

The Blessing of the Wedding Bedchamber in North-Western Europe, c.950–c.1200

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This article addresses two specific problems. First, between c.950 and c.1200 there appears to be a mismatch between liturgical manuscripts and narrative sources on the Christian blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed, with the former recording the ritual but the latter scarcely mentioning it. The second concerns the question as to whether the ritual was expected to take place at home or in the church. In order to shed light on the development of the ritual, where it took place and how frequently, the article is divided into four parts. A discussion of liturgical manuscripts for the blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed is followed by an analysis of the prayers to establish why the wedding bedchamber and the bed warranted a blessing. We then turn to an evaluation of the sparse evidence for the priest's liturgical role at home weddings. Finally, the liturgical evidence is linked to historical and fictional evidence. The article concludes that ambiguity about where the ritual should take place allowed for discretion on the part of those involved, and that the great majority of the laity may have been ignorant of the ritual altogether.

The blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed is a practice with a long history, going back to Greek, Roman and Jewish traditions.¹

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¹ Korbinian Ritzer, *Formen, Riten und religiöses Brauchtum der Eheschließung in den christlichen Kirchen des ersten Jahrtausends*, ed. Ulrich Hermann and Willibrord Heckenbach, 2nd edn, *Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen* 38 (Münster, 1982), 206–8; Protais Mutembe and Jean-Baptiste Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage en France du XIIIe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1974), 27–8, 35–6, 326–7 (this book was also published in the same year in Paris, for a different series, with the names of the authors reversed; the pagination in both issues is the same); Cyrille Vogel, 'Les Rites de la célébration du mariage. Leur

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Taking place within the bedchamber, it was a ritual whereby the newly wed couple would be wished a happy life, fertile marriage and offspring. In the early church, the secular event gained a religious character. Avitus, bishop of Vienne (c.494–518), alluded to the practice in a letter, in which he implicitly contrasted the blessing of a virgin *in sancti altaris thalamo* (in the bedchamber or bed of the holy altar, i.e. in a church) with a marriage blessing *in thalamo*, in the home.² Another mention of this practice appears in the *Vita sancti Amatoris* of Stefanus ‘Afer’, written c.570. In it, he describes an instance in which Bishop Valerianus of Auxerre was invited into the bedchamber (*thalami*) to read prayers for the couple (*coniugali preces*) from a prayer book held in his right hand (*libellum sacrarum precum dextera arripere*).³ Both texts mention a domestic setting for the ritual. The next piece of evidence relating to this blessing appears over a hundred years later in the Bobbio Missal (Paris, BnF lat 13246), a late seventh- or early eighth-century liturgical book from south-western France.⁴ This is one of the oldest European liturgical manuscripts in existence and has generated much scholarly interest.⁵ Amongst an assortment of blessings, there are two relating to marriage. The first begins with the rubric *Benedictio thalami super nubentes* (‘blessing of the bedchamber / bed of the couple’) which is followed by the prayer *Deum qui ad multiplicandum humani genere prole* (‘[we pray that] God, by offspring, multiply the human race’). The second

Signification dans la formation du lien durant le haut moyen age’, in *Il matrimonio nella società altomedievale 22–28 aprile 1976*, Settimane di studio del centro italiano di studi sull’alto medioevo 24, 2 vols (Spoleto, 1977), 1: 397–472, at 452–3; Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites*, Alcuin Club Collections 64 (London, 1984), 51–2, 56–7, 59, 63–4, 71–8; Philip L. Reynolds, ‘Marrying and its Documentation in pre-Modern Europe: Consent, Celebration and Property’, in idem and John Witte, eds, *To Have and to Hold: Marrying and its Documentation in Western Christendom, 400–1600* (Cambridge, 2007), 1–42, at 21–5.

² ‘[S]i sponsam Christo devotam et in sancti altaris thalamo benedictione dotatam’: Avitus of Vienne, Letter 55 to Ansemund (MGH AA 6.2, 84), lines 8–11; cf. Ritzer, *Formen*, 207; Vogel, ‘Les Rites’, 424.

³ Stefanus ‘Afer’, *Vita sancti Amatoris*, ActaSS Mai I (1860), 52; cf. Ritzer, *Formen*, 207; Vogel, ‘Les rites’, 427.

⁴ E. A. Lowe, ed., *The Bobbio Missal: A Gallican Mass-book: Ms Paris. Lat. 13246*, HBS 53, 58, 61, 3 vols (London, 1917, 1920, 1924), 2: 167–8; cf. Ritzer, *Formen*, 208 n. 20, 354–5; Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 224; Vogel, ‘Les Rites’, 428.

⁵ Yitzak Hen and Rob Meens, eds, *The Bobbio Missal: Liturgy and Religious Culture in Merovingian Gaul* (Cambridge, 2004).

one is rubricated as *item alia*, followed by *Te deprecamur* ('we beseech you'). Their contents will be discussed below in section two. Importantly, these prayers occur without a mass, a pattern which later became customary. As this article focuses on north-western Europe, the next set of surviving examples after the Bobbio Missal come from England, followed by Normandy, and finally elsewhere in northern France.

Before turning to England, however, we need briefly to consider the suggestion of an Iberian tradition of the blessing of the wedding bedchamber. According to Reynolds, the bedchamber rite was 'conspicuous in nuptial liturgies in Visigothic and Mozarabic Spain', although, in these cases, it took place before, rather than after, the wedding mass, and salt was sprinkled in the bedroom.⁶ As such, this Iberian ritual differs quite substantially from the wedding ritual and prayers with which I am concerned, not only in terms of timing, but also in the content of the prayers themselves.⁷ Moreover, although the evidence comes from eleventh-century liturgical manuscripts from the bishopric of Tarragona (the Roda Pontifical, Cathedral de Lleida, Codex 16, dating to c.1000; and the Sacramentary of Vich, Museu Episcopal Vich, Codex 66, dating to c.1030), liturgists have assumed, but cannot prove, that it represents a much older Visigothic tradition. The argument for an older, unproven, Visigothic ritual lies behind the suggestion that it is possible that the maker of the Bobbio Missal received his inspiration from the Iberian peninsula. However, given the similarity of the Bobbio prayers with those of the north-western European tradition, and the distinctiveness of both from the Iberian ones, I will leave the supposed Visigothic tradition to one side.

This article will address two specific problems. First, between c.950 and c.1200 there seems to be a mismatch between liturgical manuscripts and narrative sources on the Christian blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed, with the former recording the ritual but the latter scarcely mentioning it. The second problem concerns whether the ritual was expected to take place in the home or in the

⁶ Reynolds, 'Marrying and its Documentation', 23, who refers to Brian Bethune, 'The Text of the Christian Rite of Marriage in Medieval Spain' (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 1987), which I have been unable to consult.

