

Ordinalia

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The *Ordinalia* (“prescribed texts”) is a cycle of three plays (8734 lines) telling the story of the Bible: *Origo mundi* “the beginning of the world” telling Old Testament stories, *Passio Christi*, and *Resurrexio Domini*, together telling the story of Christ. It dates from around 1400 and survives in a single fifteenth-century manuscript. It is in Cornish, which at that period was spoken across the bilingual western half of Cornwall, the eastern half being English-speaking. Linguistically and textually the cycle shows its mixed background, mingling English influences with Brittonic ones. Internal evidence of place-names links the cycle with the town of Penryn, so like the other Cornish literary works it may have been written at Glasney College just outside that town.

The cycle is comparable with the English-language dramatic cycles, but with differences in content and form. The overall theme is the need for redemption from Adam’s original sin, and how it was achieved. The first play portrays Old Testament figures and events which exemplify this need or foreshadow the life of Christ: Cain and Abel, Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Moses, King David, King Solomon, and Maximilla, an apocryphal pre-Christian martyr for Christ. Woven into the text is the apocryphal legend of the Holy Rood, beginning with the dying Adam’s request for a token of redemption: Seth receives seeds from the Tree of Knowledge, to be buried in his father’s mouth. The tree which grew from these was eventually used as the Cross for the Crucifixion, fulfilling the plan. Although this

legend was well known in England generally, the *Ordinalia* is the only English dramatic cycle to use it. It also uses other apocryphal stories, notably the Death of Pilate in the third play as an interlude between the Resurrection and the Ascension. However, the cycle also lacks certain well-known elements (see below). The second play starts directly with Christ’s ministry with His disciples, and finishes with the removal of His body for burial; the third starts with Pilate setting soldiers to guard the tomb, and finishes with God welcoming Christ into heaven.

The production and staging differed from those of urban cycles. Unlike those cycles, the *Ordinalia* was not divided into discrete sub-plays for production on wagon-stages by individual guilds. Each play, performed on one of three successive days, is a semi-continuous text, presumably for uninterrupted performance, although the first play is naturally episodic, and the third has the digression on the Death of Pilate. No record of any performance survives, but diagrams in the manuscript show that the plays were to be staged in an open-air amphitheater, examples of which survive in west Cornwall. Characters were allocated to stations on the perimeter bank, from which they descended to the central arena to play their roles; it is uncertain where the audience was, but they too may have stood partly in the central arena with the action happening around them, which would have been particularly effective in crowd scenes.

The language of these plays and two others constitutes the chief (very incomplete) source for Middle Cornish, a Brittonic (Celtic) language closely related to Welsh and (especially) Breton. At the time of the plays, Cornwall had been part of England

for nearly 500 years, absorbing cultural and linguistic influences. The language shows English loan-words, idioms, and syntactic influences, and various characters speak phrases of English: the masons building the temple, Christ's torturers, King Solomon, the good emperor Tiberius, the Three Maries at Christ's tomb. Metrically, too, the text reflects the cultural mix: the syllabic lines with end-rhyme are like those of Welsh and Breton poetry, but the stanzaic forms are akin to those of English drama.

The text includes 27 place-names in Cornwall, particularly as land-grants given to servants: five such grants in *Origo mundi* and three in *Resurrexio Domini*, naming 23 places, mostly minor ones near Penryn. However, in the second play, *Passio Christi*, local names were used differently, in phrases meaning "(not) anywhere from here to there," while the smith making the nails for Christ's Cross works at Marazion, 16 miles from Penryn. The use of local place-names throughout a story set in the Holy Land was probably intended to impart extra immediacy and relevance to the action.

The work was written presumably at Penryn, probably at Glasney College, using its library resources for the apocryphal material (Padel 2016). The text may well have developed over a period of time, and hints of lost scenes portraying the Fall of the Angels and the Childhood of Christ are probably symptoms of that development. Slight differences in language between the plays are likely to reflect varying scribal habits during this development, rather than dialectal or authorial differences in the language itself.

Two other texts are partially related to the *Ordinalia*. The Middle Cornish narrative Passion Poem, of 259 stanzas, is of about the

same date (Murdoch 1993, 19), and several passages show close agreement of wording; it is uncertain which text derived the phrases from the other. Similar verbal parallels occur between English-language cycles and equivalent narrative poems of the Passion. The other related text is the later play, *The Creacion of the World*, surviving in a manuscript written in 1611. This work covers half the action of *Origo mundi*, the first play of the *Ordinalia*, as far as Noah's Flood, and it contains about 180 nearly identical lines, making it partly an expanded version of the earlier play, with modernized language and incorporating additional (apocryphal) material; it is thus the final manifestation of the gradual development of the text of the *Ordinalia* over the centuries.

SEE ALSO: Christianity in Britain; Cornish (overview)

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FURTHER READING

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