

TEAMS 2019 Essay Prize Winner

Gardening with the Dead: A Medieval Monastic Practicum

Dr. John T.R. Terry, The Westminster Schools, Atlanta, GA
Grades 9-12

I. Introduction

"Gardening with the Dead" is currently designed for high school sophomores enrolled in our required course "History of the Ancient World" at The Westminster Schools. This is primarily a content course, building upon the critical skills students learn in their freshman introductory course. The central text for this project is Walafrid Strabo's ninth-century poem *Liber de cultura hortorum* ("Book on the cultivation of gardens," or *Hortulus*), as a way for students to enact medieval gardening techniques in our own community garden, which in turn supports local food banks. My main goal for this project is more of a guiding principle: to provide students with an experience that would be recognizable to the people we are trying to understand. Enacting sources helps students develop empathy and understanding in historical studies.

II. Teaching Background and Context

"Gardening with the Dead" challenges students to read medieval sources on monastic gardening and to work in our school's community gardens in order to gain an appreciation for pre-modern monastic labor, foodways, and the ways in which a pre-modern text can be enacted as opposed to passively read for sense.

Walafrid's poem can be read simultaneously as an early medieval intellectual homage to classical Latin authors, a practical guide to gardening, an exegetical understanding of the natural world, and an herbal sourcebook for curing upset stomachs. All of these interpretations were available to early medieval people because they had complex minds like ours. As I constantly tell my students: history isn't just what happened, but what we can interpret.

To prepare for this project, and more immediate to my own research background in early medieval monastic culture, it was crucial for my students first to get a sense of just what early

medieval monasticism was as a phenomenon.¹ We started where many sourcebooks indeed start, with the so-called Desert Fathers and Mothers and the early ascetic movements of Egypt and Syria and read excerpts of Benedict’s *Rule* to get an idea of the tensions in early monastic circles as well as the logic behind Benedict’s manual of monastic style, all of which seem utterly foreign in a modern culture that values self-care and individualism.² [do you mean today’s culture?>

To help my students understand all this, and gain a fuller sense of monastic relationships with the natural world (my subject of research), I distributed excerpts from a handful of other sources: some, like the *Rule of Benedict*, are mainstays of the typical medieval sourcebook, but others, like the sixth-century *Lives of the Jura Fathers* and the ninth-century Anglo-Latin poem *De abbatibus* by the monk Æthelwulf almost certainly had their debut in a high school classroom. Finally, the ninth-century monastic blueprint, the *Plan of St. Gall*—a totally unique source from the period—gives students a clear idea of what exactly went into an ideal monastic community.³ We engage these sources quite briefly, with me providing context and specific excerpts on slides, followed by brief discussions. These discussions orbit around a few major takeaways:

- 1) Many late antique and early medieval monastic people considered themselves to be fleeing the world and getting closer to God.

¹ See “Personal Resources” in the Appendix below for two files related to these classes:

“Medieval Monasticism” covers the rise of monastic culture, and “Gardening with the Dead” is a more polished assessment of the project prepared for this submission. Both of these files are attached as separate PDFs.

² See Appendix for all resources related to this project’s context, including the rise of monasticism and Walafriid’s cultural background.

³ For high-resolution images of the Plan and more information, see “Carolingian Culture at Reichenau & St. Gall.” Accessed May 20, 2020. http://www.stgallplan.org/index_plan.html.

- 2) Many of them thought they had a right to claim and clear the wilderness for their communities, but equally considered the natural world to be an influential participant in their own lives
- 3) Many near-contemporaries of Walafriad thought that a monastic community should be a machine, with each piece mutually supporting another, as the *Plan of St. Gall* clearly shows. (The *Plan* in particular is crucial for students' understanding of early medieval monastic communities, since it contains garden plots clearly labeled with crops Walafriad would have planted.)

Collectively, this exploration of sources helps convince my students that early medieval minds were complex ones, capable of holding several interpretations of their worlds simultaneously. I offer these examples to illuminate part of the vast range of experience monastic people could have with their natural worlds in the early Middle Ages. Walafriad is but one voice among many.

