

THOMAS A KEMPIS, *Imitatio Christi* (The Imitation of Christ)

In Latin, decorated manuscript on paper

Southern France (?), c. 1450-1475

ff. vi (modern paper) + 53 + vi (modern paper) folios, watermark, char à deux roues, Briquet 3538, Perpignan, 1466 (not listed in Piccard online), early foliation in ink top outer corner recto is visible on from f. 14, 14-32, completed in modern pencil, missing three leaves, one possibly cancelled (collation i-iii<sup>12</sup> iv<sup>10</sup> v<sup>10</sup> [-1, before f. 47, 9, and 10, 10 possibly cancelled], horizontal catchwords, quire and leaf signatures with a letter designating the quire and an Arabic numeral the leaf lower outer corner recto, lightly frame rule in lead with all rules full length (justification 144-142 x 107-105 mm.), written in a cursive gothic bookhand in 33-32 long lines, majuscules touched with red, red running titles (some partially trimmed) and rubrics, red paragraph marks, two-line alternate red or blue initials, some with dark yellow highlights, darkened along the edges, a few stains in the outer margins, a few worm holes, corners and some edges of the first two and last seven leaves with modern repairs, overall very good condition. Bound in a modern vellum over pasteboard with two leather ties, title on spine in ink, "De immitacione," in pristine condition, no wear. Dimensions 207 x 143 mm.

Close to one thousand surviving manuscripts, as well as hundreds of printed editions and translations, witness the popularity of the *Imitation of Christ* during the later Middle Ages. Widely disseminated, it became an essential text not only for monasticism but for lay spirituality. This manuscript, with its pointing hands and other signs of use, witnesses the dissemination of the spirituality of the *Devotio moderna* into Southern France in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. Any foundational library of important medieval texts is incomplete without a copy of this work.

## PROVENANCE

1. Evidence of the watermark, a cart with wheels like 8-petalled flower heads (split across two pages, for example ff. 2 and 10), which is not a common one, suggests this was likely copied in Southern France, perhaps in the region around Perpignan, in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The script, which is a careful cursive gothic, rather upright, certainly looks French. Note in particular the 'd' with two loops and pointed bowl, the short 'r' and rows of minims with pointed tops, "qui" is abbreviated in the northern fashion (an abbreviation found in Southern France and Catalonia, but not in Italy). The opening words in a rounded Gothic text script and the long-topped tironian sign used for "et" (and) lend support to an origin in Southern France (and we can also point to the dark yellow used to highlight some of the pen initials).

The abundant use of red paragraph marks that divide the text into short maxims is a notable and interesting feature of this copy.

The early foliation, now partial, begins with "14" on f. 14, showing that this was always either a text bound independently (or perhaps the first text in a longer volume); the last folio is now quite dark, suggesting that it has been in this position for a considerable time.

2. Numerous annotations throughout are evidence of use; there are no lengthy notes, but instead the type of additions one expects in a work for personal spiritual development

and meditation, rather than academic study: f. 1, a carefully drawn hand; f. 2rv, "nota," side brackets, and a pointing hand, ff. 6v and 7v, pointing hand with long finger (the second very long, with "nota bene" alongside); ff. 8v and 13, faces in profile alongside the text, with large pointing hands; ff. 8v and 14, line drawings of a woman; ff. 15rv and 18, pointing hand and "nota"; f. 23v, prominent side brackets and pointing hand; short reader's notes, ff. 30v, 33, 34.

## TEXT

ff. 1-53v, *Incipit libellus deuotus et multum utilis compositus a domino Iohanne Gerson quondam cancellario parisiensi postea monacho cartusienisi. De immitacione christi et contemptu omnium vanitatum. Capitulum primum*, incipit, "Qui sequitur me non ambulat in tenbris etc. dicit dominus . . ."; f. 13v, *Incipit liber secundus. De interna conuersatione. Capitulum primum*, incipit, "Regnum dei intra vos est dicit dominus . . ."; f. 21, *Tabula tercii liber, De interna consolatio et interna christi locutione ad animam fidelem. Capitulum primum*, incipit, "Audiam quid loquatur in me domine deus . . . [f. 53v, ends in Book III, near the beginning of chapter 59], . . . atque ibi mors et infernus//" [missing the end of the chapter].

Thomas a Kempis, *Imitatio christi*, ed. Pohl, 1904, and Lupo, 1982; this manuscript now includes three books, arranged in the order found in Pohl's and most other printed editions. One leaf missing after f. 46v, which ends in Book III, chapter 49, "Querat alius hoc alius illud//" (three lines from the end of the chapters); f. 47 begins in Book III, chapter 50, "[exte]riorum iudicare neque . . ." (six lines from the end of the chapter). On f. 21, the scribe copied "Tabula tercii libri" (the table of the third book), but did not in fact copy a table of chapters; all three books here begin directly with the text. The manuscript now ends very near the end of book three; since the manuscript has been rebound, it is impossible to judge whether it was once followed by the fourth book. We should note, however, that many copies of the *Imitatio* did not include all four books.

