The Liber ordinarius of Nivelles

Liturgy as Interdisciplinary Intersection

Edited by
JEFFREY F. HAMBURGER
and EVA SCHLOTHEUBER

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The Liber ordinarius of Nivelles
(Houghton Library, MS Lat 422)

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgments ................................................... V
Introduction ......................................................... 1

The Manuscript

*Jeffrey F. Hamburger*
Description of the *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles, Houghton Library,
MS Lat 422 and the Date of its Decoration .......................... 11

*Albert Derolez*
Codicology and Paleography of the Nivelles *Liber ordinarius* ........ 15

The Context

*Eva Schlotheuber*
Pilgrims, the Poor, and the Powerful: The Long History of the Women
of Nivelles ........................................................ 35

*Walter Simons*
Worlds Apart? Beguine Communities of Nivelles and the Abbey of
St Gertrude, from Marie d’Oignies (d. 1213) to the *Liber ordinarius*
(c. 1300) ................................................................. 97

*Rowan Dorin*
Order and Disorder: The Documentary Additions to the *Liber ordinarius*
of Nivelles .......................................................... 133

The Cult

*Bonnie Effros*
Elizabeth de Bierbais and the Relics of Gertrude of Nivelles ........... 153
### Table of Contents

**Alison I. Beach**  
*Placet nobis electio*: The Election and Investiture of the Abbess at Fourteenth-Century Nivelles ........................................... 165

**Margot Fassler**  
Liturgical History and Hagiography as Reflected in the Ordinal of Nivelles, with Emphasis on the Cult of St Gertrude ................. 175

### The Liturgy

**Louis van Tongeren**  
Holy Week in Nivelles .................................................. 239

**Charles Caspers**  
On the Road: The Processions of the Canonesses of Nivelles and their Attitude towards the Outside World (c. 1350) ....................... 255

### The Architecture

**Klaus-Gereon Beuckers**  
The Abbey Church of St Gertrude in Nivelles: Observations regarding its Architectural Disposition ........................................ 279

**Andreas Odenthal**  
*Maiorem ecclesiam esse matrem omnium ecclesiarum totius villae*:  
On the Sacral Topography of Nivelles based on the *Liber ordinarius* ...... 313

### The Documents – Edition, Commentary, and Translation

**Thomas Forrest Kelly**  
Personnel of the Church of Nivelles as seen in the *Liber ordinarius* ...... 341

**Virginie Greene**  
The French of Nivelles: A Vernacular Legalese in the Making ............ 359

**Hannah Weaver**  
Note on the Language of the Documents Pertaining to the Abbey of Nivelles ................................................................. 379

**Eva Schlotheuber and Jeffrey F. Hamburger**  
Document Edition and Translation ........................................ 380
Table of Contents

IX

Abbreviations ............................................................. 447
Bibliography ............................................................... 449
Color Plates ................................................................. 485
Index of Names ............................................................ 503
Index of Places ............................................................. 509
In the collection of his papers, *Liturgica Historica* (1918), published almost exactly a century ago, Edmund Bishop, the famous historian of Catholic liturgy, posed the question: “Is the subject ‘An Old Prayer Book’ a ‘dull’ one?” Tongue-in-cheek, Bishop wrote that he would prefer the dullest form possible, namely, a tabulation of its contents, adding that “any subject is sure to prove dull to somebody”. By Bishop’s sardonic definition, a *Liber ordinarius*, which itself offers little more than a list, albeit a complicated one, constituting the *ordo* or order of the liturgy for a given church or community, itself would be a very dull book indeed. This collection of essays, however, devoted to a single, if outstanding, example of the genre, seeks to demonstrate the contrary.

To judge from the recent outpouring of scholarly publications on *Libri ordinarii* – books that, much like the script of a play, lay out the order of the liturgy, complete with instructions regarding its performance, props, staging and setting – such documents, of which a great many survive, currently enjoy a renaissance of interest across a wide array of academic disciplines, including not only the history of liturgy per se, but also of music, monasticism, art and architecture, and religion, in particular, religious institutions. Consisting of little more a seemingly endless series of cues, organized in various ways according to the liturgical calendar, the contents of *Libri ordinarii* are by their nature skeletal in character. Yet they offer a sufficient wealth of information to have permitted those who used them in the past and those who study them in the present to flesh out that skeleton and lend it life. Read attentively, these books provide far more than a mass of raw information, itself a goldmine for scholars interested in the basic historical challenge of reconstruction, whether of the liturgy itself or the architecture and liturgical furnishings of a particular community. More broadly, they also provide critical insight into the history of ideas, attitudes, and mentality as well as the relationships among the various groups that constituted a given community and the liturgical interactions among them, all of which were freighted with social as well as religious significance. In the case of female monastic communities, such as that at Nivelles, a *Liber ordinarius* also sheds light on constructions of gender and conceptions of ritual as they related to gender in the social, political and religious spheres. Detailed descriptions of how ceremony unfolds in time and space, they permit at least a partial reconstruction of elements of historical experience that are otherwise inherently ephemeral.
The Liber Ordinarius ostendens qualiter legatur et cantetur per totum anni circulum in ecclesia Nivellensis (i. e., The Liber ordinarius showing how [the liturgy] is read and sung through the entire cycle of the year in the church of Nivelles) or, for short, the Liber ordinarius of Nivelles (LON), which was acquired by the Houghton Library at Harvard University in 2010 and assigned the shelfmark MS Lat 422, served as a guide to the corporate prayer of a community, in this case, the canonesses of the abbey of St Gertrude in Nivelles in modern-day Belgium. Located between Brussels and Charleroi and no more than about twenty miles from the border with France, the abbey, which today still dominates what is now the rather sleepy town of Nivelles, was, through much of the Middle Ages, a strategically located center of power, closely associated in turn with the Merovingian, Carolingian, and Ottonian imperial houses. Among extant manuscripts, that purchased by the Houghton Library, which had previously been privately held, is the oldest known to survive from an institution that exercised tremendous power and influence over the course of many centuries.

Nivelles was founded in Gaul in the middle of the seventh century, by Ida, the window of Pippin the Elder, and her daughter, St Gertrude. For its time, the foundation was a typical initiative for a widow of the high aristocracy acting under the influence of Irish missionaries. The two female founders mandated the adoption of a fixed rule and enclosure. Among the principal duties of the community were the care of strangers and administering to the needs of the poor, widows, and orphans. The charitable ministration associated with the various hospitals linked to Nivelles had a significant and lasting impact on the abbey throughout its history. Founded on lands that had belonged to the powerful Austrasian major domus, Pippin the Elder, Nivelles evolved into one of the most important dynastic monastic houses of the later Carolingian dynasty, which was deeply involved in the Pippinids’s retention of power during the difficult period following Grimoald’s so-called coup d’état in 656. Nivelles thus acquired its enduring status in cultural memory as the “cradle of the Carolingians,” and for many centuries the abbesses of Nivelles most likely remained the most powerful territorial rulers in the region. When in 1798, during the French Revolution the abbey was dissolved, the community of women could look back on a history of approximately 1150 years.

