁹ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 81, p. 382.

³⁰ Here, Prudentius and Gregory of Tours may have inspired the composer of this prayer; they both use the word *falernum* in the context of Epiphany. Prudentius, *Liber Cathemerinon*, IX v. 28, ed. M.P. CUNNINGHAM (Turnhout, 1966: CCSL 126), pp. 3-72, at p. 48; Gregory of Tours, *Liber de virtutibus sancti Martini*, II, 16 and II, 26, ed. B. KRUSCH, in: *Gregorii Turonensis Opera*, 2, *Miracula et opera minora* (Hannover, 1885: MGH SRM 1.2), pp. 134-211, at pp. 164 and 169 respectively. See also the study of the Christian use of the word by E. BROUETTE, “‘*Vinum falernum*’: Contribution à l’étude de la sémantique latine au haut moyen âge”, *Classica et*

As these examples show, words originating in the pagan classical tradition certainly do play a part in Christian liturgical texts, even in as far remote an area as northeast Gaul, even in the period between the supposed decline of the classical tradition and the so called Carolingian Renaissance.

Style

The last aspect of Mohrmann's definition of liturgical Latin to be examined here, is the hieratic character of liturgical language. Liturgical language, according to her definition, was in a register "far removed from that of everyday life, a fact which was certainly appreciated, since, at the time, people still retained the *sens du sacré*". In the vocabulary of liturgical texts as collected in the *Missale Gothicum*, however, everyday life is perhaps more present than Mohrmann suggests. I would like to demonstrate this reverberation of daily life in the liturgical language with the help of some lexical illustrations. I confine myself to examples where words are used which are directly or indirectly linked with animals or cattle.

The first word I want to consider is *saginat* ('fattened'). It is used four times in the *Missale Gothicum*. In a prayer for Easter, Christ's death is compared with several images of oblation found in the Old Testament.

*Ipse est agnus immaculatus, qui prioris populi prima pascha in Aegypto fuerat immolatus, ipse est aries in uerticem montis excelsi de ueprae prolatus sacrificio destinatus, ipse est uitululus saginatus, qui in tabernaculo patris nostri Abrahae propter hospites est uictimatus.*³¹

Christ is the passover lamb, slaughtered in Egypt (Ex. 12); he is the ram, found on top of the mountain Moria, where Abraham was about to sacrifice his son (Gn. 22); he is the fatted calf ("*uitulus saginatus*") Abraham offered his divine guests at Mamre (Gn. 18). In this sentence the word *saginat*, connected with a calf, is used in an unsurprising way. More often, however, the word is used in a spiritual context: the Eucharist, the feeding of the soul, or even the heavenly marriage feast.

Medievalia 10 (1950), pp. 267-273. Brouette does not mention the use of *falernum* in the *Missale Gothicum*.

³¹ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 291, pp. 461-462.

*Cybo caeleste saginati et poculum aeterni calicis recreati, fratres karissimi, domino deo nostro laudes et gratias indesinenter agamus.*³²

*Dignum et iustum est ... tibi sanctificare ieiunium, quod nos ad animarum medilla et castigationum corporum seruare docuisti, quia restrictis corporibus animae saginantur et in quo exterior homo noster adfligitur, dilatatur interior.*³³

*Porrige pastor aepolum, quo uicta fame saeculi cybis aeternitatis animae saginentur.*³⁴

The word *saginated*, used with a view to expressing abundance and utmost satisfaction, suggests the scene of people stuffing themselves, and calls to mind the image of a fattened pig bred for slaughter. The latter is an image with which the Gallic listener will be familiar, as pig breeding was one of the most important means of existence in early medieval northern Europe.³⁵ Although the word *saginated* is already used in a spiritual way by Tertullian,³⁶ it was not discussed by Mohrmann. Could it be that she ignored the word because it did not suit her idea of liturgical language?

In a series of prayers in preparation for the Easter vigil, the burning of the sacrifice of the evening prayer is compared with the burning of the faith in the heart of the faithful, where the latter is expressed with the word “*assato*”, roasted:

*Domini gratiam per aquam et spiritum renati et per multiplicem paternae dilectionis prouisionem innumeris laqueis abstracti, huius diuinae dignacionis auctorem dominum incensu uespertinae praecis sacrificio et in caelesti patina per spiritum erecto, et igne illo, quem ipse in nobis accendi desiderat, sollempniter assato praecariis affectibus, fratres karissimi, dipraecimor ut ...*³⁷

³² *Missale Gothicum*, No. 23, p. 359.