⁷ Ritzer, *Formen*, 356–64, appendix 5; Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 27–8; Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 48–52, 54–5.

church. Non-liturgical narrative sources such as chronicles, saints' lives and fictional texts are mostly silent on this issue, a silence that corresponds with a similar lack of evidence for the celebration of weddings more generally. Indeed, in numerical terms, references to weddings in narrative sources before 1200 are mostly to domestic festivities – eating, singing and dancing – with scarcely any mention of a priest's liturgical involvement. Admittedly, there are plenty of references to the presence of priests at weddings, but mostly as guests in their capacity as kin to either the bride or groom.⁸ Apart from a few exceptions, the narrative image of wedding celebrations is that of a mostly secular affair. Given the mismatch between liturgical evidence and narrative texts relating to this ritual, scholars have been reluctant to surmise whether the blessing of the wedding bedchamber or bed, mentioned in liturgical manuscripts as following a mass, would be recited in church or in the home.⁹ This article seeks to shed light on the development of the ritual, and where it took place, and will be divided into four parts. It will begin with a discussion of the evidence for the blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed to be found in liturgical manuscripts. This will be followed by an analysis of the prayers themselves, in order to establish what it was about the wedding bedchamber and bed that warranted their blessing. There then follows an evaluation of the (sparse) evidence for the priest's liturgical role at home weddings. Finally, the article connects the liturgical sources to historical and fictional evidence, to argue that the ambiguity about where the ritual should take place allowed discretion for those involved in it.

THE EVIDENCE OF LITURGICAL MANUSCRIPTS

Before discussing the liturgical manuscripts in question, it is important to address some methodological points relating to this type of evidence.¹⁰ Liturgical manuscripts can be divided into various genres,

⁸ Elisabeth van Houts, *Married Life in Medieval Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford, 2019), 40–1, 68, 82.

⁹ Ritzer, *Formen*, 315, 318 (domestic ritual); Vogel, 'Les Rites', 453 (home ritual); Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 67 (in church); Reynolds, 'Marrying and its Documentation', 23 (a home setting); Helen Gittos, *Liturgy, Architecture and Sacred Places in Anglo-Saxon England* (Oxford, 2013), 271 (a home setting).

¹⁰ Helen Gittos, 'Researching the History of Rites', in eadem and Sarah Hamilton, eds, *Understanding Medieval Liturgy: Essays in Interpretation* (London, 2016), 13–30, at 17–19.

of which, for my purpose, priests' books – such as sacramentaries and missals, as well as pontificals and benedictionals – are the most important.¹¹ By the eleventh century, each liturgical manuscript was normally designed for a person with specific responsibilities, usually a priest.¹² It may have contained only parts of a service. For these reasons, liturgical manuscripts are very diverse in terms of content and as such we cannot extrapolate from them 'rules' issued by a universal church. On the contrary, liturgical manuscripts attest to the ways in which individual institutions looked after their own liturgical traditions. Nevertheless, despite differences in the ordering and positioning of prayers in relation to the celebration of a mass, there is a remarkable uniformity in the prayers relating to the wedding bedchamber and bed. Yet this apparent uniformity may be misleading in suggesting a straightforward narrative of development of the blessing, since the prayers are only one isolated part of the ritual. Finally, as will become clear in this article, the collection of prayers concerning the wedding chamber should not be read as a blueprint or template for a standardized set of actions in practice. It is often unclear whether the prayers associated with any ritual were meant as a practical guide to an actual service or were merely intended to be read privately. With this in mind, we can now turn to the manuscripts themselves, beginning in England, where the earliest examples of the wedding bedchamber ritual in north-western Europe can be found.

One of the earliest English testimonies to the wedding bedchamber blessing in pre-conquest England appears in the Durham Collectar (Durham Cathedral Library MS A.IV.19). Dating to the first third of the tenth century, it was written in the south, perhaps the south-west, of England, before being taken to Chester-le-Street around 970, where substantial additions were made in the later tenth century.¹³ Most of the bedchamber blessings occur in the

¹¹ Richard W. Pfaff, 'Massbooks: Sacramentaries and Missals', in idem, ed., *The Liturgical Books of Anglo-Saxon England*, Old English Newsletter Subsidia 23 (Kalamazoo, MI, 1995), 7–34; Janet L. Nelson and Richard W. Pfaff, 'Pontificals and Benedictionals', *ibid.* 87–98.

¹² For secular priests and the variety of their liturgical books, see Gerald P. Dyson, *Priests and their Books in Late Anglo-Saxon England*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 34 (Woodbridge, 2019).

¹³ Alicia Corrêa, ed., *The Durham Collectar*, HBS 107 (London 1992), 220–3 (mass) and 224 (prayers nos 626–30), with the suggestion that the blessings were 'recited by the priest over the marriage bed at night'; Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 29 (by the

original part of the manuscript in the form of a nuptial mass and five prayers, of which one is a blessing of the bedroom (*Benedic Domine thalamum hoc*), as encountered in the Bobbio Missal, followed by four prayers under the rubric ‘In the bedroom’ (*in thalamo*). This includes a blessing for the couple (*istos adulescentulos*), one for procreation (*creator et conservator humani generis*), and one for ‘the bed and those who lie in it’ (*lectum istum et omnes habitantes in eo*), asking God’s blessing that ‘they will be full of holiness, chastity and tenderness’ (*ut sit in eis sanctitas, et castitas et laenitas et pleni*).¹⁴ Although the Durham Collectar is undoubtedly an early English priest’s book, its continental exemplar for the original contents (including the wedding chamber blessings) came probably from northern France.¹⁵

The second set of English liturgical sources are bishops’ books. One example is the Egbert Pontifical (Paris, BnF lat 10575), a tenth-century manuscript that contains wedding material.¹⁶ Instead of a set of mass prayers, it contains a number of blessings (introduced with rubrics or titles), including one for the bedchamber (rubric: *Benedictio thalami*; incipit: *Benedic domine thalamum hoc et omnes habitanter in eo*); one for the couple (rubric: *Alia*; incipit: *Benedic domine istos adulescentulos*); one for the ring (rubric: *Benedictio annuli*; incipit: *Creator et conservator*); one for the bed and for those in it (rubric: *Benedictio lecti*; incipit: *Benedic domine lectum istum et omnes habitantes in eo*); and one for the couple’s parents and offspring across four generations.¹⁷ According to Andrew Prescott, it has many

priest at home); Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 63–4; Richard W. Pfaff, *The Liturgy in Medieval England: A History* (Cambridge, 2009), 65–6.

¹⁴ Corrêa, ed., *Durham Collectar*, 76. For *adolescens* as a sexually mature person, see Isidore de Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, transl. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2010), 241.

¹⁵ Corrêa, ed., *Durham Collectar*, 110–11.

¹⁶ H. M. J. Banting, ed., *Two Anglo-Saxon Pontificals (The Egbert and Sidney Sussex Pontificals)*, HBS 204 (London, 1989), 133–4; Vogel, ‘Les Rites’, 427, 452; Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 67.

