A MEDIEVAL BELL

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“Behold my uses are not small,
That, God to prays, Assemblyes call:
That breake the Thunder, wayle the Dead,
And cleanse the Ayre of Tempests bred;
With feare keepe off the Fiends of Hell,
And all by vertue of my Knell.”

This Englished version of a Latin poem, in the sixth edition of A Help to Discourse, printed in 1627, describes well the functions of a medieval bell. A poem of similar nature was inscribed as early as 1268 on a bell founded for Saint George’s church in the city of Hagenuau, and by the seventeenth century parts of it were included in bell inscriptions all over Europe.

Because secret services were necessary to avoid persecution, the early Christians evidently did not use bells to summon the worshipers, but by the sixth or seventh century bells were certainly rung in churches throughout Western Europe. Saint Pachomius’s rule, written in the fourth century for his Egyptian monastic community, states that trumpets called the monks to worship; but in Saint Benedict’s rule, written for monks in the West in the sixth century, the word signum appears in connection with calling the monks to the Divine Service, and signum was one of the words commonly used in medieval Latin to signify a bell. A hundred years later Bishop Gregory of Tours reports in several of his works that bells were used to announce the monastic offices. The poet Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers and a contemporary of Gregory of Tours, mentions bells calling the faithful to prayer in the most important church in Paris, and instructions are given in Charlemagne’s time for the ringing of bells in parish churches.

The tolling for the dead is mentioned by Bede in his Ecclesiastical History of the English People when he tells of the nun Begu’s vision of the passing of Saint Hilda at Whitby Abbey in 680. By the thirteenth century Bishop Durandus of Mende in the Manual of the Divine Offices explains the procedure for the tolling for the dead. The bell is rung twice at the death of a woman and thrice at that of a man and in the case of a cleric according to his ecclesiastical orders. In England in 1476 a sum of money was paid for ringing “to the worship of God and for the Duke of Yorke sowle and bonys coming to Fodrynghey.”

Many miraculous ringings of bells are reported by medieval writers. Bishop Jacobus da Voragine tells in The Golden Legend how the bells rang in a certain church in France of their own accord at the rediscovery of relics of Saint Vitus and Saint Modestus which had been hidden in the walls of the church; because of the displeasure of the good bishop Saint Loup, the bells of Saint Stephen’s in Sens lost their “sweet tone” when King Clothaire II had them removed to Paris. The bells regained their usual sound only as they came within seven miles of Sens when Clothaire sent them back in disgust. Voragine also explains why bells were effective in defeating demons and stopping storms: “the cross is borne and the clocks and bells be sounded and rung; the banners be borne and in some churches a dragon with a great tail is born . . . for whereas the kings have in battle their trumpets and banners . . . right so the King of Heaven has his signs . . . and the evil spirits that be in the region of the air doubt much when they hear the trumpets of God when the bells be rung . . . and cease the moving of
Bronze bell, made in Austria, xv century. Height 19 inches. The detail below shows the knight's figure and the date 1494 reversed.

Tempests.” From a more practical point of view the ringing of bells during storms is attested by two late medieval entries in English parish records. Sums were paid for bread and cheese “for ryngers in the gret thunderyng” and also “for rynging when the tempest was.”

Concrete archaeological evidence of the early existence of bells in the Adriatic region of Italy is found in the bell towers of Sant’ Apollinare in Classe and Sant’ Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna; the earliest parts of these towers date from the sixth century. St. Mark’s bell tower in Venice, which collapsed suddenly in 1902, was started in 888. It was from Venice that Constantinople is said to have received its first bells in the ninth century, and the earliest bells in the near-by Austrian provinces were imported from the region of Venice.

The bell recently acquired for The Cloisters comes from this Adriatic region, which was formerly part of Austria. Around a band at the top of the bell are hounds, identified by their collars and prominent ribs; hares, identified by their long ears; and floral motifs. Below this band is the date (1494) and the figure of a knight carrying a shield and holding a lance with a pennon. Beside the platform on which the knight stands is a six-petaled flower. The hare, hound, and plant motif is repeated: the hound at one side of the knight and the plant and hare below.

