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Before the Dawn

Monks and the Night in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Europe

Mary W. Helms

Abstract. – Early European monks were preoccupied with the night. They were quintessential men of the dark, for nocturns, by far their longest liturgical office, was conducted each night, in the blackness of virtually unlit churches. In so doing monks not only ritually anticipated the coming of the dawn but also, and especially, engaged with the primordial cosmological darkness that preceded the original creation of Genesis. Various aspects of daily monastic life prepared monks for this primary nightly labor, the emotional and psychological effects of which were probably further heightened by physiological reactions to chronic sleep deprivation. [*Europe, early medieval monasticism, spiritual qualities of night, sleep deprivation, ritual and cosmology*]

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In early medieval Western Europe, cenobitic monasteries¹ were very distinctive features of both town and countryside. Sheltered within the walls of these religious communities, separated both locationally and by vocational intent from the mundane earthly life outside the gates, thousands of men and women dedicated their lives to praiseful worship of and communication with the divine. The monastic environment in which they lived shaped and facilitated this religious labor with architectural features that encoded basic cosmological and theological precepts in the various special purpose spaces and places of which the monastery was composed (Gilchrist 1989; Helms 2002)

and with formal rules and especially ritual that defined and activated fundamental tenets of faith through carefully organized liturgical offices.

Foremost among these ideologically charged monastic settings and liturgical presentations were the garden or garth situated at the very heart of the cloister complex and the office of nocturns sung in the depths of the church. The garth, the only formal monastic space to stand open to the sky, in essence manifested light, not only natural light (it was the cloister's major source of *lumen*) but, more significantly, supernatural light (*lux*), the light of heaven and of the first day of creation. As a quiet Edenic garden, the garth also stood as analogue for paradise and, more specifically, for the first three days of the hexameron when the newly created world was still and motionless and Adam lived alone in innocence and in full union with his God (Leach 1969; Helms 2002). In contrast, the office of nocturns (sometimes called vigils),² by far the

1 A *cenobium* was a form of monastic community in which a master and disciples lived in a close village-like or communal setting. It contrasts with a *laura* in which small cells of individual disciples were scattered about the countryside in general proximity to a central nucleus containing an oratory and a few other buildings.

2 The term "nocturns" is used throughout this essay to refer to the main night office, although this service is also sometimes called by some authors "matins" or "vigils." However, I shall follow the practice of using matins to refer to the morning office following nocturns. Authors who use matins instead of nocturns in reference to the night office (in effect identifying it as a very, very early morning office) term the regular morning office "lauds."

longest and most important of the “daily” liturgical services³ and the office that was chanted in the depths of every night in a virtually unlit, pitch black church, manifested darkness. It can be essentially understood as connecting the monks with the primordial and pre-creational dark that both preceded and accompanied the original creation of the world as described in Genesis and with the power of the numinous⁴ that was felt to be present in its infinite depths.

It is the intent of this essay to explore some aspects of the monastic life of the night and the dark in late Antiquity and the Western European early Middle Ages.⁵ To be sure, various commentators of early monastic life have, more or less in passing, voiced recognition of the fundamental importance of night prayers and of the office of nocturns to the monastic vocation,⁶ but detailed scholarly discussions of early monastic life typically emphasize the activities of the day as much or more than those of the night and deeper ideological implications of an emphasis on the spirituality of the night remain largely unexplored. In vocational terms, however, the night seems to have informed the very heart of the monastic endeavor, the nature of which I am interested in investigating. I find it singularly appropriate, therefore, to explicitly discuss the nocturnal dimension of early communal monastic life specifically and directly partly because it mattered so much to the monks and partly because, at first consideration, it would appear to address a major theological and cosmological paradox underlying early monasticism given that, for hundreds of years, the devout

men⁷ who accepted the demanding ascetical monastic life and who, of all Christians, were most deeply and intensely committed to a theology and cosmology that emphasized light as a supreme metaphysical and theological concept, actually held their longest hours of prayer and meditation in the dark of night.⁸

To be sure, resolution of the paradox would seem to be readily at hand, given that the night office was closely followed by another brief service (matins, sometimes called lauds; see note 2), that celebrated the coming of the dawn. Thus nocturns can be easily understood as essentially anticipatory: “rising during the night and watching before dawn expresses the will to purify oneself, the desire for Christ, and the awaiting of the day” (De Vogüé 1983: 183). Yet, in terms of time and energy expended and in terms of devotional intensity, it was not the heralding of the dawn or of the day, not matins or lauds or any of the other offices of the day (see note 3), but the phenomenon of darkness and the liturgy of the night that had to be concluded before dawn (since matins must begin at daybreak; Kardong 1996: 183) that was by far the primary devotional experience for the community. It can be argued, therefore, that, in the monastic perspective, night was more than a period of waiting for the coming of day and it can be posited that dark night in its own right held additional theological and cosmological significance relevant to the ultimate monastic spiritual pursuit. Indeed, within the context of the nocturns-centered existence that consumed so much of their time and attention, monks can be appropriately thought of as essentially men of the night (“darkness is our natural element . . .”; Harper 1968: 129).

The Dark, the Night, and Creation

In fundamental cosmological terms, darkness and night can be understood as sharing with light an association with the generative first principles that informed original creation. Indeed, darkness stands even closer than light to ultimate cosmological beginnings in that (as will be discussed in more detail below) darkness is often identi-

3 The standard Benedictine monastic liturgical offices included the nightly nocturns and the seven offices of the day: matins, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers, and compline (Kardong 1996: 169–194). See Bradshaw (1981), Taft (1986) for general discussion of the historical development of these various offices.

4 The numinous refers to an objective sense of the presence of some thing or some power that is extraordinary, as of the supernatural or the divine (Otto 1950).

5 This essay primarily references the period from approximately the 4th century, when desert monasticism began to flourish, to the formation of the mendicant orders of the early 13th century. This era was marked theologically and cosmologically by a general emphasis on absolute first principles recognizing an eternal, God-created, hierarchically-structured and unchanging universe in which the significance of all reality was directly referred to sacred beginnings more than to human history. See Helms (2002: 436–438, especially n. 4), for suggested references.

6 For example, “vigils is the Office most characteristic of monks” (Kardong 1996: 169, 210); nocturns constituted “the principle task of the entire monastic day” (Levi 1987: 177).

