The Medieval Rosary

As an artefact, a rosary is a string of beads, often combined with sundry decorative items, used for counting prayers. Fingering each bead in turn helps the user to keep track of how many prayers they wish to repeat. Prayer beads have been used in Christian, Moslem and Hindu societies over many centuries.

Looking at European sources, there are a couple of factors that add challenge to the research. There are oddities of representation - artists may have painted a rosary without being particular as to the number of beads, although they may have been more careful with the shape and colouring of the item. It is also hard to be sure how long a strand is when, as is frequently the case, the sitter has it looped over an arm or otherwise partially obscured.

The anatomy of a rosary is fairly simple, and is dealt with fully under the heading Design and Construction. For the moment, suffice it to say that in a more complex string, the small beads, which form the majority are known as Aves, while the larger, more ornate, ones are variously named paternosters, gauds or marker beads. Incidentally, the word 'bead' itself comes from its religious function - related to 'bidding', or praying.

The Legend

The name 'rosary' (referring to a rose garden or a wreath) comes from legend. In this legend, a band of robbers observed how a monk was telling his beads by the roadside. Each prayer fell from his lips as a rose, and the Virgin Mary herself gathered up the roses and formed them into a garland for her head. The prayers were certainly in Latin - vernacular prayers only came into vogue near the end of the fourteenth century. The Latin *Pater noster* and *Ave Maria* may be found at the end of this article.

Modern rosaries

Modern rosary beads are often joined with links of chain, which was not done in medieval times. They have 55 or 165 beads, separated into decades of small Aves, beginning with a Paternoster marker and ending with a repetition of the Gloria. The loop finishes with several free-hanging beads and a crucifix. This format was fixed in 1569, by Pope Pius V. 'Chaplet,' which once referred to a necklace (religious or otherwise), or to a circlet for the head, is nowadays applied to various aberrant forms of bead/prayer combination, differing from the official rosary devotions. Chaplet devotions are still popular today. The rosary devotion has also continued to evolve, with differing formats for some specific purposes.

Changing Ritual

St Anthony, mortifying his flesh in the desert in the third century, used stones to keep track of his prayers. There is another early record of prayer-beads belonging to the seventh-century Abbess Gertrude in Belgium. Lady Godiva, who died in around 1040, willed her rosary to a monastery she had helped to found. Rosaries have been used since very early Christian times, but the observance of 'telling the beads' has not remained static: the prayers recited, the order and the standard number of repeats, have all altered with time, fashion and cultural changes.

Originally, the 150 beads were supposed to represent the Psalms. Monks were to recite these daily. Unlike the monks, lay brothers and sisters attached to religious houses were often unable to read or speak Latin, and would thus have found the memorisation of the long list of Psalms onerous, to say the least. In the 11th and 12th centuries, therefore, Carthusian and Cistercian authorities allowed their lay brethren to substitute the *Pater noster* (Our Father) for the Psalms. The practice of substitution spread widely among the laity from this time. In the mid-twelfth century, the cult of Mary took off,

and the *Ave Maria* was added to the prayers. This might be by repeating an Ave after each Paternoster, or by substituting Aves completely (making the process a 'St Mary's Psalter'). It became common, in divided strings of beads, to say ten Aves and follow each decade with a recital of the Paternoster. Personal rosaries became increasingly standard possessions during the fourteenth century, and by the end of the medieval period they were probably the most common item of jewellery across all classes. In some societies, a person was not considered respectable - or Christian - unless their rosary was visible.

Once Reformation ideas took hold in the sixteenth century, things changed dramatically in England, and in the Lutheran parts of Germany and the Lowlands. After the banning of rosaries and other Papist artefacts by Queen Elizabeth in 1571, English recusants continued to illegally import and make rosaries. Carisbrick suggests they also used the more discreet 'decade rings', which can be worn privily on the finger, or carried in a pouch. They usually have ten small knobs to serve as beads. The Victoria and Albert Museum holds one, dated 1500 - 1520, which has ten knobs and a central bevel, which would have taken the place of the gaud on a strung rosary. The bevels of such rings are often decorated with an initial, possibly that of the owner, or the initial letter of an appropriate Latin word. Decade rings are sometimes known as 'soldier's rosaries', and have the added advantage that there is no danger of losing valuable beads if the thread breaks.