Delaisé, 1956, is a diplomatic edition of Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 5855-61, copied by Thomas a Kempis in 1441, which includes the *Imitatio christi*, as well as other texts by Thomas. Many manuscripts of the *Imitatio* differ in the number of books they include and in their order. The earliest dated copy of book one was copied in 1424; all four books can be found in a dated manuscript from 1427, but there was certainly considerable variability, especially in the early manuscripts, and in different regions (English copies, for example, often include only books 1-3). Compared with the usual printed texts including Pohl's edition, the Brussels autograph of 1441 includes four books, arranged book 1, 2, 4, 3.

What is interesting about Delaisé's edition is not only its demonstration of his method of physical or "archeological" analysis brought to bear as proof for the autograph status of the Brussels manuscript, but his reasoning that Thomas did not compose his text as a treatise per se but rather as a series of "rapiaria" or hastily written notebooks of observations on how Christ's life could serve as a model in the contemporary world. Perhaps it is the very informality of the work that contributed to its great impact.

Axters, 1971, assembled a lengthy inventory of the surviving manuscripts. Since then, the estimate of the number of surviving manuscripts and printed editions of the *Imitatio* has increased steadily. Van Engen, 1988, p. 8, suggested there were 750 manuscripts, and that the text was printed in more than 3,000 editions from the first edition in 1472 down to the last century, fifty of which date before 1500; Van Engen, 2008, p. 9, mentions 900 fifteenth-century manuscripts

and one hundred early printed editions; Von Habsburg, 2011, suggests there are 800 manuscripts, and more than 740 printed editions from its composition up to 1650, making it the most frequently printed book in the sixteenth century apart from Bible, with over 100 editions before 1500. During the fifteenth century it was translated into French, German, Dutch, Middle English, Castilian, Catalan, Italian, and Portuguese among other languages.

The *Imitatio Christi* ("The Imitation of Christ") has been called "the most influential devotional book in Western Christian History" (Van Engen, 1988, p. 8), and it has been the subject of countless scholarly works, many of which have been concerned with the lively and enduring debate about the identity of its author. It has been ascribed to a very long list of authors including Jean Gerson, Chancellor of Paris (d. 1429), as here (and many others, Augustine, Bernard, Bonaventure and to a presumed Italian Abbot, "John Gersen," and to Geert Grote (1340-1384) himself). Delaissé's critical study, published in 1956, of the Brussels manuscript (MS 5855-61) that was signed and dated by Thomas a Kempis in 1441, was key to convincing most scholars that it was by Thomas, and he is widely accepted as the author today.

Thomas a Kempis (1379/80-1471), or Thomas of Kempen, born in Kempen, Germany, was part of the second generation of the *Devotio Moderna* after Geert Groote, the founder of this religious movement. He was educated in a school of the Brothers of the Common Life in Groote's native Deventer, Holland, and then became a canon at the Agnietenberg priory (Mount Saint Agnes), near Zwolle, a priory of the Congregation of Windesheim, where his brother John served as prior. He made his profession there in 1406, and was ordained in 1413. He was a prolific author, composing numerous devotional tracts, as well as a Chronicle of the priory.

In this work, Thomas encapsulated the spirituality of the *Devotio moderna*, or the New Devout, especially their emphatic emphasis on Christ, the importance of the Bible, the recommendation of the use of the vernacular for religious writings, and their focus on the interior life and a calm withdrawal from the world. The importance of the Bible, especially the Gospels, is found throughout the *Imitation*, since hearing and reading the Bible in the right spirit is central to a desire to follow Christ (book one, chapter five). The degree to which Thomas himself internalized the Bible is found in the astounding number of scriptural citations found throughout the work; Becker, 2002, lists 3,815 scriptural sources in the *Imitation*.

## LITERATURE

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#### ONLINE RESOURCES

Briquet watermarks online

[http://www.ksbm.oew.ac.at/\\_scripts/php/BR.php](http://www.ksbm.oew.ac.at/_scripts/php/BR.php)

Piccard watermarks online

<https://www.piccard-online.de/einfueh.php?sprache=en>

Latin Library: text of the *Imitatio Christi* in Latin

<http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/kempis/kempis1.shtml>

English version of the *Imitatio christi*

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/kempis/imitation.toc.html>

V. Scully. "Thomas à Kempis," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, New York, Robert Appleton Company, 1912

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14661a.htm>

TM 900