From here, we could spend the rest of the class on the more immediate context: Walafriad Strabo was born in 808 somewhere in Swabia, and at a young age was given as a child oblate to the island monastery of Reichenau on Lake Constance. The members of his home monastery thought so highly of his intellectual potential that they sent him to study with the legendary scholar Hrabanus Maurus at Fulda at the age of 18, sometime around 825-26. From there, Walafriad worked quickly: he was tapped to be the tutor for young Charles the Bald, son of the emperor Louis the Pious, around 829. By 838 Walafriad's work at Louis' court had earned him the position of abbot back at Reichenau. After a complicated period during which Walafriad's support for Louis' son Lothar earned him the anger of Louis' *other* son Louis the German, Walafriad returned to Reichenau after Lothar's defeat, and was also entrusted with the role of emissary to Charles the Bald.

Given these confounding political headaches of his 30s, we might understand why Walafriad may have wanted to turn to gardening, maybe as a coping mechanism: after all, the very first line of his poem reads, "A quiet life has many rewards..." Typical of a (Carolingian) Renaissance man, Walafriad was a really accomplished intellectual of his time. He wrote works on biblical exegesis, theology, hagiography, and poetry. *Hortulus* represents but one example of

his literary output, but in many ways it's the most personal—or at least gives students the best chance to “get to know” him. This 444-line poem on gardening has something for everyone: plenty of remedies for upset stomach (mint, pennyroyal, fennel, sage), reflections on the symbolism of certain plants, a long and discursive meditation on the rose as a symbol of Christ, even a nod to the naughty Roman fertility god Priapus at the beginning, and at the end a dedication to his beloved teacher, Grimald. He's a flesh-and-blood person with interests, hobbies, and ideas. Walafrid is a knowable ninth-century person. Given this, naturally, I wanted my students to garden with Walafrid. The plan, in its most basic form, is to read his poem and plant his crops.

III. Implementation

To set our gardening day, I established a partnership with one of our outdoor education teachers, all of whom teach about foodways and the responsibility students ought to take as consumers. For our Frankish monks, who were never totally self-sustaining but were profoundly dependent on their own agricultural and economic production, this is a sensible way to teach.

First we discussed what exactly we wanted my students to learn. We first wanted them to connect with a text from a pre-modern period, which is basically the goal of any history educator. But we wanted them to connect more deeply than usual—to research a crop and its uses, and to experience the arduous process of clearing beds, tilling soil—or as one student put it, “fluffing it up”—and planting seeds and seedlings just as Walafrid might have done around springtime at Reichenau. (For this reason, this project works better in spring semesters, but we have plenty of crops from both sides of the Atlantic to plant in the fall.)

Next, we wanted the students to appreciate the differences between medieval and modern methods. Some of our tools, like the mattock (mentioned in *Hortulus* as a *rastrum*: a hoe, rake, or mattock), are almost exactly like those Walafrid and his compatriots would have used, to help students develop empathy with a historical person with whom they assume they have nothing in common.

Finally, we wanted our students to contribute to their own community by cultivating our school's gardens. Typically, current students will not enjoy any of the (literal) fruits of their

labors during the semester in which they are enrolled. This is part of the plan. We wanted them to understand the value of labor and patience as opposed to the instant gratification of the grocery store or Uber Eats. We also wanted them to contribute to future classes who will be able to harvest some of these plants (or their descendants) in future semesters, linking classmates across time.

By the time we encountered Walafrid's *Hortulus*, it was easier for students to understand where Walafrid was coming from: "This I have learned not only from common opinion and searching about in old books, but from experience of hard work and sacrifice of many days when I might have rested, but chose instead to labor."⁴ In other words, this wasn't just an intellectual exercise but one born of years of experience working from the scriptorium to the garden. In the words of one student in their post-project reflection, "I understand now that monasticism is no joke. It is very tough work, not just sitting around and praying."

In class, we then read excerpts of *Hortulus* and discussed its contents. Students paired up and chose crops from a list I provided, so I could make sure they were choosing crops we would actually be planting such as sage, pennyroyal, mint, and radishes. Each pair of students had to analyze Walafrid's section on that crop and conduct brief research on both current and historical uses for those plants. As we discussed at the end of class, there were a wide range of medicinal uses for each herb, and upset stomachs seemed to be a common anxiety. From here, students could discuss processes of trial-and-error and observation in a world without microscopes and modern chemical manipulation and, I hope, this gave them a clearer idea of the sophistication of monastic gardeners.