¹⁷ Incipit: ‘Benedictio domini sit super uxorem tuam et super parentes vestros ut videatis filios vestros, et filios filiorum vestrorum usque in tertiam et quartam generationem et sit semen vestrorum benedictum a deo Israel qui regnat in secula seculorum’ (cf. Tob. 9: 10–11); Banting, ed., *Two Anglo-Saxon Pontificals*, 134. There is a further blessing of the couple (Banting, ed., *Two Anglo-Saxon Pontificals*, 140) referring to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (cf. Tob. 7: 15), for the groom’s seed, and further prayers for the bedroom / bed (*thalamum*) and those in it. These ask that they may live in God’s peace and continue according to his will (*tua voluntate*), that they may live in love (*in amore*) and grow old together

traits in common with other early English bishops' books, although these, interestingly for us, do not contain the wedding chamber ritual.¹⁸ The so-called Benedictional of Archbishop Robert (Rouen, BM 369/Y7), for instance, dates from the last quarter of the tenth century.¹⁹ It contains a mass with prayers for the ring and its conferral, as well as the blessing of the bride and the groom (*Benedictio sponsi et sponsae*). However, it does not include a blessing for the bedchamber or the bed, despite containing the 'blessings for the young people' (*benedictiones super adbolescentes*) normally associated with the ritual of the bedchamber. While Reynolds has claimed that these blessings 'seem to have been intended for the bedchamber rite', with the implication of a home setting,²⁰ Stevenson believes they were said in church.²¹ Two other early English bishops' books which contain the *Benedictio sponsi et sponsae*, but not the wedding chamber blessing, are the Sherborne Pontifical (Paris, BnF lat 943), dating to 960×988 in its original layer from Christ Church Canterbury; and the Lanalet Pontifical (Rouen, BM 368/A27), dating from the first half of the eleventh century, and probably originating from Winchester for Lyfing, monk of Winchester and bishop of Crediton (1027–46).²² The final piece of evidence for pre-conquest England is a priest's book, the so-called Red Book of Darley (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 422) written c.1060, perhaps at Sherborne. It

(*senescant*), and multiply throughout the length of their days (*multiplicentur in longitudine dierum*) (cf. Gen. 1: 28).

¹⁸ Andrew Prescott, 'The Structure of English pre-Conquest Benedictionals', *British Library Journal* 13 (1987), 118–58, at 128–9.

¹⁹ H. A. Wilson, ed., *The Benedictional of Archbishop Robert*, HBS 24 (London, 1903), 149–51. Regarding its dating, see Prescott, 'Structure', 124; but note that Nicholas Orchard, in *The Leofric Missal*, HBS 113–14, 2 vols (London, 2002), 1: 70–1, dates it to 980×88; Ritzer, *Formen*, 365–8 (text of blessings); Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 66–7; Pfaff, *Liturgy*, 81 n. 53.

²⁰ Wilson, ed., *Benedictional of Archbishop Robert*, 151, for the blessing of the adolescents; Reynolds, 'Marrying and its Documentation', 23.

²¹ Stevenson, *Nuptial Ritual*, 66–7; cf. also Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 30 n. 24.

²² Prescott, 'Structure', 126–8. See also *ibid.* 147, where the prayer 'Benedictio sponsi et sponsae' is identified as that found in E. Moeller, ed., *Corpus Benedictionum Pontificalium*, CChr.SL 162 A–C (Turnhout, 1971–9), 1: 678–9 (no. 1657), 735 (no. 1798). The difference between the two versions is very slight indeed. For the dating of the Lanalet Pontifical as after 1020, see Orchard, ed., *Leofric Missal*, 1: 76.

contains a set of mass prayers together with blessings of the couple, of the ring and of the bedchamber.²³

In summing up the pre-conquest English evidence, it can be suggested that a mass (itself a set of prayers) became a standard component of the solemnization of weddings in churches. The mass was coupled with a variety of associated prayers for the couple, the wedding bedchamber and bed, occasionally in combination with blessings for the ring, and for food or drink, and for the couple's families. The wedding bedchamber prayers are present in books made for priests and their communities (such as the Durham Collectar and the Red Book of Darley) and for bishops (such as the Egbert Pontifical).²⁴ The scant rubrication in the manuscripts as to where the prayers are to be read, however, is inconclusive. A prima facie case can be made that the blessings are meant for a domestic setting, and certainly the Durham Collectar suggests as much with the rubric *in thalamo* referring to the bedroom, alongside a prayer for the bed. The Egbert Pontifical is more restrained in its rubrics, but distinguishes between bedroom and bed. The other manuscripts do not have rubrics with specific indications of location.²⁵ However, both here and in what follows, the evidence of rubrication cannot be taken as proof for the location, if any, where the prayers were meant to be said.

More English liturgical manuscripts become available in the twelfth century. They also become more expansive with regard to the liturgy and, crucially, contain explicit rubrication with guidance for the priest as to where the constituent parts of the wedding ceremony should be said. The clearest example of this is the so-called Bury St Edmunds Missal, probably dating from the 1120s or

²³ Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 422, available online at: <<https://parker.stanford.edu/parker/catalog/fr610kh2998>>, last accessed 25 January 2023, with the marriage rite at 276–84; Pfaff, *Liturgy*, 94–6; Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 284, 286; see also Helen Gittos, 'Is there any Evidence for the Liturgy of Parish Churches in Late Anglo-Saxon England?', in Francesca Tinti, ed., *Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2005), 63–82, at 77, where she notes that the Red Book of Darley has a rubric at p. 280 for the blessing of the marriage (*blesung.benedictio*) which is in Old English and Latin. Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 67, erroneously refers to this rubric as 'the blessing of the brides'.

²⁴ I am most grateful to one of the reviewers of this article for this point.

²⁵ The Leofric Missal contains a nuptial mass and prayers, but none for the wedding chamber: see Orchard, ed., *Leofric Missal*, 1: 72; 2: 435–6; Pfaff, *Liturgy*, 131–2. Vogel, 'Les Rites', 439–40, is superseded by these two works.

1130s, and written at the monastery of St Edmund, although soon after transferred to Laon (now Laon, BM MS 238).²⁶ Scholars agree that the form in which these wedding blessings and mass prayers were copied would become the standard service in England and north-western France.²⁷ The Bury St Edmunds manuscript helpfully includes rubrics which indicate where the blessings should be read. It begins with the blessing of the ring just ‘before the church door’ (*ante hostium templi*), with the priest verifying the groom’s and bride’s consent.²⁸ Then comes the assignment of ‘the dowry and other gifts’ (*dos et alia dona*), followed by the giving of the bride to her husband-to-be. The priest then presents the ring and other gifts to the groom, who in turn gives them to the bride while reciting prayers: he first puts the ring on her right thumb, then on her index finger, before finally placing it on her middle finger – the thumb and fingers representing the Trinity. The bride, now with ring and gifts, prostrates herself before her husband, presumably as a sign of submission and obedience. The rubrics then describe how the couple and priest enter the church, where another blessing takes place before the altar. The priest celebrates mass for the Holy Trinity as if it is a Sunday. After the mass, there follows yet another set of blessings: first, that of a drink (*potum*, presumably wine), then that of the bedchamber or bed (*thalamum*). Crucially, there is no guidance, in the form of rubrics, as to the location for these post-mass blessings.²⁹