Gertrud and Itta had placed the pastoral care of the women in the hands of Irish monks for whom they founded the monastery of Fosses. With time a community of canons with the unusually high number of thirty members was established in Nivelles; its role was to support an aristocratic community of approximately forty canonesses. The Liber ordinarius of Nivelles, including the documents and records that it contains, reflects the formative beginnings of the monastery, its important traditions and rituals as well as its religious, political, and charitable functions into which both the female and male communities were integrated. Given its liturgical function, the manuscript necessarily documents
the performance of the liturgy in great detail. More than that, however, it permitted the community not simply to preserve but also to shape and structure its memory and understanding of itself in terms defined by liturgy. The manuscript permits us to see how the liturgy was put to use not only for religious but also for political and social reasons. Indicative of this context was the decision of the Chapter of Nivelles to add to the *Liber ordinarius* crucial documents regarding the interaction of the female and male communities that for the most part are not documented elsewhere.

The abbey’s religious, political, and social importance alone would suffice to make its *Liber ordinarius* a document of commanding interest. It takes on added significance, however, in light of what is now over a generation of scholarship devoted to questions of gender as they relate to the history of medieval monasticism. One salient feature of the *Liber ordinarius* of Nivelles is that its contents are addressed primarily to the requirements of its primary community of canonesses rather than those of its secondary community of canons. Rarely does a document provide such direct insight into the particularities that distinguished a female from a male community as well as the many ties that bound them together.

When it originally surfaced at an auction at Sotheby’s, London, in 2008, the *Liber ordinarius*, which the catalogue described in misleading fashion as the “Hausbuch” of the Abbess Elizabeth de Bierbais, was dated to within her lifetime, ca. 1280, in large part on the basis of documents included among the liturgical texts proper. Such a date would link the *Liber* to period of tremendous turmoil in the abbey’s history, years which witnessed quarreling not only between the abbey and citizens of the town over taxes (the proverbial town-gown struggle), but also among the abbess and the canonesses over jurisdiction and management of the abbey’s considerable estates, the complicated relationship to the dukes of Brabant as well as other duties and obligations. These struggles culminated with the opening of the tomb of St Gertrude by Abbess Elizabeth de Bierbais on 8 July, 1292. To situate the *Liber* within, let alone characterize it as a witness to, these dramatic events certainly lends the book a certain melodramatic character. Its origins, however, prove to be much more complicated – and perhaps still more interesting – in ways which underscore that the liturgy, far from the timeless reflection or embodiment of eternal praise, which is how it is described in idealizing accounts, in fact represents a highly contested and ever-changing field of social as well as religious action.

Such changes are not simply reflected in but shaped by the material record in the form of manuscripts. The *Liber ordinarius* from Nivelles provides one very concrete and vivid example of this phenomenon. One striking feature of the manuscript is that all of the documents incorporated into its pages can be dated to the second half of the thirteenth century; the latest date that can be attached to any of them is the year 1300. The dating of this material to the latter half of the century contradicts the date assigned to the Lambert Table. If credence can be
lent to an inscription in the calendar as well as the accompanying Lambert Table for calculating the date of Easter, both of which provide the date 1346 (and both which are written in the same script, if not necessarily the same hand, as the rest of the manuscript), then the entire book dates not to the later thirteenth, but rather to the middle of the fourteenth century, a shift of at least half a century.

The history of the manuscript’s creation and the transmission of the materials it contains can briefly (if somewhat summarily) be reconstructed as follows. As occurred quite frequently, the liturgical customs of the abbey of Nivelles owe their having been recorded to ongoing conflicts within the community. Very often, significant information is only set down and codified when it is, for whatever reason, perceived as being in peril. In the particular circumstances that gave rise to the manuscript, a struggle broke out between the abbess and the Chapter of the canonesses and the canons of Nivelles, which at its heart revolved around the ancient status of the abbey as self-governing under the Empire. It appears that the compilation of the liturgical customs of the abbey, i.e., the original version of the *Liber ordinarius* that in turn most likely was based in part on still older models and that served in turn as the exemplar for the extant manuscript, was assembled and commissioned by the Chapter of women during the second half of the thirteenth century. Into this manuscript, which no longer survives, were entered the internal decisions of the Chapter in these years. The *Liber ordinarius* thus served to record the collective memory of the Chapter of Nivelles and of the decisions and debates that marked its conflict with the abbess. In a certain sense, then, the *Liber* represents the beginning of the Chapter’s independent administration of its own affairs. By documenting its own self-governance, the Chapter took an important step in the direction of taking over responsibility for the complex fabric of Nivelles’s ritual and, by extension, political life and, in so doing, challenging the abbess’s sovereignty. With the exception of two documents and the record of the opening of Gertrude’s grave in 1292, the added documents contained in the manuscript are otherwise unknown. Together with a critical apparatus and a translation, they receive their first edition as an appendix this volume of essays.

As the conflict between the Chapter and abbess regarding the abbey’s position in the Empire once again came to the fore in the middle of the fourteenth century, it would appear that the Chapter commissioned a more or less exact copy of the *Liber ordinarius*, the manuscript that is now housed as MS Lat 422 at the Houghton Library of Harvard University. This manuscript contains extensive traces of use and in the fifteenth century received a new binding. As this binding demonstrates, no later than the fifteenth century and possibly earlier, the *Liber ordinarius* was secured to a lectern by a chain, i.e., in a place where it would have been accessible equally to the communities of canonesses and canons, possibly within the church of St Gertrude. The editors know of no comparable example of a *Liber ordinarius* that was chained in comparable fashion; such books were nor-
mally housed in the sacristy. The manuscript’s singularity in this respect underscores the extent to which the manuscript had come to serve a special, indeed, exceptional function. A remark made by Geldolphus van Ryckel, abbot of St Gertrude in Louvain and author of a life of the saint printed in 1637, indicates that the women’s choir at Nivelles housed one or more lecterns with chained books of which one contained a record of the opening of Gertrude’s tomb (“Haec ex libro qui catenatus extat ad stallum dominarum in choro”).¹ From the seventeenth century there also survives a text, printed by Jules Fréson in 1890, which alludes to detailed instructions in “the ordinal of the Ladies” (l’ordinaire des Damosselles) regarding the abbess’s obligation to provide the canonesses with salmon cut according to precise specifications (no doubt the text in MS Lat 422, f. 95r).²

The manuscript’s relatively modest decoration, in the form of flourished pen-work initials, discussed briefly by Jeffrey F. Hamburger in his description of the manuscript, supports or at least in no way contradicts a dating of the manuscript to the middle of the fourteenth century. As detailed in the contributions to this volume by Albert Derolez and Rowan Dorin, the manuscript is almost certainly a copy; there is no other satisfactory way to explain the manuscript’s particular combination of scribal and codicological irregularities. If accepted – and in this volume Walter Simons’s essay represents a dissenting voice – the manuscript’s dating not to the late thirteenth but rather to the middle of the fourteenth century has profound implications, not only for how it was made, but also for the historical circumstances of its making, which here are discussed in greatest depth in the essay by Eva Schlotheuber, together with the historical background and the development of the charitable institutions that also shaped the community’s identity and therefore were also reflected and negotiated in its liturgy on an ongoing basis.