Through a generous grant from Westminster's Glenn Institute, a service-learning fund, to purchase tools, seeds, and seedlings, we were able to put together eight crops from Walafrid's *Hortulus*: sage, rue, gourd, melon, fennel, mint, pennyroyal, and radish. The tools we used, such

⁴ All of my citations of the poem are from Raef Payne, trans., *Walafrid Strabo: Hortulus* (Pittsburgh: Hunt Botanical Library, 1966). This passage is from the "Preface," *Hortulus* ll. 15-16, pp. 24-25.

as mattocks, hoes, and small hand tools for clearing weeds, would have been immediately familiar to Walafrid and his monks.

For our garden day, since I had three classes that met over the course of two days, we broke classes down into main tasks: to clear weeds away from the mounds between the swales, prepare/loosen the soil, and plant. And here Walafrid has very specific things to say (which some students and I declaimed loudly as we worked):

Winter, image of old age, who like a great belly
Eats up the whole year's substance and heartlessly
Swallows the fruits of our unstinted labor,
Had gone into hiding deep below the earth.
For Spring had arrived and driven him under...⁵
But this little patch which lies facing east
In the small open courtyard before my door
Was full of nettles! All over
My small piece of land they grew...⁶
So I put it off no longer. I set to with my mattock
And dug up the sluggish ground.⁷ (46-47)

Every time a student found a worm or grub, it gave us the chance to read (in English and Latin) Walafrid's own physical experience: among other activities, he tells us that "I destroyed

⁵ *Hortulus*, ll. 19-25, pp. 26-27.

⁶ *Hortulus*, ll. 36-40, pp. 26-27.

⁷ *Hortulus*, ll. 46-47, pp. 28-29.

the tunnels of the moles that haunt dark places, and back to the realms of light I summoned the worms."⁸

We got to the planting stage surprisingly late in the class period; it was important for them to learn that none of this would happen without hard work and patience. In the words of one student, "This garden experience has helped me understand the text better because I was able to connect with Walafrid and understand the strenuous work this type of gardening requires. This also helps us see how . . . monastic gardening is not much different from our type of gardening. We were also able to understand how accomplished they felt by doing this work and feeling the same type of emotions they felt."⁹ Once we were prepared to plant, we discussed the properties and uses of each crop as we introduced them physically to the students and provided tutorials on how to handle the plants and seedlings themselves and where to plant them relative to each other. While some students planted, others passed around the poem to read aloud from the section of whatever was being planted: sage "deserves to grow green forever, enjoying perpetual youth;/ For it is rich in virtue and good to mix in a potion,/ Of proven use for many a human ailment."¹⁰ Pennyroyal: "if you cook some pennyroyal and use it as a potion or a poultice, it will cure a heavy stomach . . . When the sun is blazing down on you in the open, to prevent the heat from harming your head, put a sprig of pennyroyal behind your ear . . ."¹¹ Fennel seed, "taken with milk from a pregnant goat, eases a swollen stomach and quickly loosens sluggish bowels. What is more, your rasping cough will go if you take fennel-root mixed with wine."¹²

After the gardening day, I assess students based on their engagement with the project as well as their post-project written reflections, which always invite them not only to share their thoughts and reactions, but also urges them to make connections with our larger unit of late

⁸ *Hortulus*, ll. 48-49, pp. 28-29.

⁹ Maya Smith, written reflection on gardening practicum, May 1, 2019.

¹⁰ *Hortulus*, ll. 78-79, pp. 30-31.

¹¹ *Hortulus*, ll. 320-323, pp. 52-53.

¹² *Hortulus*, ll. 215-216, pp. 42-43.

antique/early medieval Europe. For example: what social functions did monastic communities serve? How did food production connect with local economies and spiritual concerns?