7 Women’s communities are not included in this analysis. Less is known of them and it appears that the spiritual environment for women’s houses was not the same as it was for men. See Gilchrist (1994) for additional discussion of this point.

8 McEvoy 1979; Pelikan 1962; Tatarkiewicz 1970: 27–35, 140–144, 226–230, 233, 289; Eco 1986.

fied in lore and legend as one of the conditions that preceded the formation of the lighted world. When describing the creation of the universe, many ancient myths (including those of the Judeo-Christian tradition and their predecessors) depict an amorphous, undifferentiated, sometimes chaotic primordiality preceding and anticipating the appearance of a shaped and formed, ordered and organized cosmos (Niditch 1985; Van Over 1980). The abstract concept of the amorphous, the confused, or the unbounded, however, is typically presented in the imagery of disordered, formless, or seemingly unlimited elements of the existing natural world. Thus the condition of the primordial may be envisioned as a great rushing wind, as absolute calm and silence, as monstrous battle, as ocean depths (the deep), as unfathomable darkness, or as a combination of such elements, as in Genesis 1.1–2: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”⁹

Such imagery draws upon qualities and observed conditions that not only are perceptually familiar to people but also allow the mythically remote era of cosmological beginnings and first principles to be eternally present in the constant restlessness of every sea, the power of every wind, or the enveloping impenetrability of the darkness and silence of every night as well as in the liturgical rituals of numerous religions that have built upon themes of darkness, silence, water, and the like.¹⁰ This is also to say that certain natural conditions, such as the stillness and darkness of the night (to focus on those themes especially pertinent to this essay), have long been perceived as qualitatively charged circumstances and extraordinary periods of time when distant spiritual potencies of the universe draw nearer and people may reach out into the limitless shadows to contact unearthly powers and mysteries.

This potential for direct nocturnal linkage between the human and the supernatural is temporarily suspended when day intrudes into the spatial-temporal qualities of night to force attention onto immediate surroundings and the seemingly urgent, though short-lived, here-and-now mundanity of ordinary daily activities and cares. In other words, (day)light and (night)darkness inherently present

very different circumstances for human experiencing. Where light emphasizes the outward forms and shapes of objects, illuminates their boundaries, and exposes the nature of their spatial surfaces and appearances, darkness erases forms and shapes, boundaries and surfaces so that “things” seem to dissolve in the dark, losing their distinctiveness and identity. Where light can be focused and has a distinct and obvious source – a lamp, a flare, the sun, a creator God – and thus has edges and limits of its own, darkness does not have an obvious focused source but is all-enveloping and all-consuming. Lacking source, darkness also lacks edges and boundaries and thus appears to be limitless, with infinite depth and endless mystery. Darkness lurks behind the light. Like silence and the void, darkness “does away with every ‘this’ and ‘here,’ in order that ‘the wholly other’ may become actual” (Otto 1950: 70, 220 f.; Zajonc 1993: 2).

These inherent contrasts between light and dark are not as apparent in industrial cultures with the technological means to produce strong and abundant artificial light so that day-like light can be extended and intruded so far into the dark as to turn night into day virtually at will. In such societies the relationship between night and day, dark and light, is reversed. Instead of giving way each evening before the all-encompassing inevitability of the coming dark and uneasily sensing the advent of its supernatural otherness, industrial peoples send night packing and make physical light triumph over natural dark. Concurrently, the surface-oriented, here-and-now qualities of the secular world of light always seem to predominate and night, instead of being in its own right qualitatively mysterious and uncanny, now is simply regarded as the temporary absence or suspension of light that should be gotten through as quickly and insensibly as possible. In contrast, among nonindustrial peoples like those of late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, who could not master and control the dark so thoroughly, night carried the heavier weight in human affairs and clearly constituted a realm of reality, a distinctive “night-season” as the term was often used in traditional Europe (e. g., Neale and Littledale 1976), qualitatively completely separate from bright day.¹¹

9 Russell 1977: 67; Keel 1978: 55; Cassirer 1955: 96; Peters 1911; Picard 1952; Van Over 1980.

10 Levi 1987: 21; Le Goff 1988: 175; Cassirer 1955: 97; Otto 1950: 68–70.

11 In many respects darkness and the medieval night were regarded in very negative terms, being associated with death, ghosts, malignant airs, night-witches, sin, heresies, the demonic, thieves, murderers, and the like. Yet it was a time for more positive family visits, social events, and partying, too. Night also provided the deep silence that

Night, the Dark, and Early Monasticism

For monks, who, by definition, renounced the superficial things of the secular world of the day, the spiritual side of night held a particular attraction. Night provided deep silence and quietude when one's thoughts could be more readily drawn to supernatural mysteries. ("Meditation during the day is, of course, good; but that at night is better . . . with worldly occupations put aside and the attention undivided, the whole man, at night, stands in the divine presence"; Niceta of Remesiana 1949: 63).¹² Therefore, dark night was the most compelling time to formally acclaim in communal ritual (as well as in private prayer) the presence and the power of God.¹³

In so doing, monks were continuing a very distinctive attribute of early Christianity that, to a lesser extent, is reflected in earlier Judaic religious texts and traditions, too. For example, major Old Testament figures encountered God in the dark¹⁴ and the Jewish celebration of the Passover meal began after sunset, as night darkened, in commemoration of how (after numerous trials, some of which also involved the night) Pharaoh allowed Moses to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt at night.¹⁵ The chaos of the final "day of the Lord" foretold by the prophets was also to be accompanied by the darkening of the sun, moon, and stars (Niditch 1985: 72–73). In the New Testament, the major transitional events of Jesus' life occur in the dark: the nativity,¹⁶ the visit of the Magi, the flight into Egypt, the miracle of walking on the water, the transfiguration, the last supper

and the betrayal in Gethsemane, the crucifixion, the resurrection.¹⁷

For early Christians, the Parousia was also expected to occur in dark of night (Matthew 24.29, 42–44, 25.1–13; Taft 1997: 34, 35). This anticipation may provide partial explanation for the fact that regular nightly devotions were a basic and very distinctive part of early Christian practice.¹⁸ Writings by various early Church fathers (Tertullian, Cyprian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, Origen) emphasize the propriety of rising at night to pray and refer to assemblies held at night (Bradshaw 1981: 48 f., 51, 54; Taft 1986: 18–24; Jungmann 1959: 100) and commentary by pagan observers indicates that it was common knowledge that the chief Christian services were held at night ("They are a skulking breed, they shun the light of day"; Minucius, quoted in Dodds 1965: III; see also Cabaniss 1970: 32 f.). All in all, the emphasis on the spiritual value of the night in the opening centuries of Christianity was such that Guiver speaks of it as a veritable "preoccupation" with the dark (1988: 51 f.).

