

**GREGORY THE GREAT, *Dialogi* [*Dialogues*]
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment
Central Italy (Umbria, Perugia?), c. 1320-1330**

i (paper) + *i* (parchment) + 98 + *i* (parchment) + *i* (paper) folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, upper outer rectos, 1-98, complete (collation *i-ii*¹⁰ *iii*¹² *iv*¹⁰ *v*¹² *vi-ix*¹⁰ *x*⁴), quire and leaf signatures on q. i, horizontal catchwords with brown and red pen decoration, center lower versos, qq. i-viii, ruled in brown ink with full-length horizontal and vertical bounding lines, prickings in upper, outer, and lower margins (justification 95-98 x 76-77 mm.), written in a handsome, compact gothic rotunda in two columns of thirty-one to thirty-two lines, additions in a more rapid gothic hand on ff. 92-98, guide letters for initials, guide notes for rubrics in margins, red rubrics, capitals touched in red, running headers ("liber" on versos and "primus" through "quartus" on rectos) in dark brown ink, one-line paraps in blue, red, or black, one-line initials in blue or red, one- to two-line initials in blue or red with contrasting pen decorations, FOUR ILLUMINATED INITIALS of six to eleven lines, painted in pink on dark blue grounds and decorated with rounds of orange and burnished gold, with blue foliate infill on pink grounds and with red, green, and blue foliate extensions (ff. 2, 18, 39, 65v), all but the last followed by a line of red-highlighted capitals, ONE ILLUMINATED HISTORIATED INITIAL of thirteen lines (f. 1) in the same style, with a foliate and floral extension reaching into the lower margin, followed by a line of capitals written in gold, two later round diagrams on f. 98, corrections in the hand of the primary scribe, manicules and marginal annotations in several medieval hands, one of which may be the hand found on ff. 92-98, burnished gold of initials partially flaked away, small stains and losses of pigment in historiated initial and its acanthus extensions, smudging and dampstaining on ff. 1-4 and ff. 91-97, some soiling in the margins from handling, worming on f. 98 with some loss of text, otherwise in excellent condition with wide clean margins. Bound in nineteenth-century half parchment over pasteboard, with a smooth spine bearing a brown leather label with gilt stamped inscription, "S. GREG. / DIALOG. / CODEX / SEC. XV," similar identification on front parchment flyleaf, mostly effaced, slight staining, wear at hinges and edges, first quire slightly loose along the bottom. Dimensions 150-154 x 101 mm.

A refined illuminated author portrait and delicate filigree initial grace this signed and complete copy of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, an influential collection of early saints' lives and miracles. Book two, on the life and miracles of St. Benedict, became a foundational text for Benedictine monasticism. Added computus diagrams, annotations, and an index furnish signs of early use and shed an intriguing light on how this text was being read and used in the late Middle Ages.

PROVENANCE

1. The colors and composition of the illuminated initials are typical of late Gothic painting in Umbria and were likely produced in Perugia early in the fourteenth century, c. 1320-1330. The historiated initial on f. 1 bears a particularly close resemblance to the work of the circle of Meo da Siena (active in Umbria, 1310-1333). The style of the flourished initials corroborates this dating and localization.

The primary scribe, Johannes, signed his name at the conclusion of his stint (f. 91v), but provided no further identifying information.

TEXT

ff. 1-2, *Incipit prologus Beati gregorij pape in quatuor libris dialogorum*, incipit, "QVADAM DIE dum nimis quorundam secularium tumultibus depressus ... Seniorum ualde uenerabilium didici relatione quod narro";

ff. 2-17v, [Book One, list of chapters] incipit, "DE honorato abbate monasterij fundensis, DE libertino preposito ipsius monasterij ..."; incipit, "UENANTii quondam patricij in sannii [sic] partibus uilla fuit ... liberius itaque loquimur si aliud exordium sumamus. *Explicit liber primus*";

ff. 17v-38, *Incipiunt capitula libri secundi*, incipit, "Uita et miracula uenerabilis benedicti conditoris et abbatis ordinis monachorum. j., DE capisterio fracto et resolidato. ij. ... *Expliciunt capitula secundi libri*"; f. 18, *Incipit liber secundus. De uita et miraculis Beati Benedicti Abbatis*, incipit, "FUIT uir uite uenerabilis gratia Benedictus et nomine ... loquendi uires interim per silentium reparamus"; f. 38, [addendum] incipit, "Iacet mihi breuiter dicere quod beatus gregorius in uita sancti benedicti uero scripsit ... Quidam marcus doctor semper ibat ad eum et in eius laudes composuit uersus ad gloriam domini nostri ihesu christi qui cum patre et spiritu sancto uiuit et regnat in secula seculorum. Amen. *Explicit uita uenerabilis patris Benedicti*";

ff. 38-64v, *Incipiunt capitula libri tertij*, incipit, "De paulino nolane ciuitatis episcopo. j., De iohannr pape. ij., ... *Expliciunt capitula*"; f. 39, *Incipit liber tertius. Capitulum primum*, incipit, "OVOS [sic] uicinis ualde patibus intendo maiorum facta reliqueram ... subsequenti hoc quarto uolumine demonstrabo. *Explicit liber tertius*";