To unpack the ordinal’s potential as an historical witness proves an exceptionally complicated task, one requiring collaboration among a large group of historians representing many different areas of specialization: hence the subtitle of this volume: “Liturgy as Interdisciplinary Intersection”. The abbey’s ordinal provides an unexpected opportunity to shed light on the social and political setting, the shaping and interaction of gender in space, architecture, furnishings, customs, music and, not least, the liturgy of one of the most important female monastic houses in all of medieval Europe. Whereas Andreas Odenthal’s essay mines the ordinal for liturgical data that can be used to reconstruct the layout

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¹ Van Rijkel, Historia (1634), 406.
² Fréson, Histoire (1890), 41: “Premes que la Dame sa vie durant paierat des ore en avant les herens crus; Item payerat le pièche de Saumon crue, de telle longheche, et largesche, entre le boudine et le teste, sans queue et sans teste, que contenu est en l’ordinaire des Damosselles sans point detrainer ne debestournerwetet, mais tout ouvert deseaure et desoubs, si on ne trouve du contraire par bonnes gens qui a ce se cognoisteront.” Our thanks to Walter Simons for bringing to our attention both this passage as well as that in van Ryckel, cited in the previous note.
and function of various spaces within and among the churches that constituted its immediate “family,” Klaus-Gereon Beuckers explores the building against the broader historical foil represented by older and contemporary structures. By recounting the history of the relics of St Gertrude, Bonnie Effros traces her cult to its origins in the Merovingian period and through successive transformations, of which the events documented in the ordinal were among the most dramatic in its history. Alison Beach analyses the very interesting and detailed information given in the documents about the election and investiture of the abbess of Nivelles in late thirteenth century. Margot Fassler and Louis van Tongeren investigate different aspects of the community’s traditions of ritual performance: Fassler, the cult of St Gertrude as expressed in a previously unexplored corpus of chant (both music and texts), van Tongeren with a focus on the celebration of Easter, an examination brought into sharp focus through systematic comparison with the Easter rites specified in other ordinaria from the region. Looking out from the abbey towards its urban and rural contexts, Charles Caspers inquires into the processions that radiated out from the abbey and which inscribed into local topography the networks within which it was embedded by ritual and legal obligations. Drawing in part on information provided by the Liber ordinarius of Nivelles, Walter Simons’s detailed discussion of the region’s beguinages, which represent a radically different tradition of female religious practice, as well as the interaction of these much more modern institutions with the great and venerable abbey, succeeds in shedding new light on accepted narratives regarding the very origins of the beguine movement.

Over and above the rich vein of liturgical information it supplies, which fills a notable gap in our knowledge of Nivelles, the documents in both French and Latin that the ordinal includes along with its more conventional liturgical texts undoubtedly represent its most unusual feature. It was, of course, hardly uncommon for documents of all kinds to be inscribed in blank spaces within manuscripts, whether inside the binding, on fly leaves or on blank folios. Parchment was precious, and occasionally the documents thus included were actually pertinent to and augmented a book’s contents. The documents incorporated into the Liber ordinarius of Nivelles, however, of which this volume includes both an edition and a translation, are anything but casual additions. Codicological and paleographical evidence indicates that they are of a piece with the rest of the manuscript. They therefore represent a carefully considered supplement whose content can only be explained by the particular political circumstances of the manuscript’s making. These circumstances are explored here in the essays by Eva Schlotheuber and Rowan Dorin. To their analysis, which situates the manuscript amidst the crisis of governance faced by the abbey in the mid-fourteenth century, Thomas F. Kelly supplies an analysis of the abbey’s personnel as referenced in the Liber ordinarius and the terminology used to do so, to which Virginie Greene adds a consideration of the legal language deployed in the documents written in
the manuscript’s particular version of the French vernacular, detecting in it literary as well as purely linguistic and legalistic elements. In turn, Hannah Weaver provides the necessary linguistic and legalistic analysis of the French, disentangling the various strands that lend it its local accent.

The contributors, all of whom attended a workshop originally convened in the Spring of 2015 by Jeffrey F. Hamburger and generously made possibly by Harvard’s Radcliffe Institute, have taken the brief represented by the book’s subtitle as seriously as it was intended. To the extent that there is overlap among the essays, it is in ways that are mutually reinforcing. As the contributions make clear, the history of the liturgy, far from being an obscure adjunct to other areas of historical inquiry, is central to an understanding of medieval history in many of its facets. In the case of the Liber ordinarius of Nivelles, those facets include topics as varied as the ordering of the liturgy in all its layers, the processions that extended beyond the family of churches that connected the abbey to the surrounding urban landscape, and relations between the laity and the abbey in the High Middle Ages as well as between the canonesses, an ancient form of female community, with the more modern form represented by the beguines. Ecclesiastical and liturgical history are closely intertwined. To these topics are added other areas of focus, all interrelated: the architecture of the church, which was frequently rebuilt and remodeled throughout its history and which was so grievously damaged during World War II; the layout and function of liturgical furnishings, not to mention the terminology employed to describe them; the complex spatial ordering of a church shared by female and male communities as well as, on occasion, the laity; the music that would have resounded in these spaces, articulating and lending resonance to the community’s devotions; and the community’s cult of the saints, which in turn was rooted in its ancient history and political affiliations.