The early Christian emphasis on the night as the proper time for religious expression continued as a very characteristic, indeed definitive, aspect of the ascetic monasticism that developed in the fourth and fifth centuries in Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Cappadocia (Salmon 1967: 918; Guiver 1988: 51 f.), although night prayers now declined in nonmonastic ecclesiastical settings which came instead to emphasize daily morning and evening prayers along with a fairly short weekly vigil from cockcrow to dawn on Sunday mornings (Bradshaw 1981: chap. 4; Taft 1986: chap. 3). Fourth-century monks, however, focused explicitly on the night as the best time for prayers and especially psalmody. There was considerable flexibility in actual practice but typically (and in brief) Egyptian desert hermits spent most of, if not the entire, night standing in personal vigil while more organized cenobitic communities (such as those formed in Upper Egypt by Pachomius) preferred that private night watches be followed by a communal office at dawn; alternatively, (in lower Egypt) prayer might begin at cockcrow and end at dawn. At the end of the day evening and early night prayers were observed, followed by a period of rest before rising again to pray in the dark. In

encouraged meditation and prayerful union with the divine. See Wolkomir and Wolkomir (2001), Ekirch (2001), and Verdon (2002) for general introductions to the nonindustrial European night.

The fact that the length of the hour varied seasonally in day and in night, as each was divided into 12 parts based on duration of daylight and of darkness, respectively, encouraged and reflected the separation between the two. Day and night do not become one unit until after the 13th century invention of the mechanical clock with escapement mechanism and the idea of the uniform hour (Dohrn-van Rossum 1996).

12 See also Picard 1952: 134 f.; Taft 1997: 263; Chitty 1966: 26; Mulcahy 1938: 26, 31.

13 Russell 1977: 139, 152, 154; Le Goff 1984: 178; Warner 1976: 106; Benko 1993: 65, 75, 214.

14 For example, God wrestled with Jacob at the river ford (Genesis 32.22–30) and tried to kill Moses at night (Exodus 4.24). See Russell (1977: 180).

15 Deuteronomy 16.6; Exodus 10.21–23, 12.8, 29 f., 42, 14.20 f.; see also Chupungco (1977: 16 f., 56, 73, 81–84).

16 Liturgically celebrated on the darkest day of the solar year (Rahner 1963: 164; Quenot 1997: 129).

17 See the various Gospel accounts of these events. Guiver (1988: 220 f.) presents an extensive list of New Testament references to night.

18 See discussion by Jungmann 1962: 111; Cabaniss 1970: 34 f.; Bradshaw 1981: 21, 37–39, 57 f.; Taft 1986: chap. 1.

Near Eastern monastic communities, heavily influenced by Egyptian practices, night prayers in some cases began at midnight, in other cases at cockcrow.¹⁹ Regardless of particulars, night after night of prayerful wakefulness and psalmody was recognized as a physically grueling regimen but one of unquestionable spiritual value: “when they sing with the angels – for angels, too, are singing – ‘Praise the Lord from the heavens’ . . . Think what it was for them to spend the whole night in this employment” (John Chrysostom, quoted in Taft 1986: 81; see also Cassian 1991: 210; Bradshaw 1981: 97).

In addition to the single-minded focus on prayer and praise, lengthy night devotions provided a particularly focused and intensive expression of the New Testament admonition to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5.17) that constituted part of the ideal monastic life (“the wakeful monk toils night and day to pray continually . . .” [Abba Hyperichus, quoted in Chadwick 1958: 46, no. 17; see also Timko 1990: 105–107, 115, 118 f.]). Praying at night, instead of sleeping, also obviously expressed with particular forcefulness and clarity the eschatological necessity of watching for the coming of Christ and of asserting “life” through constant wakefulness so that the dark and its attendant sleep-cum-death did not ultimately triumph (Clement of Alexandria in Taft 1986: 15; Chupungco 1977: 93). Combating the dark through wakefulness was also an essential part of the constant vigilance against the ubiquitous demons that, among their many other temptations, urged sleep with its troubling dreams on fatigued monks or tried to thwart prayerful concentration by forcing them to yawn or presenting tantalizing images of food or women (Valantasis 1992: 66 f.; Taft 1986: 67).

Furthermore, and of great significance it would appear, the night was the optimal period of time for desert monks to reach toward unity with the creator God of Genesis. In his discussion of Athanasius’ “Life of Antony,” Marx states that, because God created souls to be virtuous, the condition of moral renewal and perfection that monks sought was “equivalent to abiding and persisting in the condition of creation.” “Hence the goal of ascetic life is in some manner identified with the original state of

mankind. The monk must somehow regain the perfection of his first creation . . .” (Marx 1946: 9, 75). This fundamental principle underlay the monks’ efforts to approximate the incessant prayer that ideally would keep their souls constantly united with God (Marx 1946: 9, 29), while the necessary purity of heart was to be further achieved by rigorous asceticism, including sleepless watching at night. Monks were also persuaded that God was nearer in the beauty and unsullied nature of the still desert “where the air is purer, the sky is more open, and God is closer” (Binns 1991: xiii; Marx 1946: 73). Given the emphasis accorded to night prayers, however, it would further appear that not only the open sky of the still desert but especially the desert’s clear and open night, when darkness, obliterating earthly things, brought the supernatural even closer and prayer was most intense, provided the optimal conditions for this outreach to the perfection of the beginning. Consequently, it is understandable why, though early Christianity initially developed the “preoccupation” with the night, it was fourth-century desert monks who, recognizing that there is a sense in which darkness has more of God than light has, especially came to “specialize” in it (Guiver 1988: 51 f.; see also Robertson in Otto 1950: 20 f.).