²⁶ The marriage rite with its variations, each printed as a numbered ‘ordo’, are printed in Muteembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 289–91 (Ordo V); Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 68–9; Pfaff, *Liturgy*, 184–6, 192–9. This manuscript descends from Rouen, BM MS 274, the so-called Missal of Robert of Jumièges: H. Wilson, ed., *The Missal of Robert of Jumièges*, HBS 11 (London, 1896). It dates from between 1014 and 1023, has a wedding blessing (*ibid.* 269–70), but none for the bedchamber or bed. In fact, Rouen, BM MS 274, is a sacramentary from Peterborough or Ely given to the abbey of Jumièges by its former abbot, Robert, when he was bishop of London (1044–51). Furthermore, the Peterborough or Ely scribe used an exemplar from Flanders. See Nicholas Orchard, ‘An Anglo-Saxon Mass for St Willibrord and its later Liturgical Uses’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 24 (1995), 1–10, at 4 n. 12; Pfaff, *Liturgy*, 88–91.

²⁷ Reynolds, ‘Marrying and its Documentation’, 21–5.

²⁸ Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing*, 68 erroneously refers to rings as plural.

²⁹ For other twelfth-century English liturgical manuscripts without rubrics for the post-mass blessings, see H. A. Wilson, ed., *The Pontifical of Magdalen College with an Appendix of Extracts from other English Manuscripts of the Twelfth Century*, HBS 39 (London 1910), 205 (the Magdalen Pontifical) and 226 (the pontifical now at Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.11.10).

Due to the relative lack of study of liturgical manuscripts from northern France before 1100 for the blessing of the wedding chamber and bed,³⁰ it has generally been assumed that the practice of this ritual was transmitted from England to France, via Normandy, in the eleventh century, although whether this happened before or after the Norman Conquest remains unclear. Vogel argues for a date connected to the transfer of the Egbert Pontifical to Evreux in Normandy, which he places in the eleventh century.³¹ Given the more recent study of liturgical manuscripts in pre-conquest England, several of which contain texts that may go back to continental exemplars, we have to keep an open mind about the direction of influence in the process of criss-crossing of liturgical books and their owners across the Channel during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Yet there are signs of receptivity to some liturgical aspects of the English reform movement in early eleventh-century Normandy.³² More explicit evidence of liturgical practice (including the blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed), comparable to that in England, can be found in several Norman liturgical manuscripts dating from the twelfth century. They include the blessing of the ring, as well as the blessing of the bedchamber and bed, but, like the English manuscripts, there is no explicit guidance as to where these should be read.³³ Three Norman liturgical manuscripts lack rubrics for the setting of the post-mass blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed: the Bayeux Missal (Paris, Bibl. Mazarine 404) from the first half of the twelfth century;³⁴ the twelfth-century missal (now Paris, BnF lat 14446) from Normandy, which has not been identified as belonging to a specific monastery or cathedral;³⁵ and the Avranches Pontifical, dating to the first half of the twelfth century (Paris, BnF lat 14832). The Avranches Pontifical contains the same blessings as

³⁰ Note that, according to Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 152, the eleventh-century Soissons Missal (Laon, BM 237) contains the blessing for the bedchamber.

³¹ Vogel, 'Les Rites', 428, 453, where he argues that the bedchamber blessing is the ritual referred to in the Rouen Synod of 1072, which he erroneously dates to 1012, see below, p. 134.

³² Pierre Bauduin, 'Du Bon Usage de la *dos* dans la Normandie ducale (Xe–début du XIIIe siècle)', in F. Bougard, L. Feller and R. le Jan, eds, *Dots et douaires dans le haut Moyen Âge* (Rome, 2002), 429–55, at 434.

³³ Ritzer, *Formen*, 319.

³⁴ Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 284 (Ordo I), with the assumption that the blessings after mass are said at home; they record Ritzer's text (*Formen*, 382) as unreliable.

³⁵ Ritzer, *Formen*, 380–1, at 381.

Mazarine 404 and BnF Lat 14446, although not immediately following the mass:³⁶ sandwiched between them is a blessing of a drink (*Benedic domine hunc potum*: ‘bless, Lord, this drink’), also found in some English liturgical manuscripts.³⁷ According to Orchard, the Avranches manuscript is a copy of a Canterbury exemplar, and is thus heavily indebted to English liturgical practice.³⁸ Unlike the three other Norman manuscripts, one other, seemingly idiosyncratic, twelfth-century manuscript from the abbey of Lyre (later preserved at Evreux but unfortunately now lost) was published by Edmond Martène, the eighteenth-century liturgist.³⁹ The lost Lyre manuscript contained rubrics with unambiguous direction as to where the prayers over the wedding bedchamber and bed ought to be recited: ‘In the evening / night when the couple go to bed the priest will come and bless the bed, saying ...’ (*Nocte uero cum ad lectum pervenerint accedat presbyter et benedicat thalamum dicens*). This is followed by another rubric: ‘Then he makes this blessing over them, saying ...’ (*Deinde faciat super eos benedictionem dicens*). These indications suggest that, according to the compiler of the manuscript (if not the eighteenth-century editor Martène), the priest was expected to enter the bedroom with the couple and that, therefore, the prayers were expected to be said at home, in a domestic environment.

The evidence gathered by Mutembe and Molin for northern France (apart from Normandy) before *c.*1200 is rather limited. It suggests that the Bury St Edmunds manuscript that was transferred to Laon was one of the earliest liturgical manuscripts with the rite of the wedding bedchamber in use in northern France. We may recall that this manuscript contains an extensively rubricated wedding rite, which, although containing blessings for the wedding bedchamber and bed after the mass, does not include rubrics for the location of this particular ritual. This aligns the Bury St Edmunds manuscript with most of the Norman ones containing the rite. What is

³⁶ Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 288–9 (Ordo IV), again with the assumption that the blessing of the wedding bedchamber / bed is a domestic rite performed at home; Stevenson, *Nuptial Mass*, 70.

³⁷ Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 324–5; cf. also p. 127 above.

³⁸ Orchard, ed., *Leofric Missal*, 1: 77–8.

³⁹ As quoted in Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 35–6, 286–7 (Ordo III). The text for the bedchamber and bed is also given in Adolph Franz, *Die kirchlichen Benediktionen im Mittelalter* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1909), 181. I am very grateful to David Ganz for this reference.

particularly interesting in this regard is a so-called 'rituale' from the monastery of Saint-Maur-des-Fossés near Paris (Paris, BnF lat 13317), dating from the first half of the thirteenth century.⁴⁰ This contains explicit guidance for the priest regarding where to recite the blessings:

After the mass, when the groom and bride have returned home, the priest will bless the bedchamber before they enter the chamber, saying this prayer 'Benedic domine thalamum hunc...'. Then the priest guides them into the chamber, saying 'Deus Abraham...'. Thereafter the priest blesses them seated on the bed, saying 'Benedic domine hos famulos [Bless, Lord, these servants]'

These rubrics suggest that in the early thirteenth century, at least near Paris, priests were expected to conduct this part of the marriage service in the home.