And then there is the physical fact of the manuscript itself: in its original binding, but somewhat battered and unassuming in appearance, certainly not a lavish liturgical manuscript of the kind that undoubtedly adorned the abbey’s altars. These books – the abbey’s graduals and antiphonaries, missals and breviaries, not to mention a host of other service books – have largely been lost over the course of the centuries. Their disappearance and destruction, however, lends the surviving of the Liber ordinarius that much more significance. Its content permits, if not a complete, then at least an extensive reconstruction of portions of the abbey’s ritual, ceremonial and musical life. Written in an idiosyncratic script, the manuscript offers little for the eye beyond the regular alternation of simple red and blue lombard initials of a kind commonly found in Gothic manuscripts, of which a few are enlivened by elaborate fleuronnée decoration, to which must be added among the manuscript’s most endearing features, its inclusion (in two versions) of a measure, painted prominently in red, for the salmon that the abbess is to distribute to the canonesses during Lent [Pl. 12,
Moreover, the manuscript’s structure, a sequence of utterly regular gatherings, combined with the irregular organization of its contents, provides a genuine historical conundrum. Why, must one ask, is the content of a liturgical book clearly dated 1346 interrupted by not one but two sets of documents placed between the Temporale and the Sanctorale and, again, at the end of the Sanctorale. And why are these documents, which deal largely with the obligations of the both the abbess and the custos, as well as the conflict between Abbess Elizabeth de Bierbais (r. 1272–1293) and the chapter of Nivelles, which by the time the manuscript was made, lay quite far in the past, recorded in Old French? Why this particular selection of documents, too scanty to have formed part of a customary? Why the strange character of the script, for which no precise parallels are forthcoming, either in other surviving documents from Nivelles or in other manuscripts of the period? Why are certain ceremonies included and others not? Each of these questions generates still more. These are just some of the puzzles for which the following pages propose possible answers.
Index of Names