The Night Office in Western Europe

Monasticism was introduced to Italy and thence to Gaul during the fourth and fifth centuries and a diversity of types of monastic establishments quickly arose (Rousseau 1978: 79–91).²⁰ Although the various community founders individually adopted and adapted directives for community life as each saw fit (De Vogüé 1977), for all the night continued to offer the greatest shelter and nourishment for spiritual life. The general nocturnal trend that can be discerned during this period of Western European monastic “mixed rule,” as it is sometimes called, was an increasing formalization and ritualization of the communal vocal worship conducted at night (as well as periodically during the day) (Dunn 2000: 94). As part of this process, the fifth-century “Ordo

¹⁹ *Lives of the Desert Fathers* 1980: 22, 71, 77, 107, 115; Rousseau 1985: 78 f. and n. 4, 86 n. 50; Taft 1982: 521 f., 524 and 1986: 80–82, 87; Burton-Christie 1993: 117 f.; Bradshaw 1981: 95 f., 99, 101–105; Chitty 1966: 26; Marx 1946: 77; Williams 1985: 86–90.

²⁰ These included *laura*-like communities (see note 1), cenobitic houses, urban monastic communities at holy shrines and basilicas, and small, informal, often ephemeral communities that arose among the well-to-do on private estates (Dunn 2000: 82–84, 91; Rousseau 1978: 152–160; O’Sullivan 1965: 32–46; Desprez 1990: 109–112; Percival 1997).

monasterii,”²¹ Cassian’s “Institutes” (1991, especially Book II), also fifth century, and the directives offered in the sixth century by Caesarius of Arles and his successor, Aurelian²² as well as the Irish-Celtic sixth-century “Regula monachorum” of Columbanus (Curran 1984, esp. chap. 22) also describe seasonal variations in night observances (not an Eastern tradition) to accommodate the differing lengths of day and night in summer and winter and indicate the far greater length of nocturns at any season compared with the always much shorter day offices.

A general sense of the exceptional emphasis accorded nocturns and of the length of that office according to season and relative to the shorter offices can be obtained by simply noting the number of psalms required of each, for psalmody was at the heart of every office.²³ Thus, for example, the *Ordo* stipulates that 18 psalms be sung each night in winter and 12 in summer but that only three psalms are required for each of the “little hours” of the day (terce, sext, none).²⁴ Under Caesarius the little hours each contained six psalms and under Aurelian their number was raised to 12, but nocturns was longer still, containing 36 psalms each night in winter and 18 in summer.²⁵ Continuing to elaborate the nocturnal process, Columbanus stipulated three separate offices each night with psalmody that added up to a grand total of 48 psalms on each summer weeknight and 60 on each winter weeknight while, for Saturday and Sunday vigils, the numbers rose to 60 psalms

each night in summer and 99 in winter (Bradshaw 1981: 133–134). As Taft has noted in general, these practices added up to “a staggering night *pensum*” (1986: 110) and, as Columbanus himself recognized (Dunn 2000: 154 f.), to a general state for monks of more or less constant fatigue in which, as Jerome succinctly summarized a century or so earlier, “you will go to bed exhausted and you will sleep while you are walking. After insufficient sleep you will have to arise . . .” (Quoted in Desprez 1990: 105; see also Kardong 1996: 170; Bradshaw 1981: 134).

Fortunately for monks, the length of the night office was significantly moderated in the sixth-century Rule of St. Benedict, a more compassionate and humane directive destined to eventually constitute the standard for cenobitic monastic life in the early Middle Ages and beyond. Because it contains greater programmatic completeness, Benedict’s rule also indicates how other areas of monastic life were directly related to, or influenced by, the conduct of nocturns and thus provides us with a fuller picture of the overall impact of nocturns on monastic life. Concerning, first of all, length of office, Benedict stipulates that nocturns in both winter and summer was to include a modest nightly total of 12 psalms plus Psalms 3 and 94, along with a hymn and several readings, the number of which varied slightly between the seasons. However, as usual, nocturns was lengthened year-round with additional lessons and canticles for the weekly Saturday night–Sunday morning vigil, though even then some rest was always granted (Kardong 1996: 169–183).²⁶ Though it is difficult to reconstruct in detail the clock time spent in nocturns,²⁷ Kardong suggests (1996: 170, 178) that Benedict’s own monks, living not far from Rome, in winter probably went to bed about 7 pm and arose about 2 am to begin nocturns (i.e., at the “eighth hour” [solar time] stipulated in the Rule) while in midsummer the period of rest would have been shorter, from about 9 pm (sundown) to 2 or 3 am (compare Knowles 1969: 213).

21 Regulations for a Monastery; Lawless 1987: 75–77, 167–171; Taft 1986: 94–96; Bradshaw 1981: 124–126.

22 Taft 1986: 101, 105–109; Bradshaw 1981: 127–133; Curran 1984: 180 f.

23 Psalms were apportioned among the day offices and nocturns in various ways. In earlier rules the psalms were simply sung in order beginning with prime on Sunday. Thus, in the course of the week, prime was to include Psalms 1–19; nocturns, Psalms 20–108; vespers, Psalms 109–117 and 128–147; the little hours of the day, Psalms 118–127 (these are particularly short psalms). In the standard Benedictine Rule (see below) a few specific psalms are specified for particular offices, e.g., portions of Psalm 118 for the little hours on Sunday. Otherwise most psalms are to be sung in order with intent that the entire Psalter be recited each week (Kardong 1996: 197–201; see also McKinnon 1999; Dyer 1999).

24 Taft 1986: 94–96; Bradshaw 1981: 124–126. When Cassian instituted the service of lauds at sunrise to prevent his monks from going back to bed and harmful sleep after nocturns and matins it, too, contained only three psalms (Stewart 1998: 74; Taft 1986: 96–100). Though all the offices focused primarily on psalms, they also included various scriptural readings and some hymns.

25 Bradshaw 1981: 128, 130; Taft 1986: 101, 106; McCarthy 1960: 72.

26 See also the description of the offices in the “Regula Magistri” (Rule of the Master; Eberle 1977), another sixth-century rule thought to be closely associated with that written by Benedict (Dunn 2000: 182 f.; Taft 1986: 122–125; Bradshaw 1981: 140).