Design and Construction
Medieval rosaries came in a large range of lengths. Strands of ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty-three, sixty-three, seventy-two and one hundred and fifty beads were all used. Perhaps the most prevalent version, used by both sexes, is a loop of about fifty identical beads, finished with a tassel.

Threading
Beads were strung on wool, silk, cotton or linen threads, cords or ribbons. The most popular choice seems to have been silk. Wool thread is the weakest of these options, and therefore least likely to be used. Chris Laning suggests that hemp fibres may also have been utilised. *Textiles and Clothing* includes a rosary strung on a cord of tablet-woven silk, dated fourteenth century.

Stringing materials were often red in colour, which was taken to signify blood, destiny and the power of Pentecost. Bright pink, black, green and crimson mixed with gold are also recorded.

Rosaries usually appear to have free play along the cord to facilitate their telling - the user being thus able to move each bead along the thread when the prayer was complete. Beads on non-rosary chaplets are sometimes separated by knots, so it is not impossible that rosaries should be knotted.

Straight, open-ended strings
Linear rosaries seem to have been mostly used by men. They are often very short. 'Tenners,' for example, are only a single decade, without gauds although often finished with tassels, or a tassel and a cross. Long open rosaries also existed - note Saint Hedwig's version.

Looped strings or chaplets.
Early sets of beads are often depicted as a simple chaplet, without gauds, finished with a tassel or cross hanging directly from the loop. The modern shape of a loop with a short tail, usually five beads before the cross, appeared in the fifteenth or sixteenth century. Short chaplets of ten large beads existed, as well as longer strings.

Decorative touches
Aside from the paternosters, which might be richly embellished, rosaries could include small pouches for relics, pilgrim's badges, medals and figurines of various saints, heart medallions, purses, tiny flasks of holy water, scent bottles, bells, pomanders and of course, crosses. Tassels are a very common feature, made in a single colour matching the cord. Secular jewellery is sometimes included, particularly in the form of brooches fixing the strand to the wearer's clothing. Chaucer's

Prioress used a brooch to attach her rosary to her gown. It was inscribed "Amor vincit omnia" (Love conquers all).

<u>Bead types</u>
Round or oval beads, unfaceted, were the most common choice for Ave beads. Other shapes can be seen in portraiture. Flattened squares, lozenges (like two cones put together at their bases), acorn shapes, cylinders, disks and rings all appear in use. Even seeds and nuts have been put to service. Intricate carving and enamelling were used to embellish both gauds and Aves. Some very magnificent sets done in this style survive.

The marker beads were selected to be of equal or superior worth to the Aves with which they were matched. Gold and crystal were among the precious materials used for these marker beads. Gauds could be almost any design. Square, cylindrical and ribbed ones appear. Occasionally, faceted gauds are mentioned, probably oval in shape. Shells, sabots (clogs), daisies, ears of grain, hearts, flowers and skulls were all used.

Amber and glass beads were common. Coral was perhaps the most popular of all, combining light weight, symbolic colour, beauty and expense!

Glass and semi-precious stones were used to imitate higher-status materials such as coral, pearls and amber. One disadvantage of this economical measure is that the weight of glass is about half as much again as compared with coral (which is mostly air pockets). This would make the longer strings quite heavy. The rosary would be less convenient to carry, and the extra weight might have made it more prone to breakage as the beads scraped against the cord.

Bone and wood were the most basic materials, and bone in particular seems to have been cut into prayer-beads in enormous quantities. The refuse of bead-cutting, being mainly strips of jaw-and lower leg-bones, perforated where material has been drilled out, has been excavated in massive quantities in northern European centres such as Konstanz and Basel.

Sadly, Chris Laning reports that she has found no evidence earlier than the twentieth century for rosary beads made from actual roses.

Paternosterers
The makers of rosary beads were divided early into guilds, differentiated according to the type of beads they made. In 1260, the Paris guild had three strands - one for workers in bone and horn, another for coral and mother of pearl, a third for crafters of amber and jet.