What does the liturgical manuscript evidence tell us about the ritual's development in north-western Europe?⁴¹ On the whole, there is ambiguity as to location of the ritual for England, Normandy and northern France before 1200. There is also growing evidence for a liturgical celebration in three parts: firstly, prayers at the church door concerning the handing of the bride to the groom (later with expressions of consent) and the assignment of the dowry; secondly, a mass in the church; followed, thirdly, by prayers. However, the location for the post-mass prayers for the blessing of the wedding bedchamber, bed and couple is ambiguous.

THE PRAYERS FOR BLESSING THE WEDDING BED AND BEDCHAMBER

The purpose of the ritual was to bless the bedchamber and bed, as well as the couple, but what was its meaning? Rituals which mark important events associated either with the human life cycle or with the public life of a community are common in all societies.⁴²

⁴⁰ Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 298–300 (Ordo XI).

⁴¹ Cf. Gittos, 'Researching the History of Rites', 27.

⁴² The literature on rituals is vast; for a selection, see Geoffrey Koziol, 'How does a Ritual Mean?', in idem, *Begging Pardon and Favor: Ritual and Political Order in Early Medieval France* (Ithaca, NY, 1992), 289–324, 414–21. For an influential, though controversial, critique of using the concept of 'ritual' in the early Middle Ages, see Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 248–61.

They are often associated with religion and, in the case of Christianity, recorded in liturgical evidence.⁴³ It is worth noting that although liturgical rituals might seem long-standing or even static, they were often incredibly varied and experienced change over time.⁴⁴ If explicit evidence regarding the purpose of a ritual is lacking, as seems to be the case for the blessing of the wedding bed-chamber or bed, it has to be deduced. A closer analysis of the three most common wedding prayers for the bedchamber or bed is therefore essential and to this we now turn. In most surviving sources for this blessing, in the first prayer the priest asks God that the couple might live in the knowledge of his love,⁴⁵ and in the second that God might bless the couple just as he blessed Tobias and Sara, daughter of Raguel.⁴⁶ The biblical couple's exemplary conduct – they fasted for three days before they consummated their marriage – is presented as a Christian role model. Both prayers end in the same manner, namely with the request that God will consider the couple to be worthy of God's love, that they may live and grow old together, and 'multiply throughout the length of their days'.⁴⁷ This last phrase in particular encapsulates Christian thinking about marriage as the indissoluble union of two people for the purposes of companionship and procreation.⁴⁸ With procreation of children seen as the most essential reason for marriage, the apostle Paul had expounded the

⁴³ Gittos, 'Researching the History of Rites', 27–8.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 27; for more general context, see Gerd Althoff, 'The Variability of Rituals in the Middle Ages', in idem, Johannes Fried and Patrick J. Geary, eds, *Medieval Concepts of the Past: Ritual, Memory, Historiography* (Cambridge, 2002), 71–88; idem, *Family Friends and Followers: Political and Social Bonds in Early Medieval Europe*, transl. Christopher Carroll (Cambridge, 2004), 136–59.

⁴⁵ 'Benedic, domine, thalamum hoc, et omnes habitantes in eo, Per Dominum': Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 326 (no. 33).

⁴⁶ 'Benedic domine istos adolescentes sicut benedixisti Tobiam et Saram filiam Raguelis ita benedicere digneris Domine' ('Bless, Lord, this couple as You blessed Tobias and Sara, daughter of Raguel whom you Lord deem worthy to bless'): Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 326 (no. 36). The story is told in the Old Testament Book of Tobit. For its use in the marriage liturgy, see Philip L. Reynolds, *Marriage in the Western Church: The Christianization of Marriage during the Patristic and Early Medieval Periods* ((Boston, MA, and Leyden, 2001), 334–7, 370–4; Christopher Brooke, *The Medieval Idea of Marriage* (Oxford, 1989), 43; Reynolds, 'Marrying and its Documentation', 20–1.

⁴⁷ '[U]t in amore tuo vivent, et senescent et multiplicentur in longitudine dierum': Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 326 (no. 33); 'ut in nomine tuo vivent et senescent et multiplicentur in longitudine dierum': ibid. (no. 36); cf. Gen. 1: 28.

⁴⁸ David L. d'Avray, *Medieval Marriage: Symbolism and Society* (Oxford, 2008), 74–98.

notion of the conjugal debt, according to which the married couple owed each other sexual intercourse.⁴⁹ The stress on multiplication, that is, producing children, as the only means to propagate humanity, is the most important reason for marriage.⁵⁰ While the prayers speak of love and of growing old together, they also act as a reminder of the importance of procreation. Apart from the reference to Tobias and Sara, there is a third blessing based on the story told in the Book of Tobit that refers to the three generations of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, where each man blessed the son of the next generation.⁵¹ This prayer illustrates the notion of multiplication expressed in the earlier prayers. The Abrahamic blessings are then likened to God's blessing of the couple. The emphasis lies on the role of the father as the head of the family, who through his seed becomes the progenitor of the new generation, a sentiment to which I return in section four. The three prayers based on the Book of Tobit are the most frequently used ones for the bedroom, bed and couple. The prayers have no commentary attached to them, so it is unclear how they would have been interpreted. Set in the context of contemporary theological discussions regarding the purpose of marriage as procreation, and the belief that intercourse was unavoidable and that the enjoyment of the sexual act was sinful, it is tempting to see these prayers as reminding the couple, on the day of their wedding, of these Christian precepts.⁵²

⁴⁹ 'The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control': 1 Cor. 7: 3–5 (NRSV).

⁵⁰ See Rüdiger Schnell, *Sexualität und Emotionalität in der vormodernen Ehe* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna, 2002), 97–116; van Houts, *Married Life*, 88–102, for a discussion based on texts by authors ranging from Augustine of Hippo to Peter Abelard.

⁵¹ 'Deus Abraham, Deus Isaac et Deus Jacob benedic adolescentos istos, et semina semen vite eterne in mentibus eorum ut quicquid pro utilitate sua didicerint facere cupiant per Ihesum Christum recuperatorem hominum filium tuum unigenitum qui tecum et cum Spiritu Sancto vivit et regnat et nunc et semper per aeterna saecula saeculorum Amen': Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 327 (no. 39). Tob. 7: 15 reads: 'et adprehendens dexteram filiae suae dexteram Tobiae tradidit dicens Deus Abraham et Deus Isaac et Deus Jacob sit vobiscum et ipse coniungat vos impleatque benedictionem suam in vobis' (Douay-Rheims: 'And taking the right hand of his daughter, he gave it into the right hand of Tobias, saying: The God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob be with you, and may he join you together, and fulfil his blessing in you').