27 Time is indicated in texts in very general terms (e.g., “about” midnight, at sunrise, etc.) and hours were not of equal length since seasonal reckoning of time accorded 12 hours each to day and to night regardless of variations in length of light and dark. In addition, each monastery exercised some degree of flexibility in shifting the time of the hours.

Benedictine monks slept in a common room in which a candle burned all night. They slept fully clothed, both for modesty and to facilitate a quick and ready rising for nocturns, the beginning of their “day.”²⁸ Benedict is explicit about the importance of prompt readiness to undertake the night vigil and Kardong emphasizes that such nocturnal punctuality in rising can be understood as constituting an important act of monastic faith.²⁹ (This point can be especially appreciated if one thinks of the rigors of rising at night in a dimly lit and unheated dormitory in winter, with intent to spend a number of hours in an equally cold, dark, and damp church, in more northerly portions of Europe and in England. See Crossley’s evocative description [1936: 28]). Before rising, however, monks would have to be awakened at the appropriate hour, not an easy feat since they lived in a world lacking constant length of hours (see note 27) and alarm clocks. Thus the issue of early medieval timekeeping, specifically the problem of how to identify a particular point in time, becomes associated with the monastic night office.

Early monastic rules say little about how time was determined, though the Rule of the Master (see note 26) notes that pairs of monks took turns, in weekly shifts, trying to stay awake while the others slept in order to awaken the abbot on time (Eberle 1977: 193). Several possibilities for determining that time are likely, however, including the use of calibrated candles or lamps of oil, whose consumption rate indicated passage of a known period of time, the recitation of a certain number of psalms, possibly the use of a waterclock (though it would freeze in winter) and, especially, weather permitting, observation of the stars, the method advocated by Cassian and evidenced by the considerable monastic attention given to the features of the night sky throughout the changing seasons of the year.³⁰ It may seem to us that the absence of definitive time pieces would have constituted a

hindrance to the careful observance of the night office in the early Middle Ages, but in at least one important respect the absence of such may actually have helped to heighten the cosmological and spiritual significance of the experience. Discussing how concepts of time and eternity are constructed in ritual, Rappaport (1986) comments that the detailed mechanical calculation and numbering of time (as in equal hours, minutes, seconds) overwhelms and ultimately defeats the sense of the eternal (1986: 22). Conversely, the absence of such detailed calculations would imply that, in the early Middle Ages, the very indeterminacy of temporal reckoning at night, combined with the need for heavy reliance on “God-created” conditions, such as the stars, for calculating a point in time, would have explicitly deepened an appreciation of the eternal.

Astronomical observations occasioned by nocturns would also have encouraged contemplation of the orderliness of the universe as evidenced in the “order, peace, and harmony of the starry night sky”, the constellations, and the phases of the moon (Spitzer 1963: 112, 153 n.24) and by extension may have further enhanced the sense of the presence of the spiritual other that infused the conduct of nocturns when the monks, assembled in their own organizational order as evidenced in the strict and unvarying position accorded to each in the church choir,³¹ sought with structured chant to emulate and participate in the everlasting cosmic order and harmony of the angelic heavenly court. In short, monastic nocturnal time-reckoning, far from constituting a deterrent to proper monastic experiences, would have heralded the conjunction between the ordered monastic world, the ordered physical universe, and the ordered cosmic eternity that monastic liturgy in general and nocturns most of all sought to define and effect.

28 Kardong 1996: 224–230; De Vogüé 1983: 181; see also Eberle 1977: 147 f., 190–194, 203, 240, 246.

29 Kardong 1996: 228 f.; Bauer 1987: 99; Symons 1953: 11 f.

30 McCluskey 1998: 100, 106, 110–112; Constable 1975: 4 f.; Bauer 1987: 102; Le Goff 1988: 176; North 1975; Stock 1988. This marked interest is illustrated most notably by Gregory of Tours’ sixth-century “*De cursu stellarum*” (McCluskey 1998: 101, 104–110), which includes discussion of the constellations as time regulators, and by the 11th-century star timetable, the *horologium stellare monasticum* (Constable 1975), which notes the exact positions of constellations relative to various monastic buildings when observed from a fixed point on the grounds of a monastery probably located in north-central France.

31 The brothers sat in choir in an invariant order according to their individual rank in the community as determined primarily by date of entry but also by quality of religious life and by the abbot’s decision (Kardong 1996: 515–517, 519, 523–525). Within that order, in choir junior members of the community and novices sat in the front rows, senior members in the second or back rows. These rows constituted two parallel ranges of seats facing each other across an open central area where a large lectern stood to support books and where the *precentor* or chief singer directed the conduct of the chant that the brothers knew by memory. For further details see, among others, Kardong 1996: 171 f., 175, 134 f., 415; Guiver 1988: 96; Eberle 1977: 18; Harper 1991: 36–38; Anson 1949: 187–189; Cook 1961: 81–84; Dickinson 1961: 17–22.

Darkness, Genesis, and the Harrowing of Hell

The darkness that the community encountered in the nocturnal church passed effortlessly beyond the walls to blend into the primordial darkness of the universe that extended beyond. More specifically, to connect the darkness of the early medieval abbey church at night with the elemental darkness of the universe is to connect the abbey night with Genesis and with absolute, first principle cosmological origins as expressed in the nature of darkness. In the opening chapter of Genesis this darkness is presented or implied in three separate contexts: as a basic condition of the uncreated, amorphous, primordial universe; as the precondition from within which the cosmic creation will emerge; and as indicative of the qualities of the beginnings of creation itself.

As was indicated earlier in this essay, primeval darkness as a fundamental condition of the uncreated universe is repeatedly referenced in the Old Testament.³² Primordial dark as creational precondition is suggested by the Judeo-Christian interpretation of such darkness as the dwelling place of the creative God (Chupungco 1977: 82) and by the implication that the Godly darkness is presciently anticipatory of creative power, that is, without darkness light cannot appear.³³ Primordial dark as expressive of the qualities of the beginning of creation itself involves the formation, differentiation, and identification of "night" and "day" (Genesis 1.4 f.) which subjects the great darkness itself to the creational process and accords it a defined and limited or contained place in that creation as the newly named "night" (Ladner 1995: 68, 69; Chupungco 1977: 47). Darkness thereby becomes further associated with the characteristics of the very beginning of the hexaemeron when the earth was "perfect" and "ideal" in its stillness and in its unity with heaven (Leach 1969).