Abundus of Villers, monk 105, 110
Adalberina, abbess of Nivelles 59
Adalpurga (Adalperga), woman healed at Nivelles 46
Adam, investitus of the parish Nivelles 56
Adan, chaplain of St Blaisius 358, 428–429
Adan de Villario, witness of parson Johannes of Gouthal’s recognition 358, 428–429
Adelgund 126
Adelheid, abbess of Nivelles and sister of Archbi"opher Hermann II 309
Adelheid, empress of the Holy Roman Empire, wife of Otto I 59, 60, 307
Adelheid of Burgundy, duchess of Brabant, wife of Henry III 76, 84, 87
Adolph of Nassau, king of Germany 91, 95, 147, 434n114, 438–439
Adon of Vien"es 190, 191, 193, 220–226, 227
Adula, matrona at Nivelles 44–45
Agnes, abbess of Nivelles 41, 156, 159, 165, 195, 199
Agnes, abbess of Poitiers, daughter of Radegund 49
Agnes de Bousval, domina 102
Agnes de Harcourt, sister of Louis IX 115
Albert I, king of Germany 59
Albert of Louvain, St, bishop elect of Li"ege and brother of Duke Henry I of Brabant 63, 65
Alcuin 41
Alexander de Brunsore (Alixandre de Brucsort), canon of St. Lambert of Li`ege 87, 420–421
Alix of Louvain, daughter of Duke Henry I of Brabant, wife of Arnould II of Wezemaal 76
Amalberga 126
Andreas, rector of the cloister schools 343, 358, 428–429
Anno, archbishop of Salzburg 41
Ansegisel, husband of Pippin’s daughter
Begga, son of Bishop Arnulf of Metz 37, 41, 195, 276
Arnould II, Wezemaal, ducal ministerial
of Brabant 59, 64, 70–73, 76–77
Arnould III, Wezemaal 76–77, 86
Arnould IV, Wezemaal 79, 84
Arnould V, Wezemaal 84
Arnulf, bishop of Louvain 71
Arnulf, bishop of Metz 36–37, 50–51, 156, 195
Arnould III, count of Looz 95
Attich, duke of Alsace 51
Baldwin (Balduin) V, Margrave of Namur, Count of Flanders and Hennegau 64, 65
Baldwin VI, count, Latin emperor of Constantinople 106
Balthildis, queen, member of Chelles 51
Bassin, bishop of Trier 50
Baudouin de Rosoux, judicial vicar of the diocese Li`ege 79
Baudouin of Barbençon, master 106
Bavo, St, legendary brother of St Gertrude 195, 197
Beatrice de Hémelette 113
Beatrice de Rêves 111
Beatrice of Breda, daughter of Geoffrey III of Breda and wife of Arnould II of Wezemaal 71
Begga, St, sister of St Gertrude 37, 41, 50, 98, 126, 154, 195, 197–198, 272, 276
Bernerus, plebanus of the parish Nivelles 56
Berthe (Bertha), abbess of Nivelles 62, 66, 107, 316
Bessela, maid of Marie d’Oignies 102
Blanche de Castille, queen, mother of Louis IX 113–116
Boidin, wax tax tributary 384–385
Boniface VIII, pope 180
Bonitus, chancellor of Sigibert III 47
Brunichilde, queen, founder of female community and xenodochium in Autun 50
Bruno, builder of St Pantaleon in Cologne 296
Caesarius of Heisterbach, Cistercian monk 106
Catherine, St 125, 178
Celestine III, pope 62, 63
Chadee, criminal from the city of Nivelles 430–431
Channeboth, criminal from the city of Nivelles 430–431
Charlemagne, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 48, 58, 195, 307
Charles IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 96, 147, 148
Charles Martel. See Charles the Hammer
Charles the Bald, king of West Francia 53, 59
Charles the Hammer (Karl Martell), son of Pepin of Herstal, grandfather of Charlemagne 41, 195
Childebert, son of Grimoald, king of Austrasia 39–40, 50
Christiane de Frankenberg, abbess of Nivelles 320, 498
Christina Mirabilis 125
Clement II, pope 61, 62n149
Clement IV, pope 80
Clement V, pope 59
Clementia d’Oiselay, abbess of Remiremont 59
Clothar II, king of Francia 36
Clovis II, king of Neustria 40, 156
Colette, criminal from the city of Nivelles 168, 430–431
Dagobert I 36, 37
Dagobert II 40
Denis van den Tympel 161
Dido (Desiderius), bishop of Poitiers 40
Dietrich II de Bierbais 84
Dietrich of Ulm (Theodoricus de Ulmo; Thierry de Ulmis), canon of Nivelles 94, 153, 404–405
Dionysius Exiguus 123, 222
Edward I, king of England 92, 442–443
Egburg, abbess of Nivelles 46
Egidius de Honnef, imperial notary 83
Egidius de Samina. See Gilles de Samina
Egidius Largetier. See Gilles the treasurer
Ekbert of Andechs-Meranien, bishop of Bamberg 67
Elisabeth de Liedekerke (Liedekirke), abbess of Nivelles 134–135, 147, 171, 173
Elisabeth of Spalbeek, beguine 113
Elizabeth of Thuringia, St 110, 125
Emma de la Tour (de Latour; de Turre), female provost (preposita) in Nivelles 81, 94–95, 153, 404–405, 412–413
Enghelbert (Engelbert) II, Lord of Enghien 71
Erbald, canon of Nivelles 410–413
Erchinoald, mayor of the palace of Neustria 38
Everard de Rèves 110
Evrart Creche, landowner and tributary of Nivelles 382–383
Ezzo, Rhenish Pfalzgraf 311
Florus of Lyon 190, 191, 220–226
Foillan, abbot of Fosse 38, 39, 40, 42, 52, 154, 192, 193, 198, 264–266, 272, 274
Foulque de Neuilly 104
Frederick I (Frederick Barbarossa), emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 62, 64, 65, 66, 166n8
Frederick II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 71
Froit, sons of 430–431
Fulbert, bishop of Chartres 177
Gautier de Trasegnies, provost of St Gertrude 112n67
Geoffrey III, duke of Brabant 110
Geoffrey III of Breda 71
Gérard, lord of Bergen op Zoom, brother of Arnould III of Wezemaal 76–77
Gerard de Huldenberg (Hodeberes; Houdebiegerges), canon of Nivelles 75n213, 131n141, 410–413
Gerard de Rèves 110
Giles, prior of Oignies 100, 103n30
Gilles, lord of Barbençon 106
Gilles de Huldenberg (Hodeberes; Houdebiegerges), canon of Nivelles 75n213, 131n141, 410–413
Gerard de Rèves 110
Giles, prior of Oignies 100, 103n30
Gilles, lord of Barbençon 106
Gilles de Walcourt 106
Gilles (Egidius) of Samina, witness of the parsons John of St Nicholas and Radulf of St Jacques 358, 428–429
Gilles (Egidius) the treasurer (Largeur), witness of the parsons John of St Nicholas and Radulf of St Jacques 428–429
Gisela, abbess of Nivelles, daughter of King Lothar II 53, 59
Gislebert de Mons, chronicler 64, 65
Godefridus of Nivelles 107
Godefroy of Brabant (d’Aerschot [Arsco]), brother of Duke Jean I of Brabant 84n267, 90, 424–425
Godefroy of Wezemaal, brother of Arnould III of Wezemaal and lord of Perck 76–77
Godescald (Godescalcus), provost of Nivelles 198, 271, 273, 324, 342, 343, 345, 346, 353, 355
Goswin (Gosuin) of Bossut, Cistercian monk and cantor of Villers 105, 110, 112, 129
Gregory I, the Great, pope 46, 52, 310
Gregory IX, pope 167
Gregory of Tours 47
Grimoald, brother of St Gertrude 2, 38, 39–40, 154, 156, 195, 196, 197
Guy de Hainaut, bishop 170n22
Guy (Guido) of Nivelles, brother of John (Jean) 103n25, 106–110, 112, 125, 130
Haziga, abbess of Andlau 166n8
Helwidis, recluse 101–102, 107, 129
Henri de Jauche, provost of St Gertrude 112n67
Henry, archdeacon of Liège 56
Henry I, duke of Brabant, count of Brussels and margrave of Antwerp 63, 64–66, 70–71, 72, 74, 76, 86, 116
Henry II, duke of Brabant 71–73
Henry III, duke of Brabant 76, 77, 273
Henry IV, duke of Brabant 76–77, 87
Henry I, king of the Roman Empire 307n59
Henry II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 60, 280n4
Henry III, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 54, 60–61, 62, 75, 158, 279–280, 310, 312, 316, 319
Henry IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 54–55, 62, 279
Henry VI, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 63, 64, 66
Henry (VII), son of Emperor Frederick II 66–67, 91
Henry V de Bierbais 84
Henry IV of Breda 75
Henry II of Leez, bishop of Liège 65
Henry III of Limburg 65
Henry of Guelders, bishop of Liège 78
Henry of St Paul, witness of parson John of Gouthal’s recognition 358, 428–429
Hermann II, archbishop of Cologne 279n3, 308, 309, 310, 311
Hiburgis, abbess of Nivelles 66
Hildegard, wife of Charlemagne 48
Hildegard of Bingen 129
Hrabanus Maurus 191, 220
Hugh of St Cher, papal legate 78
Hugo of Celles, magister 71
Hugues de Pierrepont, bishop 103n30, 105, 106
Hugues de Walcourt 106
Iacobus de Montano Vico. See Jacques de Mons
Iacobus de Sancto Syro. See Jacques de Saint-Syr
Ida de Bierbais, possible sister of abbess Elisabeth de Bierbais, and wife of Arnoul IV of Wezemaal  84
Ida of Nivelles, beguine  112, 125, 127n131
Imagina, wife of duke Geoffrey III, abbess of Munsterbilzen, abbess of Katharinarokloster  99, 110
Innocent IV, pope  274
Iohanna, female provost (preposita), canoness of Nivelles  410–413
Irmina, abbess of Oeren, Trier  50
Isabelle, sister of Louis IX  115
Isabelle de Brugelette, abbess of Nivelles  79, 158, 159, 373
Isabelle de Frankenberg, abbess of Nivelles  320, 498
Itta. See Iduberga
Iwan, vicar of Nivelles  56
Iwain de Rèves. See Ywain de Rèves
Jacques, monk of Anchin  158
Jacques Castance (Castangne), archdeacon of the Chapter of Liège  81, 412–415, 418–419
Jacques de Mons (Iacobus de Montano Vico), canon of Nivelles  410–413
Jacques de Nivelles  158–159
Jacques de Saint-Syr (Iacobus de Sancto Syro), canon  153, 404–405, 444–445
Jacques de Vitry (OP, bishop of Acre)  57, 98–102, 104, 106–107, 109, 110, 111, 114, 130
James, abbot of Villers  81, 129, 412–415, 418–419
Jan van Ruusbroec, chaplain at St Gudule’s in Brussels  109–110
Jean I, duke of Brabant  76–77, 84–85, 89–90, 92, 119n103, 134, 159, 272, 422–425
Jean II, duke of Brabant  90, 92, 120, 122, 143, 168, 169, 320, 321, 422–425, 442–443
Jean III, duke of Brabant  95, 96n325, 135, 147–148, 149, 168, 169, 171, 173
Jean de Baulers, priest of Nivelles  153
Jean d’Eppes, bishop of Liège  56, 106
Jean de Liroux  104–107
Jean de Nivelles  104–107, 125
Joanna, duchess of Brabant  270
John Gielemans, canon of Rooklooster  127
Johannes Poullondon  430–431
John, bishop of Cambrai  302
John, friend of Juliana of Cornillon  256
John (Jean; Johanne), husband of Marie d’Oignies  101, 106, 107, 109
John (Jehan), lord of Gooik (Goy)  384–385
John (Johannes), vicar of the parish of Gouthal in Nivelles  69, 358, 428–429
John (Johannes), vicar of the parish of St Nicholas in Nivelles  69, 358, 428–429
John of Baulers (Johannes de Balerio), priest and witness to the opening of St Gertrude’s tomb  358, 404–405
John of Trafleir (Johannes de Trafleir), witness of parson Peter of the Sepulcher’s recognition  358, 428–429
John (Jehan) le Feuire, landowner, tributary of Nivelles  382–383
Juette, beguine  106
Juliana of Cornillon (Juliana of Mont-Cornillon), beguine and Augustinian canoness  110n64, 124, 125, 129, 256–257, 264n43, 271
Karl Martell. See Charles the Hammer
Lambert, St, missionary bishop and patron saint of Liège  121, 123–124, 192, 227–228, 236
Lambert II (Balderich) of Louvain  61
Leo III, pope  335
Leo IX, pope  61–62
Lévêque, Guillaume  133n3
Lull, Ramon  167n14
Lothar II, king of Lotharingia  50, 53, 59
Lothar III, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire  55, 62
Index of Names 507