⁵² On the theological discussions and other medieval texts on the subject, see Schnell, *Sexualität und Emotionalität*, 97–116; van Houts, *Married Life*, 88–102.

Why then the blessing of the bedroom and bed? What follows is my interpretation of the prayers. Clearly the priest's moral message was deemed most effective if it was said aloud in the very bedchamber and near the bed in which the couple would have sex. The blessings would have been understood to fill the bedchamber, the bed and those in it with divine grace, a theological belief recently explored by Pawel Figurski.⁵³ It is almost as if the bedchamber and bed were seen as a site of memory, to remind the couple every time they slept together of the Christian message: to have sex for procreation only. The pastoral care offered to married couples, with its emphasis on chaste living – in the sense of sleeping together and having sex for procreation only – led to difficulties when some couples took the advice on chaste sleeping to mean sharing a bed, but not engaging in sex, and thus not producing children. This extreme interpretation of a sexless married life was a recurring theme in medieval hagiography.⁵⁴ Anxiety about fertility was real. Herein lies, I think, the origin of the ritual of blessing the bedchamber, bed and couple as an old fertility rite going back to a pre-Christian past, perhaps involving charms and amulets.⁵⁵

The contents of the wedding bedchamber blessings present a prima facie case for a home setting, as the ritual only makes sense in a domestic context where bedchambers and beds can be found. Yet, at the same time, since most of the prayers are based on biblical texts, they could have been used more symbolically, after the end of the mass in church, as a means of foreshadowing the intimacy of a couple's first time in bed. A church ritual would also avoid any awkwardness on the part of the couple. The absence of explicit rubrics in the liturgical manuscripts, indicating that the priest ought to leave the

⁵³ Pawel Figurski, 'Sacramental Kingship, Modern Historiography versus Medieval Sources', in idem, Johanna Dale and Pieter Bytteeber, eds, *Pontifical Liturgies in the High Middle Ages: Beyond the Legacy of Ernst H. Kantorowicz* (Turnhout, 2021), 25–60, at 53–4.

⁵⁴ For chaste sleeping as a theme in medieval hagiography that was implemented in real life by some married couples to the consternation of their families worried about the absence of children, see Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), esp. ch. 4, 'The Conjugal Debt and Vows of Chastity: the Theoretical and Pastoral Discourse of the High and Later Middle Ages', 132–94.

⁵⁵ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), 69–80 (on the use of charms and amulets for fertility reasons, amongst other objects). For anxiety about fertility and practical help and advice from *matronae* (experienced women), involving 'pagan' rituals for married couples who did not conceive, see van Houts, *Married Life*, 88–103.

church after mass and perform certain rituals in the home, is especially striking. The very lack of specificity may have enabled the priest and family to decide where the blessing of the wedding bedchamber and bed should take place. If there was a preference for blessing the bedchamber and bed at home, it is worth asking how common it was for priests to perform other rites (connected with weddings) in a domestic setting.

THE PRIEST AND WEDDING RITES AT HOME

To answer this question, we will now consider the priest's ritual wedding activity in the home, rather than in a church. Early eleventh-century England produced the vernacular *Wifmannes Bewedding*, an Old English text containing details for a marriage arrangement dated to the episcopacy of Wulfstan of York (1002–23).⁵⁶ It contains a clause regarding the wedding ceremony: 'At the wedding, there shall be a priest authorized to say mass, who should arrange their union with God's blessing for all prosperity.' The reference to a priest suggests a solemnization of the wedding with a mass and prayers, as recorded in liturgical manuscripts. However, the presence of the priest and couple in a church is hinted at, though not made explicit. Given the evidence from the pre-conquest liturgical English manuscripts discussed above, it is important to stress that the advice expressed in this document leaves open the option for a priestly blessing at home, including the blessing of the wedding bedchamber or bed. In Normandy, the earliest hint we have of a couple marrying in a domestic setting in the presence of a priest comes not from a liturgical text, nor from a chronicle or saint's life, but from the canons of a provincial synod that took place in Normandy in 1072.⁵⁷ In that year,

⁵⁶ F. Liebermann, ed., *Die Gesetze der Angelsachsen*, 3 vols (Halle, 1903–16), 1: 442–4, at 442; Patricia Skinner and Elisabeth van Houts, transl., *Medieval Writings on Secular Women* (London 2011), 70–1 (no. 33). For the date, see Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century* (Oxford, 1999), 385–6.

⁵⁷ Ritzer, *Formen*, 314–15, indirectly quotes Dom Bessin, *Concilia Rothomagensium provinciae* 1 (Rouen, 1717), and dates the synod to 1012. In this he is followed by all other liturgical scholars. The correct date is 1072: see Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, ed. and transl. Marjorie C. Chibnall, 6 vols (Oxford, 1969–80), 2: 284–93, at 288–9: 'Item. Ne nuptiae in occulte fiant neque post prandium sed sponsus et sponsa ieiuni a sacerdote ieiunio in monasterio benedicantur, et antequam copulentur progenies utrorumque diligenter inquiratur' ('Again: Marriages are not to be celebrated in secret or after dinner: the husband and the wife, both fasting, shall be united in a church

Archbishop John of Rouen (1067–79) issued guidance on marriage and consanguinity.⁵⁸ He ordered that no weddings take place in private (*in occulte*) or after a meal (*neque post prandium*), but that the fasting bride and groom (*ieiuni*) be blessed in a church by a fasting priest (*ieiune*). The implication of this decree is that weddings too often took place at home after a festive meal, either with a priest who had taken part in the festivities, or without a priest at all. These new regulations required the presence of a priest, who would ensure that the occasion was public, and demanded abstinence from food, guaranteeing the occasion was a sober and orderly affair, to take place probably in the morning and preferably in a church. Again, there is no reference to the blessing of the bedchamber or bed.⁵⁹

From twelfth-century Hainaut (in modern-day Belgium) originates a little-used text which throws some light on a priest's ritual practice in the home.⁶⁰ It concerns the *Life of the Blessed Virgin Oda* (d. 1158) by Philip Harveng (d. 1183), abbot of the Premonstratensian monastery of Bonne Espérance in the diocese of Tournai (at Vellerelle-les-Brayeux, thirteen kilometres south-east of Mons).⁶¹ It is important to note that this belongs to a sub-genre of saint's life which concerns saintly women who escaped arranged marriages.⁶² Other examples include the Life of Christina of Markyate in England, written by Robert de Gorrion, monk at St Albans, in the 1140s or 1150s; and the Life of Yolande of Vianden in Luxembourg, written by Brother Hermann in the early thirteenth century.⁶³ Oda's life falls, chronologically, between these two. The

by a priest who is also fasting, and before the marriage is consummated careful enquiry shall be made into the ancestry of both'). Orderic is the only source for the text of this Rouen synod printed by Bessin.

⁵⁸ David Bates, *William the Conqueror* (London, 2015), 356–7.

⁵⁹ Both Ritzer, *Formen*, 313–14, and Vogel, 'Les Rites', 453, assumed that the synod referred to ritual of the blessing of the bedchamber / bed.