As attributes of darkness as well as of eternity and of paradise, perfection, stillness, and related qualities such as timelessness and immutability have been expressed in various ways. Regarding darkness and perfection, Benko captures the thought indirectly when he characterizes conditions in the very beginning, right before creation "when 'the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters'" (Genesis 1.2), as "the unspoiled state of creation" (1993: 10 f.). Regarding stillness

and eternal timelessness, Isidore of Seville, in the seventh century, explicitly characterized the deep of night as a time free of all movement and thus corresponding, in a sense, to an absence of earthly time (Verdon 2002: 1). This unearthly stillness and quiet also made night itself the perfect time for the products of creation to seek contact with their maker. As Hippolytus, writing in the third century, explained, it is important to pray at midnight because "at that hour all creation is still for a moment, to praise the Lord; stars, trees, waters stop for an instant and all the host of angels (which) ministers to him praises God with the souls of the righteous in this hour" (quoted in Bradshaw 1981: 54; see also Jones et al. 1992: 87 f.). In like manner, the calm and the quiet of the night, "this most holy time of day, the hours when peace doth all embrace,"³⁴ the time when "silence and quiet are [offered] to us by the night itself" (Niceta of Remesiana 1949: 65), recommended the nocturnal hours as particularly suitable for monastic devotions, "for we the couch all promptly leave at quiet time of night to pray."³⁵

The various early medieval monastic rules, and especially Benedict's detailed description of the proper conduct of the *opus Dei* (Work of God),³⁶ clearly indicate that during the early Middle Ages the office of nocturns heightened this traditional nocturnal spiritual exercise by formally ritualizing the relationship between the monks and the night, shaping, ordering, and transforming the experiencing of primordial darkness with communal liturgy. In so doing, nocturns as ritual became itself a creational act that, by deliberately and formally sacralizing the time of night, validated a specific "mythic" identity or "essence" (Cassirer 1955: 89) for the darkness and brought it closer, so to speak, to the assembled choir where it could be integrated into the pattern of prayer, readings, and silent meditation and the verbal and musical structure inherent in the psalmic chant.³⁷ Nocturns, as the lengthiest formal communal office of the monastic *opus Dei*, thereby went beyond individ-

32 For example, Genesis 1.1–4; Job 26.10; 38.9; see also May 1939; Peters 1911: 51 f.; Niditch 1985: 72 f.

33 Forrester-Brown 1974: 34, 32; May 1939: 207; Ladner 1995: 66.

34 From the hymn "Primo Die Quo Trinitas" by Gregory the Great, in Mulcahy (1938: 6).

35 From the hymn "Tu, Trinitatis Unitas" attributed to Gregory the Great, in Mulcahy (1938: 26, 31).

36 See specifics and interpretational commentary in Kardong (1996); also Eberle (1977) regarding the Rule of the Master.

37 Rappaport (1986) discusses how ritual structures space and especially time. Limits on length prevent a more detailed discussion of the application of his ideas to early medieval monastic offices here, but the exercise is very informative.

ual private prayer and even the ideal of ceaseless prayer to inform the experience of the numinous that organized cenobitic monasticism sought to achieve.

Since the ritual of nocturns was held each and every night, the monks regularly experienced the mystery of the divine darkness and, in addition, just as regularly anticipated the archetypical process of the first creation, the very beginning of light and life, that was replayed each dawn with the advent of the day. Within the broader context of Christian liturgy and theology, this cosmic event was also replayed and celebrated in theophanic form in Christ’s death and resurrection. These second-creational Christological events can be transferred to the nocturnal monastic setting to provide another dimension for the realization of the power and mystery of the monastic dark. To do so, however, we must consider nocturns in conjunction with its two short bracketing offices of compline (at dusk) and matins (at dawn). A series of tropes can be associated with this trio of night-related offices such that compline : nocturns : matins :: the setting sun : the nocturnal journey of the sun : the emergence of light :: the death of Christ : Christ’s rest in the grave and descent into the netherworld of the dead : the resurrection :: Good Friday : Holy Saturday : Easter Sunday (cf. Rahner 1963: 112–114, 117; Chazelle 2001: 28 f.; see Table 1).

Table 1: Night-Related Offices and Tropes

Compline	Nocturns	Matins
Setting sun	Nocturnal journey of sun	Emergence of light
Death of Christ	Christ’s rest in the grave and descent into hell	Resurrection
Good Friday	Holy Saturday	Easter Sunday

Within these relational chains, night and nocturns are associated with the absence of the sun, Christ’s rest in the quiet of the tomb and descent into hell, and Holy Saturday; themes that relate the monastic darkness to death-like earthly extinction and the pre-salvational void or abyss that awaits the (re)emergence of life and light. Various late Antique and early medieval monastic themes and practices can be related to these tropes (see also below), including consideration of the physical atmosphere of the dark enclosed abbey church and choir within the context and imagery of the tomb and its close conceptual relative,

the sacred cave (Heyden 1987; Weinberg 1986), further expressed in the crypt, a standard feature of early medieval churches that was often (though not always) constructed as a semisubterranean vault in close proximity to the altar and to the monks’ choir (Crook 2000). The crypt enclosed remains of saints or other holy personages and part of the spiritual service rendered by monks in choir involved the watch that they kept over these earthly relics (Jungmann 1959: 281; Dunn 2000: 91; Wallace-Hadrill 1983: 61).