Additionally, I typically put one of the sources we discussed in a final exam section to see how students have made connections across the semester—in other words, I invite them to make connections between concepts with which they become familiar (religious institutions, environmental change, political fragmentation) and sources they find less familiar.

IV. Conclusions

I have several modifying ideas for future semesters. Textually speaking, I am intending this upcoming semester to integrate later medieval sources on gardening and the natural world, such as the literary output of twelfth-century abbess Hildegard von Bingen. In terms of adding experiential learning to this project, Atlanta's local Monastery of the Holy Spirit engages in gardening and agriculture, adhering to the daily discipline laid out in the sixth-century *Rule of Benedict*, and it would be valuable for my students to understand how a modern monastery uses modern methods but remains connected to premodern values. I am also in discussions with colleagues who practice smithing and welding about how students might make some of their own tools. Since part of the lesson is to experience some of the work and patience of pre-modern agricultural production, this would be an ideal hands-on experience. Two final ideas for the future revolve around the gardening space itself: a project of designing their own garden or monastery in the spirit of the St. Gall Plan, and planting crops needed to make ink for my next project idea: a manuscript-making practicum.

As detailed in the introduction, my goals for this project run parallel with providing students with an experience that, in this case, would have made sense to Walafrid. Our poet-gardener would have immediately recognized the tools we used, the crops we planted, and the methods by which we did so. He might have lent a hand and critiqued my Latin. Or maybe he would have ordered some of the younger monks to do the work that he, as abbot, didn't feel like doing on a hot afternoon. One student noted that until they got to the garden to work, "I had no

idea how much intention and effort was required”¹³ to do the things Walafrid described. I also wanted to bring the joy of history to the classroom and beyond. Connecting with an individual and what they have left for us from the distant past is a way to understand the pleasures and challenges of their life, in a small way, for about 60 minutes at a time. Another student—and I hope she is being genuine!—observed that “While I was digging up the weeds and tending to the garden, I was digging up the weeds from my brain, clearing the garden of my soul and heart, making room for new spring creativity and excitement.”¹⁴ Experiential learning and garden therapy would probably have been familiar concepts to Walafrid.

Finally, such projects can help students to realize that people from the premodern world, while radically different in some ways, are remarkably similar to us. Enacting a source can activate it. Reading history is more rewarding if we can develop empathy and real understanding—in this instance, for someone describing the challenges and rewards of clearing land for something new.

¹³ Avi Athohta, written reflection on gardening practicum, May 1, 2019.

¹⁴ Lucy Hager, written reflection on gardening practicum, May 1, 2019.

Appendix: Select Resources

I include links for several helpful online resources here, as well as more widely-available print sources, which make it easier for teachers to replicate and adapt elements of this project. This is only a select list.

Personal resources:

- "Gardening with the Dead" (a polished assessment/presentation of the project and its results for students and faculty)
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-5MFrr2kgCJMqNQLroaZ110117Fv2vdj/view?usp=sharing>
- "Medieval Monasticism" (an in-class presentation I use for context and discussion)
https://drive.google.com/open?id=1DeLGPp7Hdft9NSxHrTii7SSwSxU9_hnP

Other resources:

Walafrid Strabo and Carolingian Monasticism

- "Carolingian Culture at Reichenau & St. Gall." Accessed May 20, 2020.
http://www.stgallplan.org/index_plan.html.
- Duckett, Eleanor Shipley. *Carolingian Portraits*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962.
- Dutton, Paul. *Charlemagne's Mustache and Other Cultural Clusters of a Dark Age*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Eberly, S.E.S. "Walafrid Strabo's *Hortulus*." Wyrting. 2018.
<https://wyrting.com/EarlyGardens/Continental/Walafrid/Hortulus.htm>
- *Walafrid Strabo: Hortulus*. Translated by Raef Payne. Pittsburgh: Hunt Botanical Library, 1966.

Medieval Gardening

- "Edinburgh Medieval Pigment Project." Accessed May 20, 2020.
<https://edinburghmedievalpigmentproject.com/>.
- Wilson, Clare. "What to Grow in a Medieval Herb Garden." English Heritage. Accessed May 20, 2020. <http://blog.english-heritage.org.uk/grow-medieval-herb-garden/amp/>.