Louis I, count of Loon 56n119
Louis II, count of Loon (Looz) 65
Louis IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 135
Louis IX, king of France 114, 115
Louis XV, king of France 161
Louis the German, king of East Francia 59
Luitgard, queen 41
Lutgard of Aywières (Lutgard of Tongeren) 105, 106, 111, 115, 116, 125, 129

Makaire, criminal from the city of Nivelles 430–431
Malbaptiste, criminal from the city of Nivelles 168, 430–431
Margaret, wife of Duke Jean II of Brabant, daughter of King Edward I of England 92, 442–443
Margaret of Willambroux 102
Marguerite de Gavre d’Escornaix, abbess of Nivelles 148
Marguerite de Provence, wife of Louis IX 114
Mariana of Austria, queen of Spain 161
Marie, daughter of King Philip Augustus of France and spouse of Duke Henry I of Brabant 116
Marie, la Baillette 126–127, 128, 268–269, 272
Marie, sister of Ywain and Walter de Rêves 111
Marie d’Oignies (Oegnies; de Oingnies; Maria de Nivella) 57, 98–112, 114–115, 125, 128–130
Markina, St, recluse at Willambroux 102, 129
Mary of Brabant 113, 116, 158n45
Mary of Grez, beguine of Nivelles 129
Mathilde, queen of the Roman Empire 307n59
Mathilde, sister of Robert of Béthune, wife of Geoffrey III of Breda 71
Mathilde de Leuwenberg, abbess of Nivelles 135n8, 147
Modesta, nun at Remiremont, cousin to Gertrude, first abbess of Oeren 50
Monegundis, widow and founder of hospital in Tours 47
Nicholas IV, pope 119, 394n29
Nicolas de Douai 158–159
Odile, founder and abbess of Hohenbourg 51
Odilia of Liège 105
Otto, cardinal legate 56, 69
Otto I, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 38n13, 59, 60
Otto II, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 59–60
Otto III, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 282, 307
Otto IV, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire 66
Otto I, Pfalzgraf, from 1045 duke of Swabia 311
Peisseral, sons of 430–431
Peter, vicar of the parish of St Sépulchre in Nivelles 68, 358, 428–429
Peter Martyr of Verona, St 269, 273–274
Peter the Chanter 104
Phillipe, abbot of Lobbes 93, 442–445
Phillip of Swabia, king of the Roman Empire 66
Pierre d’Alençon 115–116
Pippin (Pepin) of Herstal, son of St Begga and Ansegisel 41, 58, 195–196
Pippin of Landen (Pepin; Pippin der Ältere; the Elder), major domo of Austrasia 36–37, 154, 195, 196–197, 223, 261–262, 270, 272, 273, 315
Poppo of Stavelot, abbot 308, 310, 311
Rabanus Maurus. See Hrabanus Maurus
Radegund, St 47
Radegund of Poitiers, queen 49–50
Radulf (Radulphus), vicar of the parish St Jacques in Nivelles 69, 428–429
Remacus, St, abbot of Stablo-Malmédy 39, 192, 227, 310
Renauld de Rêves 111
Renier Bouchial, burgher of Nivelles 113
Richard of Cornwall, Holy Roman king 76n219, 78
Richette I, abbess of Nivelles 199
Richette II, abbess of Nivelles 355
Richeza (Richenza), abbess of Nivelles 54, 60–61, 309, 311, 312
Rigart de Kenneffe (Rigaut; Rigars; Keneffe), canon of Liège 87, 420–421
Robert de Béthune, advocate of Arras 71–72
Robert of Thoroute (de Thourotte; de Thourette), bishop of Liège 72, 75n213, 75n215, 126, 127, 256–257, 268, 271, 273
Romaric, founder of the monastery Remiremont 37, 51
Rudolf of Zähringen, bishop of Liège 63
Servais Goidin, owner of half a stall in the market of Nivelles 384–385
Sibille de Jauches (Sibylla de Iacea), canoness 153, 404–405
Sigibert III, son of Pippin of Landen, king of Austrasia 37, 39–40, 47
Simon, son of Henry III of Limbourg 65
Simon Weris, wax tax tributary of Nivelles 384–385
Sybilla of Gages, canoness of St Gertrude’s 129
Theodoricus de Ulmo; Thierry de Ulmis. See Dietrich of Ulm
Theophanu, empress of the Byzantine Empire and the Holy Roman Empire, wife of Otto II 59, 60, 307
Thomas of Cantimpré (OP) 97, 100, 105, 106, 110, 111, 115, 116, 129
Ultan, brother of Foillan, abbot of Fosse 38, 266n51
Ulthrogota, queen, wife of King Childebert 50
Urban II, pope 59
Usuardus of Saint-Germain 190, 191, 199, 220–222, 225, 226
Venantius Fortunatus 47
Vulfterude (Vulfterude), abbess of Nivelles 40–41, 43, 156, 165, 195, 198
Waldetrudis, St 126, 192–193, 198, 221, 227
Waldrada, mistress of Lothar II 50
Wallehanig (Wallenhanig), probably a local noble family around Nivelles 424–425, 444–445
Walter (Walerus), rector of the church of St Syr in Nivelles 428–429
Walter VII Berthout, lord of Mechelen 76, 77
Walter de Bierbais, canon at Nivelles 84n263
Walter de Pois, schoolmaster (scholasticus) at Nivelles 153, 404–405
Walter de Rèves 111
Walter the Stubborn (Hardehol), knight of the Savetines 384–385
Wazon (Wazo), bishop of Liège 157, 279, 309
Wilhelmina de la Tour, possible sister of Emma de la Tour, canoness of Nivelles 94–95
William, abbot of Villers 129
William, earl of Holland 279
Willibrord, missionary bishop from Northumbria 50
Wulfterude. See Vulfterude
Ywain de Rèves (Iwain), priest of Laon cathedral and provost of St Gertrude’s 110–112, 130
Zwentibold, king of Lotharingia 53
Index of Places