Perhaps the ultimate medieval identification accorded the sacred cave, however, was as a powerful otherworldly place related to the land of the dead (Russell 1984: 144, 224 and 1977: 62 n. 12) and perhaps the most popular early Christian and medieval image of salvation (also incorporated into the Apostle’s Creed) is the legend known as the “Harrowing of Hell”³⁸ in which, on Holy Saturday, between his death and resurrection, Christ (like the sun crossing the dark region beneath the earth; Rees 1992: 80) descends into the vast darkness of the cavernous underworld to break open the gates of hell, flood it with salvational light (an obvious parallel with the original creation in Genesis; cf. Quenot 1997: 80) and, defeating the devil, release the souls imprisoned there (MacCulloch 1930). There is much in these themes to engage monastic sensibilities, for the monastic vocation was itself a kind of liminal death, closed to secular earthly life but still awaiting release into eternal salvation; the monastic goal included prevailing over soul-destroying demonic lures and temptations; and the longest hours of monastic liturgy, when monks were most truly monkish, were served at night in a dark, cavernous church in close proximity to a crypt-tomb.³⁹

Considered in this context, therefore, the lengthy hours of nocturns regularly experienced on each weeknight can be understood themselves as recalling, in a restrained fashion, Christ’s rest in the dark silence of the tomb and the descent to the underworld of the dead⁴⁰ while the more extended weekly vigil on Saturday night – Sunday morning bespoke more fully and intensely the

38 See the 3rd–4th-century Apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus.
39 It could be said of early medieval monks gathered together in the abbey church (as in a kind of otherworldly sacred cave), as of the desert anchorites, their vocational forebears who often utilized caves as shelters, tombs, and oratories, that “in the cave the hermits died with Christ to the world; here they fought demons, as Christ in Hades vanquished the devil ... here they were reborn; here they tasted the fruits of paradise” (Williams 1962: 38).
40 McNamara 2000: 362; Taft 1997: 263; Clement 1993: 192.

Christological power and mystery of the dark as it mirrored the ultimate liturgical experience of the holiest cosmological night of all – the great paschal vigil commemorating in Christological terms the archetypical sacred night “which dispels the primordial darkness, brings everything back to light, form and order, and transforms the chaos of sin . . . into the cosmos of divine grace . . . the second creation [which] like the first, commenced on the night between Saturday and Sunday, when God created the world and Christ rose from the tomb” (Gregory of Nazianzus, quoted in Chupungco 1977: 84; De Puniet 1939: 175).

Confident that this greatest of all nocturnal mysteries would be repeated in the Parousia, monks awaited in their own version of the sacred dark, sharing their nightly liturgical lives not only with attending heavenly angels but also with the entombed whose still and silent spiritual “presence” enhanced the stillness and silence of the numinous atmosphere. Indeed, during the ninth century and thereafter, the office of nocturns came to be accompanied by a liturgical office of the dead that was conducted in conjunction with nocturns proper, one of the many activities emphasizing the close association felt between monks and those who had died “good” deaths before them (Knowles 1933; Paxton 1990: 134–136; Bloch and Parry 1982: 15 f.).

Sleep Deprivation and the Experience of the Numinous

When the monastic brothers conducted nocturns and the related office of the dead they, like Christ on Holy Saturday, strove to defeat the sleep of death as they strove to shape and control the dark (Chupungco 1977: 92 f.). One way to attain this goal was to remain awake especially at night, normally the proper time for physical sleep, and to abstain from sleep as much as possible at any other time. On a broader plane, sleeplessness was part of the general pattern of asceticism practiced by monks who also sought a return to an original Adamic state of ideal innocence and human purity. From the earliest days of monasticism sleeplessness was the ascetic ideal,⁴¹ since watching, together with fasting, was thought to help purify the heart by encouraging the will to overcome evil and, by generally weakening the body, taming concupiscence, thereby helping greatly to destroy

sins of the flesh.⁴² It is not surprising, therefore, to find a steady stream of comments in the monastic literature regarding fatigue and the constant burden of enduring insufficient sleep (and food), even though some rules, most notably Benedict’s, urged moderation along these lines.⁴³

The correlations that early monastic fathers posited between limited sleep, fasting, and reduced physical drives and passions may have been accurately observed (Dunn 2000: 16 f.; Stewart 1998: 72). Experimental and clinical studies have shown that sleep deprivation (analogous to monastic vigils) and fasting may result in a significant degree of drive reduction by (possibly) directly or indirectly enhancing the activity of endogenous opioids in the body (Bushell 1995).⁴⁴ Heightened opioid activity also enhances tranquility and a sense of euphoria, properties associated by monastic fathers with the deepest form of prayer in which a sense of God’s immediate presence might be obtained. Research into sensory deprivation (as would have obtained during nocturns in a dark church) and rhythmic auditory stimulation (such as sustained chanting) has also revealed drive reductions and, presumably, increases in opioid activity that would be conducive to altered awareness (especially when added to various self-mortification practices).

Considered overall, Bushell suggests that, by enhancing endogenous opioids, the practice of a full ascetical and meditational program (such as he studied among contemporary Ethiopian Christian ascetics) may lead to a reduction of drives and their replacement with euphoric states of bliss.⁴⁵ Within the context of early medieval monasticism, it is easy to understand that, from the point of view of asceticism, regular nightly participation in the lengthy office of nocturns in the close to total

41 “An hour’s sleep is enough for a monk: that is, if he is a fighter” (Abba Arsenius, quoted in Chadwick 1958: 49).

42 De Vogüé 1983: 182, 231–234; Peifer 1966: 456 f.; *Lives of the Desert Fathers* 1980: 22 f.; St. Maximus the Confessor 1955: 162, 176; Valantasis 1992: 72, 54, 55.

43 See also Cassian 1991: chap. 17, 316, 406. For example, “Let [the monk] come weary and as if sleep-walking to his bed, and let him be forced to rise while his sleep is not yet finished” (Columbanus, quoted in Lawrence 1989: 45); “our food is scanty, . . . our sleep often upon our book. Under our limbs there is but a hard mat; when sleep is sweetest, we must rise at a bell’s bidding . . .” (Ailred in Knowles 1969: 90); see also Jerome, quoted above.

44 The body manufactures various opiate-like peptides known as endogenous opioids. Through actions both within the central nervous system and in peripheral areas outside the CNS the opioids influence numerous bodily functions and exert profound effects on mood and motivation. See, for example, papers in Almeida and Shippenberg (1991).