⁶⁰ Mutembe and Molin, *Le Rituel du mariage*, 65–6, note that the passage refers twice to custom, which they identify as the custom of the archdiocese of Reims and of the neighbouring region of the Pas-de-Calais.

⁶¹ PL 203, cols 1359–74, esp. 1362–6 (ET: Theodore J. Antry and Carol Neel, eds and transl., *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality* [New York, 2007], 219–42, at 227–33).

⁶² Van Houts, *Married Life*, 74–5, 94–6.

⁶³ Charles H. Talbot, ed. and transl., *The Life of Christina of Markyate, a Twelfth-Century Recluse*, rev. Henrietta Leyser and Samuel Fanous (Oxford, 2008); for the attribution to Robert Gorrion, see Katie Ann-Marie Bugyis, 'The Author of the Life of Christina of Markyate: The Case for Robert de Gorrion (d. 1166)', *JEH* 68 (2017), 719–46;

protagonist's struggle to remain a virgin and become a bride of Christ fuels the narratives about marriage, with an emotive language that we have to bear in mind. Nonetheless, it contains important evidence regarding medieval wedding ceremonies and rituals.⁶⁴ Oda's story is that of an arranged marriage that failed dramatically *c.*1130, before the wedding was even concluded. Philip, the author of her *Life*, recounts how he was present at Oda's funeral and collected his information from those who knew her.⁶⁵ The most interesting aspect of Oda's wedding ceremony, for our purposes, is the fact that it did not take place in a church at all, but the priest was summoned to the bride's home. According to Philip, the wedding took place there because 'the church was too far away'.⁶⁶ The specific circumstances of a reluctant bride may well explain the domestic arrangement of a priest attending at the bride's home, rather than at a church. With the church at a distance, the bride might have tried to escape en route to it. There is one further intriguing aspect in this story about the reluctant bride Oda: the prominent place of the bedchamber at the end of the narrative. After the withdrawal of Simon, the jilted groom, the bride flees to her mother's bedchamber (*matris thalamum*). Alone in the room, Oda takes the sword hanging at the end of the bed, intending to cut off her nose, but fails.⁶⁷ This attempted self-mutilation was a drastic way of avoiding ever being married off again.⁶⁸ What is particularly interesting is the link between the failed wedding celebration and the presence of the bride, on her own, in the bedchamber which had conceivably been

Brother Hermann von Veldenz, *Bruder Hermann von Veldenz, Leben der Gräfin Yolanda von Vianden*, ed. Claudine Moulin (Luxembourg, 2009); idem, *Brother Hermann's Life of Yolande of Vianden*, transl. R. H. Lawson (Columbia, SC, 1995).

⁶⁴ Van Houts, *Married Life*, 46–7, 49–51, 131–2, 224–5 (Christina); *ibid.* 35–6, 40–1, 100–5, 128–9, 233–6 (Yolande).

⁶⁵ *Vita s. Odae*, cols 1373–4 (Antry and Neel, eds and transl., *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality*, 241); G. P. Sijen, 'Les Oeuvres de Philippe de Harveng, abbé de Bonne Espérance', *Analecta Praemonstratensia* 15 (1939), 129–66, at 163.

⁶⁶ 'Et quia ecclesia haud prope erat': *Vita s. Odae*, col. 1364 (Antry and Neel, eds and transl., *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality*, 230).

⁶⁷ '[A]rrepto gladio quem ad caput lectuli videt derendum nasum suum festinet praecidere': *Vita s. Odae*, col. 1366 ('seizing the sword hanging at the head of the bed, she tried to cut off her nose': Antry and Neel, eds and transl., *Norbert and Early Norbertine Spirituality*, 232).

⁶⁸ For a recent discussion of disfigurement as (self-inflicted) punishment, see Patricia Skinner, *Living with Disfigurement in Early Medieval Europe* (New York, 2017).

prepared as the wedding chamber and was potentially where the priest would have said his blessing. However, this is speculation, as the text does not refer to it. We are not told what happened to the priest; presumably he went home. While there is scant evidence of priests (potentially) officiating in the home as part of wedding celebrations, it is worth considering whether any other non-liturgical narratives refer to blessings of the wedding bedchamber or bed.

THE BLESSING OF THE WEDDING BED(CHAMBER) IN NON-LITURGICAL NARRATIVES

By far the most elaborate description of the blessing of the wedding bedchamber is that by the chronicler Lambert of Ardres *c.* 1200. It is also one of the most neglected by historians of liturgy.⁶⁹ In his history of the counts of Guines and Ardres, two medieval counties south of Flanders (now in France), Lambert gives an important description of the blessing of the marriage bed of Arnold V of Guines (d. 1220) and Beatrice of Boubourg, which he himself had attended as chaplain.⁷⁰ This is therefore a first-hand account of liturgical practice.⁷¹ According to Lambert, it was ‘on the first evening’ after the solemn nuptials, presumably in the church, that Count Baldwin II (1169–1206), the father of the groom, demanded the ceremony of the blessing of the bed and couple. For this reason, he called his chaplain Lambert, together with Lambert’s sons, William and Robert, who was the priest at Audruick (Pas-de-Calais). They blessed the bed, along with the couple lying in it, by sprinkling them with holy water and wafting incense, and by commending the couple to God. Surprisingly, however, it was the count who read out the prayers, which were addressed to ‘God, who blessed Abraham and his seed

⁶⁹ None of the historians of liturgy mentioned in this article refers to Lambert’s testimony. Amongst historians of the Middle Ages, only Georges Duby discussed it, see notes 70, 73 below.

⁷⁰ Lambert of Ardres, *Historia comitum Ghisnensium*, c. 149 (MGH SS 24, 550–642, at 637–8); Leah Shopkow, transl., *The History of the Counts of Guines and the Lords of Ardres* (Philadelphia, PA, 2001), 185–7; Georges Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France*, transl. Barbara Bray (New York, 1983), 258–9; van Houts, *Married Life*, 70.

⁷¹ Lambert’s elaborate description of the wedding festivities of Arnold II of Ardres (d. c.1138) and Gertrude does not mention the blessing of the bedchamber and bed: see van Houts, *Married Life*, 70.

... so that they may live in your divine love and persevere in concord and their seed may be multiplied throughout the length of their days for an unending eternity.’ Count Baldwin then turned to bless his eldest son Arnold:

I give to you the same grace in a father’s blessing upon his son, if any bounty and grace of benediction has been passed down to me by the patriarchs, I give to you the same grace of benediction that God the Father once granted our father Abraham, Abraham gave his son Isaac, Isaac then conferred upon his son Jacob and his seed, to the extent that this devotion pertains to our faith.