In an inventory, published in 1917, of bells collected to be melted down for arms during the first World War in the Austrian province of Küstenland and adjoining territory, three bells are listed which bear the identical knight’s figure: a bell from Dedni dol, near Weixelberg (Carniola), dated 1486, one from Stari trg that is undated, and another, dated 1487, from Sussenberg (Styria). This last bell also includes a hare and hound in its decoration. The author of the inventory believes that these three bells and a fourth related bell from Gross-Pölland (Carniola) may have been the work of Master George of Laibach (Carniola), who cast the great bell for the church of San Giusto in Trieste in 1467; unfortunately he gives no reason for his statement. Laibach was an early and important bell-founding center of the region, and Dedni dol, Stari trg, Gross-Pölland, Sussenberg, and Trieste are all within approximately thirty-five to forty miles of that city, but there is no concrete evidence that Master George founded any of the group except the Trieste bell, on which he placed his name and the found-
ing date. Since the Cloisters bell was cast within eight years of those at Sussenberg and Dednido and bears the same knight’s figure as these two bells and the undated one at Stari trg, it must have been cast by the same bell founder. This founder evidently worked in the territory which is now part of northwestern Yugoslavia and may have had his headquarters in the city of Laibach.

The Cloisters bell, which is nineteen inches high, fifteen and a quarter inches in diameter, and weighs eighty-seven pounds, is small compared to many bells of the Middle Ages. The bell that Master George made for San Giusto was over five feet high, and a bell cast in Strasbourg in 1375 weighed in the vicinity of ten tons.

The monk Theophillus’s twelfth-century treatise on the arts says that a bell should be made from a metal which was four parts copper and one part tin. According to reports of the Middle Ages, however, more precious metals were sometimes used. Duke William of Aquitaine gave to the monastery he had founded, Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, a little bell of silver which by its sweet and clear tone charmed the ears of all who heard it. It was responsible for the downfall of a demon who had just been exorcised and was attempting to escape when he was so upset by its sound that he was recaptured. In an inventory made at Windsor Chapel in the time of Richard II a silver bell is listed, and Charles V of France had a gold bell. The belief that silver made the tone of a bell sweeter is not technically true, but the Monk of Saint-Gall tells of the fate of a bell founder who tried to trick Charlemagne. This man had founded a bell that pleased the emperor by its tone, and Charlemagne requested that he cast another bell in which he would combine a royal gift of silver with the brass instead of using tin. The bell founder, however, kept the silver for himself and used instead the usual tin. When the bell was hung, it refused to ring, and when the founder in a rage seized the cord to make it sound, the clapper fell out and killed him by a blow on the head.

Above: A XIV century miniature showing a minnesinger disguised as a pilgrim giving a letter to his lady as the bell calls her to mass. In Heidelberg, left: A XII century capital in Saint-Benoit-sur-Loire. The devil is trying to break Saint Benedict’s bell.
Most large bells, however, were made of an alloy of copper and tin similar to that mentioned by Theophilus, rather than of silver or gold. The following collection was taken in the thirteenth century to provide metal for a bell: "180 pounds in brass received as gifts in pots, platters, basons, lavers, kettles, brass mortars, and mill-pots. Also 425 pounds received from one old bell."

The use of the word "baptism" in the description of the consecration of a bell is a very interesting one. Although the ceremony that took place at the dedication of a bell is similar to that of baptism, most writers who have discussed the subject point out that no remission of sins was implied as in the sacrament of human baptism. One set of instructions indicates that the Litany was said and certain psalms sung. The bell was washed with holy water into which salt had been cast; a sign of the cross was made on the top of the bell with holy oil; and these words were pronounced: "Let this bell be sanctified and consecrated, O Lord, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." Sponsors were frequently present; sometimes the donor of the bell stood as sponsor, and often influential people in the community were called on to act in that capacity. In 1499 in an English parish at the "hallowing of the great bell Harry," Sir William Smyes, Richard Clech, and Mistress Smythe took the part of god-parents.

Relatively few medieval bells are in existence today. Some were recast to make them larger or to improve their tone; some bells cracked and had to be refounded. Many were melted in the frequent disastrous fires of the past, and a great number were melted down in wartime to provide metal for arms. The bells related to the Cloisters bell were evidently melted down for this reason during the first World War, and the author of the inventory laments the fact that people preferred to send their old bells to the collection points and retain the more recent ones. This very practical tendency was probably present in earlier wars as well.

The story of "Georges of Amboise," cast for the city of Rouen in 1501, tells the fate of one famous medieval bell. From the time it was first founded it aroused great interest. It was a very large bell, and its founder was supposed to have died almost immediately after it was completed, according to one report from sheer joy at his accomplishment and to another from sheer exhaustion. When Louis XVI visited Rouen in 1786, the bell cracked, it was said, as an omen of the evil to come. Before the bell could be recast it was melted down in accordance with a revolutionary edict, and from its metal a certain number of medals were struck which bore these words: "Monument of vanity; destroyed for utility; in the year two of equality."