Aachen 45, 62, 66, 236, 279
Aalst 272
Aarschot (Aerschot; Arscot), county 64
Affligem, abbey near Aalst 148n45, 272
Alarvolut 266
Alsace, duchy 50, 51, 166n8
Altdorf, family monastery of Pope Leo IX 61
Anchin, abbey 158
Andenne, monastery founded by St Begga 41, 154, 195, 197–198
Anderlecht 125
Andlau, monastery 166n6
Antwerp, margraviate 64
Ardenne 36, 93
Athies 49
Austrasia 36–37, 39, 40, 41, 156, 190n34, 195, 315
Aubergere 290n27
Avauterre (Avalterre) 115–116
Awihon Bruch. See Willambroux
Aywières (Les Awirs), Cistercian nunnery 99, 105, 106, 107, 109, 110–111, 129, 131
Barking 154
Barletta 77
beguinerages 6, 7, 97–131
- Arras, le Roi 114
- Cambrai (Cantimpref) 114, 115, 116
- Nivelles, Goutisseaux 57, 113, 116–117, 118, 128, 130
- Nivelles, St Sépulchre 107, 112–113, 116–117, 127n131, 130
- Nivelles, St Syr, de la Royauté (Larente) 57, 113–117, 118, 125, 127–128, 129, 130, 268
- Oignies 103
- Paris 114
- Villers 116
- Willambroux 100–103, 112, 116–117, 129, 130
- See also Liège: St Christophe, church and hospital
Belgian Limburg 110
Bergen op Zoom, property of Nivelles 71, 73, 75, 84
Biertremon, tributary of Nivelles 382–383
Bonn, St Cassius, collegiate church 326
Bouillon 121
Brabant (Braibant), duchy 63–64, 70–80, 89–90, 93, 99, 115, 125, 148, 275, 360–363, 372
Brauweiler, Ezzonid family monastery 309
Breda 71–72
Brussels 2, 36, 78n230, 125, 127, 162, 200
- Calvinist garrison 161
- "Coal Forest," familial land of the Pippinids 36
- St Gudule 109, 110n61
Cambrai 100, 106, 234, 236, 302
- diocese 104, 125, 262, 272, 274
- See also under beguinerages
Campine 93
Champagne 110
Chartres
- cathedral 175n3, 177, 302n49
- diocese 188
Chelles, monastery 51, 154
Cleves, county 64
Cluny, community 64, 315n16
Cologne 61, 91, 110, 176n4, 208n90, 220–226
- archdiocese 93n315, 191, 291
- cathedral 291–293, 311, 319n40
- baptistery church 291
- St Maria ad gradus, church 291
- Sta Maria im Kapitol, women's collegiate church 287n23, 296
- St Gereon, church 176n4
- St Pantaleon, church 285, 286, 296
- St Severin, church 308, 310
- Condroz 93
- Couture-Saint-Germain 105
- Cugnon, monastery founded by the Pippinids 37n9
- Deutz, monastery 296
- Douai 116, 374
- Duffel 386–387
- Echternach, Benedictine monastery 50
- Eisenach, Katharinakloster 110
- Ely 154
- England, kingdom 26, 71, 154, 360, 361, 363n15, 373–374
- Essen 52n94, 67n173, 166n6, 287n23, 307, 309, 311, 312, 317, 320n45
- Famenne 93
- Flanders, county 66, 110, 114, 361, 372
- Fosse (Fosses), monastery 38–40, 44–45, 53–54, 154, 193, 200, 257, 264–266, 272, 336, 351, 354. See also under hospitals
- France (Francia), kingdom 2, 36, 58, 110, 114, 190, 360–361, 372, 374
- Frauenchiemsee 166n6
- Freckenhorst, women's collegiate church 200, 230, 285, 287n23
- Gandersheim, Damenstift 67, 166n6, 286, 287n23, 312
- Gelders (Guelders), county 64
- Genappe, market under the lordship of Nivelles 63, 90, 422–423
- Gerresheim, Damenstift 314n8
- Ghent (Gent) 114, 190n34, 197n63
- Goinart, tributary of Nivelles 382–383
- Goook (Goy; Goyaca), wax tax tributary of Nivelles 70, 71, 73, 82, 84, 264n45, 382–383, 384–385, 416–417
- Gorissen, community 70n190
- Gorze 308, 310, 315n16
- Groenendaal, hermitage 110
- Hainault (Hainaut; Hennegau) 93, 106, 110n62, 266
- Hamburg 161
- Heigne, Chapel of Our Lady 103
- Heisterbach, Cistercian monastery 74
- Herford 67, 170n19
- Hersfeld, monastery 308, 310
- Hesbaye 93
- Hildesheim, St Michael, church 287
- Hohenbourg, monastery in Alsace 51–52 hospitals (xenodochium) 41–57, 157, 353, 418n79
- – Autun 50
- – Fosse 42, 45, 49, 52, 264
- – Lyon, Virgin Mary 50
- – Nivelles, Gouthal (Goutal; Goutisseau) 57, 113, 128, 267, 335, 336, 398–399
- – Nivelles, St Nicholas 55–56, 128, 261n26, 267, 400–401
- – Nivelles, St Sépulchre 55–56, 84, 112, 128, 267, 335, 356, 400–401
- – Nivelles, St Syr 57, 116, 118, 125, 128, 335
- – Rome, St Peter 47
- – Saix 49
- – See also Liège: St Christophe, church and hospital
- Huy 72, 106, 269
- Jauchelette (lacelete), property of the Chapter of Nivelles 430–431
- Jerusalem 242, 335n127
- Jouarre 154, 155
- Kalkar 200, 230
- Kaufungen 170n19
- Kerkom, Cistercian convent (La Ramée) 112
- Kildare 154
- Korsendonk 127
- Kortenberg 77
- Laon, cathedral 111, 112n67
- Lembeek, church 193n46, 221
- Lennick (Lyniaco), property of the abbey of Nivelles 59, 70, 82, 87, 406n55, 414–415
- Les Awirs. See Aywières
- Liège (Lüttich) 104–105, 110, 115–116, 296, 309, 361
Index of Places

