CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIBELLI PRECUM IN THE CENTRAL MIDDLE AGES

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The idea of the *libellus precum* as a distinct type of prayer collection in manuscript form emerged in the twentieth century. André Wilmart’s work in the 1930s and 1940s, particularly his edition of prayers in four Carolingian manuscripts, initiated the long tradition of scholarship that views the *libellus precum* as a distinct textual genre and manuscript type.1 Although the most literal interpretation of the expression *libellus precum* would imply a codicologically independent gathering or “little book” containing predominantly prayer texts, in actuality scholars use it to cover an extremely wide spectrum of manuscripts and text collections. This essay reviews the literature on *libelli precum*, emphasizing the diversity of materials encompassed by this term and arguing for greater consideration of the manuscript context in studies of prayer during the central Middle Ages. In the Appendices, I present the contents of two Psalters from around 1100 that include *libelli precum*, in order to provide examples of manuscript descriptions that situate the prayer collections among the other texts that make up the book as a whole.

*Libelli precum* typically contain prayers to the persons of the Trinity (both individually and together), the Virgin Mary, the saints, angels, and apostles, often but not necessarily in that order. In some cases the contents are limited to only a few of these addressees. There is considerable variation in the number of prayers for individual saints, the size of the collection, and the length of individual prayers. Most *libelli precum* are unique collections of texts; while not all the texts within them are unique, their combination and ordering usually are. Prayers

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that are common to several manuscripts may appear in a different order in each one. Even groups of texts that are commonly transmitted together often vary slightly because of prayers added or omitted to the series. Consequently, *libelli precum* are often analyzed and edited as textual units or blocks.

Wilmart’s edition of 1940 drew upon four manuscripts of the ninth century, all from ecclesiastical (and mainly monastic) scriptoria. The excerpts he selected encompass a wide variety of genres: prayers, hymns, abbreviated Psalters, confessions, and set of liturgical texts to recite during specific hours of the divine office. They also include groupings of psalms for particular spiritual purposes, a kind of practice also described in texts such as the *De psalmorum usu* of Alcuin. In the preface to his edition Wilmart did not furnish complete descriptions of the manuscripts or explain why he chose certain texts over others. As a result, the edition radically separates the prayers edited from their manuscript context. More recent editions (particularly of Insular prayer manuscripts) have presented the texts in the context of the whole manuscript. Wilmart, a seasoned liturgical scholar, was certainly aware of the contents of the manuscripts in addition to the prayers. It was probably methodological bias rather than a lack of aptitude that led him to isolate the prayers as a separate textual tradition, for he maintained that “liturgical prayer and private prayer are distinct types.” In medieval manuscripts, however, such a strict division can be difficult to establish. Indications of a separation between prayers and other texts in a manuscript are comparatively rare. One unusual example is the rubric *incipit orationes peculiares* in a manuscript copied in northern Italy around the year 1000. Although this rubric apparently refers to “private” prayers, which would seem to distinguish between one set of prayers and other texts in the same book, no other aspect

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3 *Precum Libelli Quattuor*, pp. 5–6.


6 London, British Library, MS Egerton 3763, fol. 51v.