ff. 64v-91v, *Incipiunt Capitula libri Quarti. Capitulo primo*, incipit, "QVod eterna spiritualia ideo carnalibus minus esse credatur. j., QVod sine fide neque infidelium uiuat ij. ... *Expliciunt Capitula libri quarti*"; f. 65v, *Incipit liber Quartus*, incipit, "POstquam de paradisi gaudijs culpa exigente ... si ante mortem deo hostiam ipsi fuerimus. *Explicit liber dialogorum. Amen, Amen, Amen. Laudandus deus est in cuncis [sic] actibus eius. Qui scripsit scribat semper cum domino uiuat. Uiuat in celis Johannes nomine felix*";

ff. 92-96v, [subject index] incipit, "[A]bbas. libro primo. capitulo primo. b, Abstinencia. libro primo. capitulo primo. a ... Vxor. libro 4o. capitulo 21o. a, [Z]içania. libro 4°. capitulo 30°. 3vij"; [f. 97, blank];

f. 97v, Computus table for calculating movable feasts;

f. 98, Two diagrams for determining the dominical letter and golden number for a given year (the example given is 1400); [f. 98v, blank].

The *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory the Great were written in 593, during his papacy (*sedit* 590-604). They have been edited on multiple occasions, notably in the *Patrologia Latina* and, more recently, by Umberto Moricca (1924) and Adalbert de Vogüé (1978-1980). Considered one of the great books of the medieval era, the *Dialogues* were among the most widely read texts of the Middle Ages. Translations exist in almost every European language, and hundreds of manuscripts in Latin survive. Nonetheless, we have identified only nine other copies sold in the last century (see the Schoenberg Database).

This is not only a complete and very handsome copy of the text, but also one that contains an intriguing brief addition at the end of book two, attesting to its veracity (it begins, intriguingly, as an assertion from outside the dialogue framework of the text: "It falls to me to say briefly that Blessed Gregory wrote truly in the life of Saint Benedict ..."). Further study may reveal whether this is a unique passage and why it might have been included here.

ILLUSTRATION

f. 1, Saint Gregory the Great, seated behind a tonsured scribe taking dictation on a scroll.

Framed within a pale pink initial set upon dark blue grounds, all decorated with white filigree, the figures of Saint Gregory and his scribe are shown against the backdrop of rose and a pale pink curtain. Burnished gold adorns the edges of Gregory's red mantle and papal crown, as well as his halo, and the folds of Gregory's mantle and the scribe's blue habit are rendered in fine detail, with contrasts highlighted with delicate strokes of white. Gregory's face, shown turned partially toward the reader, and the monks, shown in profile, have been painted in refined detail, with almond-shaped eyes, heavily shaded upper lips, and carefully modeled facial contours, the monk's round cheeks highlighted with white and Gregory's high cheekbones and gaunt cheeks accentuated with delicate shading.

The execution of these figures and coloring and decoration of the initial and its acanthus extensions are typical of late Gothic Umbrian painting and bear a particularly close resemblance to that of a Choir Book initial attributed to the circle of Meo da Siena (Koller Zürich, 18 September 2015, lot 113). Active in Perugia from 1319 to 1333, Meo da Siena showed in his work the influence of Siennese painters like Duccio. In turn, he and his work exerted a strong influence on artists like Vanni di Baldolo, one of the leading figures in establishing a distinctly Perugian school of manuscript illumination in the early fourteenth century (Palladino, 2003).

Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), an immensely influential Latin Father of the Western Church, was born in Rome to a wealthy family, but turned aside from his wealth and success, converting part of his patrimony into monasteries in Sicily and giving the rest to the poor. He established his father's house on Rome's Caelian hill as a monastery dedicated to St. Andrew and went to live in this monastery as a monk. He was forced to leave his monastic retirement in 579 when Pope Pelagius II appointed him a deacon of Rome and sent him as his ambassador to the Byzantine court in Constantinople. Later, upon Pelagius's death in 590 Gregory was appointed pope. During this period he completed the bulk of his writings, including his *Regula pastoralis*, *Moralia in Job*, many of his homilies, and his *Dialogues*.

Gregory wrote the four books of the *Dialogues* of Saint Gregory the Great, at the request of certain monks of his household, holding up the lives and miracles of the Italian saints for admiration and instruction in the first three books and arguing the immortality of the soul in the fourth. The text takes its name from the dialogues that frame these accounts, all conversations taking place between Gregory and his deacon Peter. In the opening, Peter finds Gregory sitting alone and in sorrow, weighed down by his dealings with men of the world; the stories which Gregory proceeds to tell serve to relieve his mind. Famously, Book II, *De vita et miraculis venerabilis Benedicti*, is exclusively devoted to Saint Benedict of Nursia, and it became a central text for medieval Benedictine monasteries – second only in importance to the Rule of Saint Benedict – as it tells the story of their Order's founder.

There are numerous signs of use in this manuscript, from the abundant marginalia to the added index and computus. The computus is an odd inclusion, as it bears no relation to the preceding text; written on the final leaves of the manuscript, it was likely a personalization by an early owner adding useful texts where he or she could find space (perhaps this was the sole

manuscript, or one of very few, in their personal library?). From the index we can divine that at least one reader was invested in rendering Gregory's treatments of particular topics more readily accessible, and, from the annotations, that more than one early reader was reading this text carefully, marking off passages of particular interest. One reader, for example, demonstrates a sustained interest in the value and inculcation of obedience, leaving marginal notes on the subject throughout the volume. The same reader seems to have read the text with an interest in extracting lessons on appropriate conduct to apply to himself and others, with many of his notes following the format of "quomodo prelati obedire debemus [how we ought to obey prelates]" (f. 32v). Further examination of this volume's annotations promises to yield further information on how this book was being read and used by its medieval readers.

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