A London jeweller of 1381, Adam Ledyard, stocked paternoster beads of white and yellow ambers, coral, jet, and silver gilt. Ave beads were represented by jet and blue glass as well as the cheaper bone and wood versions for children (Evans, p. 50).

Interestingly, there is a discernible change in bone-working technology in the German town of Constance, spanning the fourteenth century. Around 1300, the choice of bones for bead production and the way they were worked was neither particularly efficient nor professional. Production was on a relatively small scale, and the beads were cut, using a bow-lathe, as rings rather than spheres. By about 1400, the process was much more streamlined. Only straight portions of the metapodials from cattle were used, and only spheres, in much higher concentration, were drilled out of the strips of bone. Huge quantities of small beads, 4 - 5 mm diameter, were produced, and a smaller count of larger beads with diameters of 6 to 12 mm. From experiment, an experienced craftsman would have produced around a thousand items per day, which certainly puts this work into the realm of mass-production.

This process of drilling beads from bone (or equally, wood) can be seen in the much-reproduced painting of a German paternosterer at work, from 1484.

Users of rosaries

Rosary guilds existed, first recorded in Cologne in 1475. Unlike most guilds, both sexes were admitted and there were no expensive dues to be paid. Other devotional groups demanded that the members own specific texts, but the rosary guilds were eclectic; neither special resources nor skills were required, not even literacy. They were a truly inclusive social structure.

People of all ranks and means used rosaries. In their simplest manifestation, a series of knots in a piece of cord would serve, so even the meanest folk of Christendom could join the party. At the other end of the spectrum, gold, sapphires and emeralds expressed the fervour and luxury of the greatest nobles. Even children were expected to recite their rosaries; Evans notes the production of 'cheap sets' of beads for children, made of maple-wood or white bone. Coral was also favoured for children, despite its dearness, as it was thought to provide protection against evil.

Fashion Accessories

Rosary beads were both a sign of piety and a fashion accessory. In effect, they could be used as a form of advertising. They indicated the social status and wealth of the owner in a highly visible way, while still being acceptable to religious authorities. Excesses of expense were frowned upon at different times, but generally the beauty of a rosary was seen to increase the glory of the Church, just as altar paintings and stained glass were suitable expressions of religious feeling. Religious jewellery was sometimes exempt from sumptuary regulations, allowing wealthy, but low-status, folk to splash out on ostentatious rosaries. A rosary would often have been the most valuable - or the only - piece of jewellery an ordinary person owned.

The ostentation of some people's display evoked criticism as early as 1261, and fashion was not always on the side of luxury: Emperor Charles V carried "ordinary little brown wooden beads…to mark his humility" (E Wilkins, pp. 48 - 50), and in the face of this royal restraint, it was considered good for the nobility in general to show their piety by carrying only the plainest of rosaries.

German and Flemish portraiture of the sixteenth century shows a fashion among ladies for very long chaplet rosaries, usually of red beads, with silver or gold paters. Sometimes a pomander is featured. Assuming that the red colour indicates coral, these strings were exceedingly expensive. Their inclusion indicates the sitter's religious orthodoxy, and not incidentally, their wealth (or their husband's!). The men of this group tend to favour a different style. Their very short, linear rosaries, often of only ten or twenty beads, seem to be restricted to male use. Linear rosaries are sometimes seen in female portraits, but as long strings (as in the illumination of Saint Hedwig, 1353). Perhaps women were naturally more dedicated to bidding their beads, or perhaps it was felt they had more need to be so!

How to wear them? Rosaries seem to have been carried prominently. Some were worn pinned to garments. They could be worn as a necklace (popular choice in the late fifteenth century) or as a bracelet. Both linear and chaplet patterns might be looped over a belt, or simply held in the hands. Rosaries are worn most particularly when going to make your devotions, but as a fashion accessory they can be seen at any time of day, looped over hand, arm or belt.

For the salve of your soul:

Ave Maria, gratia plena, dominus tecum. Benedicta tua in mulieribus. Et benedictus frustus ventris tui Jesus Christus. Amen.

Pater noster qui es in coelis sanctificetur nomen tuum. Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua sicut in coela et in terra. Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie. Et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos demittimus debitoribus nostris. Et ne nos inducas in temptationem. Sed libera nos a malo. Amen.

Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto. Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum. Amen.

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