³³ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 179, pp. 420-421.

³⁴ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 91, p. 386.

³⁵ A point to which my attention was kindly drawn by my colleague Karl Heidecker. Cf. C. WICKHAM, “European forests in the Early Middle Ages: Landscape and land clearance”, in: *L’ambiente vegetale nell’alto medioevo*, 2 vols. (Spoleto, 1990: *Settimane di studio del Centro Italiano di Studi sull’Alto Medioevo* 37), 2, pp. 479-545.

³⁶ A. BLAISE, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* (Turnhout, 1954), p. 733 refers to Tertullianus, *De resurrectione mortuorum* 8, ed. J.G.P. BORLEFFS (Turnhout, 1954: CCL 2), pp. 921-1012, at p. 931 (“*caro corpore et sanguine Christi uescitur, ut et anima de Deo saginetur*”).

³⁷ *Missale Gothicum*, No. 221, p. 435.

In this sentence, which is an obvious allusion to Psalm 140, 2 (“*dirigatur oratio mea sicut incensum in conspectu tuo, eleuatio manuum mearum sacrificium uespertinum*”), the word *assato* seems rather exaggerated. *Assatus* is used for the roasting of meat, and possibly, but quite seldom, for the offering of animals. The image here, where one would rather expect a word like *accensus* or *incensus*, is perhaps excessively expressive.

These examples do not display a strongly hieratic choice of words, far removed from daily life. In my view, the words and images used in the prayers of the *Missale Gothicum* can very well be fit into the experience of everyday life.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, I have expounded Christine Mohrmann’s ideas concerning liturgical Latin. Liturgical Latin in her view is a hieratic language, highly stylized and far removed from everyday language. Liturgical texts in general lack vulgar elements. In the liturgical vocabulary there is little room for words connected with non-Christian religious traditions.

When comparing this general image of liturgical language to the language and style of an early medieval Gallican liturgical source, in this case the *Missale Gothicum*, some important differences become visible. In the first place, the text of the *Missale Gothicum*, however ‘sacred’ it may be, is not without vulgar features. Here I have only touched on this matter, but much more could be said about vulgar elements in orthography, morphology and all other fields of language.³⁸ Concerning the vocabulary, it is clear that the composers of the prayers did not hesitate to use words from a pagan context. Even very rare words, used in classical poetry, are found in this Gallican sacramentary. Moreover, words easily associated with everyday life and trivial matters are used freely.

Mohrmann’s narrow emphasis on the hieratic character of liturgical language seems to give away her rather one-sided interest in Roman liturgy. In comparison with the Roman liturgy, the Gallican texts are far less sober and severe. The Gallican prayers are known for their copious and rich poetic character. This is even more true of Spanish liturgical texts. It is therefore regrettable that Mohrmann did not pay much attention to liturgical families other than the Roman branch. As I observed at the beginning, Mohrmann was

³⁸ See ROSE, in: *Missale Gothicum*, pp. 37-187.

concerned with liturgical Latin especially in the second half of her career, during the 1950s. It was in the same period that she made a case for the maintenance of Latin in the contemporary Roman Catholic Church.³⁹ In this context, I cannot leave out the following striking passage found in the above-quoted lecture on liturgical Latin, where Mohrmann raps her opponents' knuckles:

The advocates of the use of the vernacular in the liturgy who maintain that even in Christian Antiquity the current speech of everyday life, "the Latin of the common man", was employed, are far off the mark.⁴⁰

At the same time, Mohrmann took up arms against a new Latin version of the Psalms, more in accordance with the classical grammar than the Vulgate version of this poetry. She even addressed herself to the pope to defend the special character of the biblical language, and did so successfully. Could it be this struggle for the preservation of the age-old tradition of the Roman Catholic liturgy, that made Mohrmann focus rather narrowly on the exemplary ancient Roman texts? Was it because of this struggle that she did not see, or did not want to see, the features of liturgical texts which contradicted her theory and harmed her current concern?

³⁹ On Mohrmann as a prominent figure in the debate on twentieth-century liturgical practice, see E. ROSE, "Moved by language: Christine Mohrmann (1903-1988) and the study of liturgical Latin", in: *Patterns and Persons: A Historiography of Liturgical Studies in the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century*, ed. L. VAN TONGEREN, M. BARNARD, P. POST and G. ROUWHORST (Leuven, Paris and Walpole MA, 2010: *Liturgia condenda* 25), pp. 371-392.

⁴⁰ MOHRMANN, *Liturgical Latin*, p. 53.