45 Bushell 1995: 560 f.; see also Appenzeller 1987: 476–478; Winkelman 1997: 397–402.

darkness of a cave-like church while coping with limited sleep and permanent chronic fatigue would have been regarded as profoundly spiritually beneficial if these opioid-enhanced practices not only facilitated celibacy but also enhanced the sense of calm and peace attendant upon deep involvement in prayer and heightened the overall awareness of a supernaturally imbued atmosphere for the brothers during those hours of darkness when the qualities of night, which could not be literally seen, instead had to be “envisioned” in other ways.⁴⁶

However, Bushell further explains that, paradoxically, continued sleep deprivation may ultimately also lead to a sense of increasing energy and the gradual reduction (though not the total elimination) of sleepiness and fatigue (1995: 556). Although early monks might well have questioned the point, an explanation may be at hand if we consider the contrasts offered by Horne between two modes of sleep, “core” and “optional” (1991: 172–175). During a period of normal sleep both essential core sleep, which refreshes cerebral function, and optional sleep are active. However, core sleep lifts after about six hours, leaving only optional sleep to continue. Compared with core sleep, optional sleep seems to be more flexible, even dispensable, for over time it can be reduced (or extended) or even totally relinquished depending on environmental factors (e. g., sense of safety, boredom, seasonal changes in length of days, etc.). Horne also notes that the fatigue caused by loss of core sleep is more physiologically rooted while that caused by loss of optional sleep is more “behavioural” or subjective in nature. This may explain why, after about five days of prolonged sleep deprivation, a turning point is reached where the overall feeling of sleepiness levels off and subjects even show some improvement, suggesting that, while core sleepiness remains, the needs of the optional sleep process have eased. Horne therefore suggests that, whereas core sleepiness can only be assuaged by sleep, optional sleepiness can be counteracted either by sleep or by increasing incentive to stay awake.

Turning to early medieval monasticism, it can be suggested that, in a moderate program, such as Benedict’s Rule provides, the early night sleep before nocturns provided for essential core sleep and whatever later sleep might be allowed (e. g.,

following nocturns and matins, as some rules permitted, or a noon siesta in summer, as Benedict permitted) constituted mainly optional sleep which could be avoided if the abbot felt it appropriate for monks to stay awake after matins. However, in communities governed by more rigorous rules, especially those with longer night offices, the chronic fatigue expressed by monastic commentators may have reflected a persistent insufficiency of core sleep as well as of optional sleep. Judging from recent studies, sleep loss in general would have impacted motivation rather than actual capacity to perform necessary duties provided sleep was not reduced below a certain critical point and if sustained wakefulness did not exceed 24 hours (Dinges and Kribbs 1991: 118, 119). However, a sleepy person, such as a monk in choir during nocturns, would have fluctuated between alertness and drowsy microsleeps as motivation to perform competed with pressure for sleep (Dinges and Kribbs 1991: 119).

Before the Dawn

Nocturnal wakefulness allowed gradual defeat of sin and facilitated the longed-for attainment of the innocent Adamic nature as it was before the fall; rejection of sleep defeated the image of death such that watchfulness at night was correlated with triumphant life, specifically with the resurrection. These intertwined monastic goals present early medieval monks both as creatures of the night who ritually explored the extraordinary supernatural realm manifested by darkness and as watchers for the coming day for whom the dark was the setting, the backdrop, for liturgy that anticipated its annihilation and conquest by the light. Although these two orientations are by no means mutually exclusive, the former seems to have outweighed the latter to the extent that exploration of the dark prevailed over conquest by the light in liturgical terms, given that the early morning office at daybreak (matins) was far shorter in length than was nocturns, whose immense importance in early medieval monastic life cannot be overstated. In other words, if the coming of the light were the greater ritual goal, one might expect the arrival of the dawn and the flowering of day ultimately to be accorded the greater praise, whereas, in fact, the depths of night seem to have held the greater fascination for the brothers.

Of course, it is quite reasonable to argue that, by lengthy night ritual that tamed, organized, and sanctified the night, monks facilitated (“created”)

46 Cassian explicitly recognized that mystical experience could occur during recitation of the office (Kirk 1931: 206 n. 2). Early desert monks regarded personal visions as normal experiences but Benedict emphasized spiritual experience in the context of communal offices instead.

the arrival of the dawn; that it was their task to prepare the way for light by personal and liturgical entrance into and triumph over the darkness and that the ultimate goal, the coming of the (salvational) illumination, essentially spoke for itself. Understood in these terms the early morning dawn would be the culmination and climax of the labors of the night office (Levi 1987: 20) as, at the beginning of the original creation in Genesis, the original dawn was the culmination and climax of the primordial but also anticipatory precreational dark. That is to say, just as the initial bursting forth of light out of darkness gives the story of the creation in Genesis its most fundamental significance (Cassirer 1955: 96), so the arrival of the early light of day informed a very significant part of the meaning of the night for monks.⁴⁷

However, it is equally possible to argue that, in secular terms, the coming of the earthly day also signaled a return of mundane earthly here-and-now duties that even a monastery had to take into account if it were to survive, and that the purpose of the periodic, short day offices (prime, terce, sext, none) was to keep the (nightly) realm of the ineffable within at least tentative reach until, with the coming of evening and the descent of darkness, the tenebrous world of the numinous was once more completely at hand. From this perspective the monastic specialization in darkness would seem to have included a genuine interest in the space/time of eternity itself and in the mysteries of the numinous that were contained within the dark and brought closer by the night. Dawn was unquestionably the termination of the experience of the night, but that does not necessarily mean that it was the entire purpose or focus of the night office per se; nocturns proper ended before the actual coming of the light that matins heralded with only a brief ritualistic exclamation point.

In the first version of the story of the creation in Genesis, Adam as the ideal sinless man inhabiting paradise was created on the sixth day and thereby entered, in all his perfection, into a fully (sun)lit (fourth day) world. Early medieval monks lived as sinful and imperfect men in the darkling post-fall world where perfect Adamic purity remained elusive, though cloistered ascetical efforts to reach that original state at least encouraged the hope of attaining purity of soul and future paradisiacal salvation. In addition, though daily life was lived

in earth's shadows, liturgical life in the church choir at night bespoke both an openness to the very first creation act and to the pre-Adamic dawn marking the beginning of the beginning (day one) and acquaintance with the infinite primordial and eternal darkness that held the presence of the ever-existing God of the universe. Monks, as imperfect post-Adamic men, heralded the dawn for both its Christological and its Edenic promise and wistfully pursued Adam's perfect state of grace, but monks were also pre-Adamic men who spent their most intense and extensive vocational (*opus Dei*) efforts seeking with psalmic praise and prayer to penetrate the ineffable mysteries of the darkness that preceded both Adam and the dawn.

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⁴⁷ David Knowles famously remarked that no one can really understand the monastic vocation who has not seen the sun come slowly up at the end of a long night office through the great east window of an abbey church (see Levi 1987: 201).

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