As we have seen above, the reference to the three generations from Abraham to Isaac, taken from the Book of Tobit, along with the petition to be blessed in turn, was a standard prayer for the blessing of the wedding chamber.⁷² As has long been recognized since the discussion of this passage by Georges Duby in the 1980s, this is a very rare example from north-western Europe suggesting that c.1200, marital beds were actually blessed in the home.⁷³ While Lambert’s eyewitness account appears trustworthy, its unusual inclusion in a dynastic chronicle raises questions. A possible clue regarding its inclusion in this work lies in Lambert’s description of the final blessing. As everyone prepares to withdraw from the bedchamber to leave the bride and groom alone, Count Baldwin and his son Arnold join hands, whereupon the father bends his head and whispers to him: ‘I bless you, if indeed I have the power to do so saving the right of your brothers [to be blessed by me], and I leave to you here [the power to bless] for ever and ever.’⁷⁴ Since Arnold, as the eldest son, would continue the dynastic line, combining those of the counties of Guines and of Ardres, his father is reminding him of his duty to procreate. Count Baldwin felt it was his responsibility, in an Abrahamic fashion, to bless his eldest son in the hope of begetting offspring, thus safeguarding his landed possessions for future generations. This is a good illustration of elite fathers’ anxiety about infertility, as discussed earlier.⁷⁵

⁷² See above, section two.

⁷³ Duby, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest*, 258–9; van Houts, *Married Life*, 70–1.

⁷⁴ ‘Tibi benedico, salvo iure fratrum tuorum; tibi, si quam habeo benedictionem, relinquo hic et in secula seculorum’ Lambert of Ardres, *Historia comitum Ghisnensium*, c. 149 (MGH SS 24, 637). I am most grateful to one of the reviewers for advice on the translation.

⁷⁵ See above, pp. 131–2.

Lack of offspring had fuelled intergenerational strife in the families of Ardres and Guines in the past.⁷⁶ The occasion of the wedding night, prior to the conception of a new generation, was a solemn occasion on which to pass on this stern message to his son. At the same time, however, he also handed over the father's right to bless his son, so that he, in due course, could pass it on down to future generations. No doubt the count and his chronicler-chaplain used the liturgical ritual of the blessing of the wedding bedchamber, bed and couple to highlight the significance of procreation for the continuation of the dynasty in the eldest son's line. According to Lambert, the initiative for the bedchamber rite was taken by the count himself, who presumably wanted to recite the prayers for maximum effect. This is a striking example of lay participation in liturgical rites nominally reserved for priests.⁷⁷

Apart from Lambert of Ardres's quite elaborate description of the blessing of the marriage bed, the only other non-liturgical source to contain such an allusion is both fictional and tantalizingly vague. Chrétien of Troyes, who wrote in the 1170s at the court of either Marie, countess of Champagne or Philip of Flanders, included in his vernacular romance *Erec et Enide* a lengthy description of wedding celebrations, stretching out over many days. The wedding night proper followed the first day of festivities. In one line, he situated the couple in their bedchamber 'with bishops and an archbishop', albeit without any reference as to what their presence signified.⁷⁸

All this is a surprisingly meagre collection of evidence for the blessing of the marriage bed in non-liturgical sources, given the impressive number of detailed prayers for such an occasion in liturgical manuscripts. However, what Chrétien of Troyes and Lambert of Ardres have in common is that they unambiguously present officiating priests in the bedroom of the newly wed couple. In Lambert's case, they explicitly blessed the couple in bed, although the majority of prayers were said by the count, the bridegroom's father, a layman.

⁷⁶ Jean-François Nieuw, 'Les Conflits familiaux et leur traitement dans l'*Historia comitum Ghisnensium* de Lambert d'Ardres', in M. Aurell, ed., *La Parenté déchirée. Les Luites intra-familiales au Moyen Age*, Histoires de famille. La Parenté au Moyen Ages 10 (Turnhout, 2010), 343–58.

⁷⁷ Carol Symes, 'Liturgical Texts and Performance Practices', in Gittos and Hamilton, eds, *Understanding Medieval Liturgy*, 239–67, at 263–6, with a brief discussion of marriage ceremonies at 264.

⁷⁸ 'Eveques et archeveque i furent': Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec et Enide*, ed. and transl. Carleton W. Carroll (New York, 1987), 90–1, line 2036; cf. van Houts, *Married Life*, 67.

Chrétien is silent as to what the archbishop and bishops actually did in the bedroom.⁷⁹

In conclusion, liturgical evidence traces the development of the blessing of the wedding bedchamber in north-western Europe, across the Channel from England to northern France, including Normandy and Flanders, and vice versa. Importantly, we should note that among those historians of liturgy mentioned here, Ritzer, Mutembe and Molin, Stevenson and Reynolds, only Mutembe and Molin followed up on any evidence for these rites in sources other than liturgical manuscripts, although they ignored Lambert of Ardres's testimony. The evidence presented here suggests that there was ambiguity as to where the blessing of the wedding chamber, bed and couple actually took place. The liturgical evidence provides a prima facie case for a domestic ceremony, though the general lack of rubrication in liturgical manuscripts for the post-mass prayers from c.1100 onwards, if taken at face value, suggests discretion on the part of those involved – priest, couple and kin – as to the place where this should take place. I have argued that this lack of precision opened up the possibility for the post-mass prayers to be recited in church, though in the few cases where the manuscript rubrication is explicit, it seemingly gives the priest directions to perform the blessing in the home. The sparsity of reports of actual domestic celebrations in non-liturgical sources is difficult to explain. We could argue that their authors and readers considered the ritual in the home to be too common an event to warrant a mention; this seems a rather feeble explanation. Alternatively, we might argue that the domestic ritual was a rare event, in which case the testimonies of Chrétien de Troyes and Lambert of Ardres are the exceptions that prove the rule. In all likelihood, it seems that the ambiguity regarding the location of the blessing of the wedding bedchamber, bed and couple in the sources does not allow for a definite answer as to whether it was an exclusively domestic or an exclusively

⁷⁹ For a priest forcing a married couple to sleep together in the same bed covered by liturgical vestments, in an attempt at reconciliation after a fall-out, see the famous description by John of Salisbury of Pope Eugenius as marriage counsellor to King Louis VII of France and Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine in Rome, on their return journey from the disastrous Second Crusade in October 1149. According to John, the pope had the bed made up with his own precious vestments ('Fecit eos in eodem lecto decumbere, quem de suo preciosissimis vestibus fecerat exornari'): see John of Salisbury, *Historia Pontificalis*, ed. and transl. Marjorie Chibnall (London, 1966), 61.

church event.⁸⁰ The ambiguity itself is testimony to the church's openness in allowing it to happen in either the church or the home. The liturgy offered the possibility for a ritual of blessing of the wedding bedchamber, bed and couple, but for the period under consideration, on the basis of the evidence collected, it seems that the ritual, as contained in a significant number of liturgical manuscripts, did not find its way into practice amongst the laity, except for a small number of elite families. The great majority of the laity may have been entirely ignorant of this ritual's existence.

⁸⁰ One of the reviewers plausibly suggested that whether blessings took place at home or in a church might have depended on whether an elite household comprised a priest who could officiate at home; a village priest might more naturally have performed blessings in a local church.