– Nivelles, parish. See under Nivelles, City (town)
– St Christophe, church, hospital, and beguinage honoring Lambert 123–124
– St Lambert (Lambertus), cathedral 92, 93, 192, 200, 239, 243, 263, 291, 293, 311, 444–445
– St Lambert (Lambiers), Chapter of 77, 88, 169–171, 412–413, 418–419, 432–435
– Villers-Perwin, parish 264, 275
– Ligny (Ligni; Lingnis; Lingui), tributary of Nivelles 382–383, 384–385, 420–421
– Lillois 105, 106, 107, 110–111, 129n137
– Limbourg (Lembourch), duchy 89, 92, 93, 192, 200, 239, 243, 263, 291, 293, 311, 444–445
– Loon (Looz), county 64, 110
– Lotharingia (Lotherenghes) 36, 312
– Louvain (Löwen; Leuven) 64, 76, 78
– St Peter, collegiate church 200, 239, 242, 243
– Lower Lorraine (Niederlothringen), duchy 64n160, 279, 307, 308, 311
– Luxembourg 96n325
– Luxeuil, monastery 39, 280n7
– Lyon 68, 71, 83
– St Eulalia, female monastery 50
– St Paul, male monastery 50
– See also under hospitals
– Maastricht 193, 234–236, 296
– Our Lady, church of 240n7, 243, 249, 286, 330n105
– Savior, church of 309n64, 311
– St Servatius, collegiate church 239, 240n7, 242, 291, 300
– Mainz, archdiocese 62, 320n46
– Masmuy, village near Nivelles 104
– Meerbeke, property of the Chapter of Nivelles 430–431
– Meerssen 59
– Meuse, valley 115, 197
– Mons, canonesses 193, 205n84
– Mons (Montani vici) 442–443
– Morlanwelz (Morlanweis) 384–385
– Munsterbilzen, Damenstift 110
– Namur 99, 116, 234–236
– Naumburg, community 321
– Neustria, kingdom 38
– Niedermünster, Regensburgmonastery 52
– Nijmegen, palace (Pfalz) 279
– Nil Abesse (Nil Labbesse) 430–431
– Ninove, abbey 379
– chapels
  – St Martin 329
  – St Nicholas 249, 327, 329–330
  – St Stephen 327–328, 348, 358
– churches
– Baulers (Balerium) 262, 275, 358
– Franciscan friary 75n215, 128, 257, 262, 335, 440–443
– magistrate 82, 90, 91, 260, 422–423
– market 63, 66, 261, 262, 296, 382–383
– Monsterout (Monstreux) 55, 261n26, 262, 335, 358
– parishes 56, 108n56, 336n133, 424–429
  – Faubourg de Mons 56, 108n56, 336n133, 424n90
  – Gouthal (ad Gotallum; Goutalle; Goutissiaux) 56, 57, 108n56, 113, 116, 119, 261, 262, 336n133, 358, 424n90. See also under beguinages; hospitals
Index of Places

- Notre-Dame (Our Lady)  56, 108, 336n133, 358, 424n90. See also under Nivelles, Abbey of St Gertrude: churches
  - St Andrew (Saint-André)  56, 108n56, 262, 335, 336n133, 358, 424n90
  - St George (Saint-George)  56, 108n56, 262, 335, 336n133, 358, 424n90
  - St James (Saint-Jacques)  56, 108n56, 109, 116, 119, 262, 335, 336n133, 358, 424n90
  - St Jean the Evangelist (Saint-Jean l’Evangeliste)  56, 108n56, 336n133, 424n90
  - St Mortiz (Saint-Maurice)  56, 108n56, 262, 265, 266, 335, 336n133, 358, 424n90
  - St Nicholas (Saint-Nicolas)  56, 108n56, 119, 358, 336n133, 424n90. See also under hospitals
  - St Sépulchre (Spuchre)  56, 107, 108–109, 112, 116, 130, 261, 262, 336n133, 358, 424n90. See also under beguiningas; hospitals
  - St Syr (Saint-Cyr)  56, 108n56, 113, 116, 127, 261, 336, 358, 424n90. See also under beguinages; hospitals
  - Thines  56, 108n56, 262, 275, 335, 336n133, 358, 424n90
  - St John the Macelli, church  262, 327, 335, 336, 358
  - St Mary Magdalene, church  262, 335, 358
  - Warthomont (Baudémont)  262, 335
  - Wilhelmites (Guilelmites)  128, 257, 269, 349, 440–443

Nivelles, county  64
Nivelles, forest of (Bois de Nivelles)  81, 85, 120, 414–415, 436–439
  - leper house de la Taille Voie  57, 101
Noville  65
Nuremberg  66, 67

Odonomt (Odoumont), hamlet near Rèves  198, 271, 355
Oeren, monastery. See under Trier

Oignies, priory of regular canons  57, 98, 99, 100, 101, 102–103, 106, 107, 110, 129, 130. See also under beguinages
Orléans (Aureliamum)  108n54, 169, 432–433, 440–441
Osnabrück, Gertrudenberg, Benedictine house  200, 203, 230
  - university  108n54, 114–115
  - Saint-Germain-des-Près  133n3
  - See also under beguinages
Poitiers  49
Quedlinburg  67, 170n19, 307n59, 312

Ravenna  291, 296
Reims  63
Remiremont (Romarici Mons)  170n19, 190n36, 220–226
  - female monastery  50–51, 59, 61, 176n6, 190
  - male monastery  37
Rèves, village  110, 271
Rome  38, 47, 105, 154, 279, 312, 335
  - Lateran, palace  67, 167, 177, 297, 309, 335n127
  - papacy  56, 62, 63, 65n166, 67, 87
  - St Peter, cathedral  156, 310, 319. See also under hospitals
Ronquières (Ronkiria)  262, 272, 275

Saix. See under hospitals
Saix. See under hospitals
Sambre, river  100, 103
Saxony, duchy  166n6
Schwäbisch Hall  64–65
Sens  202
Sicily, kingdom  66
Soissons  155, 373
Spain, kingdom  161
Speyer  66
  - cathedral  290–291, 294, 296, 319
Spiesant, prebend of Nivelles  60
Stablo-Malmedy, abbey  37n9, 39, 54, 60, 154
St Bénigne, abbey in Dijon  77
St Denis  155, 195
Steppes 121
St Katharine-Lombeek, property of Nivelles 70
St Martin de Savigny, Benedictine abbey 133n3
St Medard 155, 373
Strasbourg, diocese 92, 170n19, 373, 377

Ternat, property of Nivelles 70
Thuringia (Thüringen), Landgraviate 110
Tienen 116
Tongeren 125, 193, 202, 234–236
– collegiate church 125, 239, 243, 246, 247, 261, 263
– St Mary, church 200, 202, 230
Toul, diocese 190
Trent 201n78, 206n86
Trier 50
– Oeren, monastery 41, 50

Utrecht (Traiectum) 108n54, 169, 204n83, 279, 432–433, 440–441
– Savior, church of 308

Vallaimpont, Templars’ territory near Nivelles 85, 86–87
Vauvert, Carthusian house in the outskirts of Paris 176n5
Villers-la-Ville, Cistercian abbey 102, 110, 113n72, 116, 129, 131, 264n43
Vreden, Damenstift 70
– St Felicitas, church 70
Wambeck (Wambeek), property of Nivelles 70, 84, 264n45, 382–383, 384–385, 416–417

Wartburg, castle 110
Ways (6 km east of Nivelles) 116
Whitby 154
Willambroux (Awiwon Bruch; Willambrox) 100–103, 110, 116, 129
– leperhouse 57, 101–102
– Mary Magdalen, chapel of 57, 101, 107, 108–109, 112, 125, 130
– reclusorium 101–102, 116
– See also under beguinages
Worringen 76, 84, 89, 422n83

Yerseke, prebend of Nivelles 60