

# Why was the Geese Book made?

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The Geese Book was made to replace an older book that had been in liturgical use in St. Lorenz in Nuremberg for some time. This book – or part of it – still exists in Nuremberg. To examine it we must visit it where it resides, at the Landeskirchliches Archiv of Nuremberg, operated by the Lutheran Church of Bavaria.

This single volume can tell us many stories and offers several hints as to why it was deemed obsolete, why it had to be remade, and why that new book emerged as the Geese Book. The codex in the Landeskirchliches Archiv bears the shelf number Lorenz 3. It was certainly not the first gradual for the parish church of St. Lorenz.

Such books that contained the Mass liturgy existed since the early Middle Ages. Generally they had become ever more complex as time progressed. Each parish needed its own particular gradual in order to accommodate all of the specific saints and other feast days that were celebrated with Masses at altars in that church. As more and more saints were included and some of their feast days were even supported by private donations, these books needed to be expanded. This means that periodically graduals needed to be amplified, updated, recompiled, re-collated, revised, and even completely replaced. After years of continuous use for all the Masses in the church year, they also wore out physically. Yet another reason to make a new book was to fashion one that was bigger and better, in other words one that was more monumental and more impressive, even at a distance.

Graduals are among the largest of liturgical manuscripts. Whole choirs of school boys and young clerics had to sing out of them together. Even this earlier gradual here in the Nuremberg archive is a sizeable book, measuring 32 by 46 cm. The volumes of the Geese Book, however, are much larger. Measuring 45 by 65 cm and 45 by 66 cm respectively, the volumes of the Geese Book are the two biggest complete books in the Morgan Library in New York.

Only volume two of this earlier gradual survives here in Nuremberg. Volume one is among the many manuscripts that have not come down to us from the Middle Ages. This second part of any gradual is usually referred to as the sanctorale, because it contains mainly the Masses for the various saints days including those of the Virgin. The lost volume, the temporale, comprised the various Christological feasts including all of the holidays that depended on the Easter cycle.

According to the colophon here at the end of the book, this gradual was written by the Nuremberg scribe and Dominican friar, Johannes Gredinger. In this colophon Gredinger also tells us that this gradual was completed in 1421. This means that it was in service for 89 years when the second volume of the Geese Book was finished as its replacement in the year 1510. It's no wonder then that we see great signs of wear – for example, on folio 277r, where we read that this chant was sung every Friday to commemorate the death of Christ and also to ward off the plague.

When we look carefully at the handwriting throughout the volume we note that it was not only Gredinger who was at work here with his quill. Upon close examination it is apparent that whole sections and complete gatherings or quires were inserted into the book in various places. In fact, we have discovered another scribal hand that we can identify: These unique signature faces, simple caricatures executed with a fine pen, many in profile, and several with irreverent grimaces and outlandish head coverings, are the work of the prebendary Georg Rayl. Because he placed his name in the colophon of another book still extant in Nuremberg in another library, we are able to identify his unique decorations in this manuscript as well. Rayl had a prebend at St. Kilian's altar in St. Lorenz and died in 1494. These discoveries tell us that this St. Lorenz gradual, the precursor manuscript for the Geese Book, had under-

gone several revisions during the 15th century. What is more, we believe that so much was added and changed that the book needed to be rebound.

Indeed so much had happened in Nuremberg during the time between the two graduals: The local patron of Nuremberg, Saint Sebald, had been canonized. The city had received the holy relics and imperial regalia for safe-keeping and annual display. The office of the pastorate of St. Lorenz had been elevated to that of provost or prior. The church of St. Lorenz had been greatly enlarged with its expansive hall choir. Many new altars had been donated and erected, old altars had been moved and rededicated. Many additional benefices had been endowed to support a growing number of clergy. Nuremberg was asserting its ecclesiastical prominence against that of the bishop in Bamberg.

The Geese Book once again presented the church year as a smooth flawless uniform and homogenous whole. It is not only much larger but also far more lavishly illuminated. If we compare the sanctorale of the Geese Book with the 15th-century book still here in Nuremberg, we note that the earlier book has 15 historiated initials and the Geese Book only 11. However, the Geese Book has additional foliate initials and acanthus decoration in the margins. Many of the historiated initials in the Geese Book follow the iconography of those in the predecessor manuscript. For example the Birth of the Virgin is depicted in both, as is the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple and the Dormition of the Virgin. Of course the narratives consisting of reduced groups of figures from the early 15th century are replaced with narratives occurring in deep landscapes or detailed architectural settings in the early 16th. One of the most striking contrasts is the isolated figure of a Saint with his Cross – meant to depict Saint Andrew, although he is not shown with the X-shaped cross upon which Andrew was purportedly crucified, compared with the historiated initial showing an elaborate narrative, the brothers Peter and Andrew fishing as they are called by Christ to be his apostles.

By far the most important “up-grade” however, is that of the whimsical and enigmatic bas-de-page illuminations. Lorenz 3 contains none of them. For the Geese Book they must have been planned from the start. When the manuscript was designed and ruled, large borders were left blank for these fanciful and provocative pictures. All of them occur on folios marking the beginnings of important festivals, for example Christmas, All Saints Day, or the Marian holidays. Jakob Elsner took over these spaces. He filled them with pictures displaying life and death struggles, with animals, with members of society beneath those of the patrician oligarchy that controlled the politics and economy of the city. The pictures served as an aid to memory, they helped the singers find their places in the manuscript. They were also open to various interpretations, they were ripe with social commentary and replete with subtle and implicit critique. For a liturgical book in a large public edifice they were somewhat transgressive.