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Psalter (use of Arras)

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment

Northern France, diocese of Arras, c. 1250-1260

242 folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, 1-242, complete (collation i⁶ ii-iii⁸ iv-xi¹⁰ xii⁸ xiii¹⁰ xiv-xv⁸ xvi⁶ xvii¹⁰ xviii⁶ xix⁸ xx-xxii¹⁰ xxiii⁸ xxiv¹⁴ xxv⁶ xxvi² xxvii¹⁰ xxviii⁶), a stub after f. 33, but nothing missing from text (Ps. 21), no catchwords or signatures, ruled in brown ink (justification 103 x 70 mm.), written in dark brown ink in gothic textualis bookhand on 15 lines, 1-line verse initials alternating in red and blue with penwork in blue and red, line-fillers in red and blue on each page with hybrids, dragons, fish and decorative motifs of great variety and imagination, Psalms begin by 2-line initials in blue, dark pink and red on burnished gold grounds, nine large initials for the major Psalter divisions in blue, dark pink, red, green and ochre on burnished gold grounds decorated with dragons and foliage, a fine peacock in colors and burnished gold in the lower margin of f. 7, illumination slightly worn on ff. 7 and 62v with some flaking of gold, a tear in the lower margin of f. 11, signs of use and small stains, but in overall very good condition. Bound in modern parchment over wooden boards, pastedowns reused manuscript leaves (see Text), parchment on the covers and spine slightly stained, in overall excellent condition. Dimensions 160 x 105 mm.

This is a luxurious volume. It glitters with goldleaf and bright pigments on nearly every page. Included are nine large, inhabited initials; imaginative line-fillers full of hybrid humans, birds, fish, and dragons; stylish feathery pen work in the lower margins; fanciful marginalia including a peacock; and countless smaller illuminated initials. Once the treasured volume used by a lay person, almost certainly a woman, for her daily devotions, this manuscript will surely delight its modern owner.

PROVENANCE

1. The styles of the illumination and script are evidence that this was made around the middle of the thirteenth century, c. 1250-1260 in Northern France. Certainly made for use in the diocese of Arras, it is likely that this was made in Arras itself.

The liturgical use of Arras is underscored by the inclusion in red of the feast "Relatio Sancti Vedasti" on July 15 in the calendar. Saint Vaast (or Vedast) was a sixth-century bishop of Arras. The annual "Relatio" feast, as Carol Symes writes, "was dedicated to 'an accounting' in honor of St. Vaast, on July 15, the day when the saint's relics were paraded around the ancient castrum of the abbey of Saint-Vaast and then placed atop the high altar for three days. It was also the day on which the commune and the abbey's tenants did homage to their holdings" (Symes 2007, p. 114). The ceremony is documented by the Carité, a brotherhood of jongleurs in Arras, in its Ordinance written before 1267, and in the cartulary of the Saint-Vaast Abbey. The calendar in our manuscript also included, in red, the *dies natalis* of St. Vaast on 6 February 6, but this was later erased (as was the feast of St. Amand of Maastricht on the same date).

The calendar is not graded, indicating the non-monastic use of the manuscript, as does the secular division of the psalms. Liturgical evidence also suggests that the original

patron may have been a lay woman. The only virgin in red in the calendar is St. Catherine, who is venerated universally, but the true devotions of the patron are revealed in the litanies. They include four virgin saints that were early medieval founders of local monasteries: Hunegundis of Homblières, Aldegundis of Maubeuge, Richtrudis of Marchiennes, and Gertrudis of Nivelles.

2. Liturgical use of the manuscript in the later Middle Ages is suggested by the Office texts with musical notation added alongside a few of the psalms (e.g. Psalms 20, 22, 24, 25, and 28).
3. Bavarian private collection.

TEXT

[Front and back paste-downs], Leaves from a mid-thirteenth-century legal manuscript, probably the commentary by Bernardus Compostellanus Junior (mid-thirteenth century) on the Decretals of Gregory IX; written in brown ink in gothic textualis bookhand in two columns; contemporary with the Psalter.

ff. 1-6v, Calendar of Arras; in addition to St. Vaast, local saints include St. Walric, founder of the Abbey of Leuconay in Saint-Valery-sur-Somme (1 Apr), St. Honoratus, Bishop of Amiens (16 May), St. Crispin and St. Crispinian of Soissons (25 Oct), and St. Quentin of Amiens (31 Oct);

ff. 7-217, Psalms 1-150; the text is complete with all 150 psalms;

ff. 217-236v, Liturgical canticles, hymns and Athanasian Creed: *Confitebor* (Isaiah 12), *Ego dixi* (Isaiah 38:10-21), *Exultavit* (1 Kings 2:1-11), *Cantemus* (Exodus 15:1-20), *Domine audivi* (Habakkuk 3), *Audite celi* (Deut. 32:1-44), *Benedicte omnia*, *Te Deum*, *Benedictus dominus*, *Magnificat*, *Nunc dimittis*, *Quicumque Vult*;

ff. 237-242, Litanies of the saints; [f. 242v, blank].

ILLUSTRATION

Nine large illuminated initials at the beginning of the following psalms: f. 7, Ps. 1, "Beatus vir..."; f. 41, Ps. 26, "Dominus illuminacio mea..."; f. 62v, Ps. 38, "Dixi custodiam..."; f. 81, Ps. 51, "Quid gloriaris..."; f. 81v, Ps. 52, "Dixit insipiens..."; f. 100, Ps. 68, "Salvum me fac deus..."; f. 123, Ps. 80, "Exultate deo..."; f. 144, Ps. 97, "Cantate domino"; and f. 167, Ps. 109, "Dixit dominus"

All 150 Psalms were recited each week during the Divine Office, and the psalms in many Psalters, even those intended for lay use, include prominent initials or miniatures that reflect liturgical readings. Seven large initials mark the psalms said at Matins on each day of the week according to secular use (1, 26, 38, 52, 68, 80, 97); another large initial begins psalm 109, the first Psalm at Vespers. The presence of a ninth illuminated initial at Psalm 51 is somewhat less common and reflects the older tradition of dividing the Psalter into three parts.

Stylistically the beautifully painted initials in our manuscript can be compared with those in the Missal made around 1250 for use at the Abbey Mont-Saint-Eloi in Arras (Arras, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 58; Online Resources). Both our Psalter and this Missal, certainly intended for use in Arras, may also have been painted there. Nonetheless, one should remember that at this time many artists were itinerant, and patrons also travelled to obtain their books. As Alison Stones has reminds us that for this period, "the geographical relationship between the artist's activities and the liturgical use of the books he/she illustrated, is often dynamic at the least" (Stones, 2013, vol. I, p. 31; for illumination in Arras around 1260-1320, see Stones, 2013, vol. I, pp. 152-167). Illuminated Psalters, often very tiny, were a specialty of scribes and artists in Northeastern France and Flanders in the later thirteenth and fourteenth century. Our Psalter, an early example of this important genre, is larger than many of the later examples.

Every page of the book is different. The fact that each verse starts on a new line is often an English and French characteristic. This arrangement leaves empty space for decoration at the ends of most lines, and they are adorned with whimsical line-fillers. There are several queens and other women hybrids, often on the top line; men are proletarian and often on bottom lines. There is a bishop (f. 237v), one or two cowled friars, and a couple of pointy-eared devils. Next to the name of Saint Michael in the litany, there is an amusing human-headed dragon holding a sagging down-turned trumpet in its mouth (f. 237).

Psalters were the primary book for private, lay devotion from early in the Middle Ages and well into the thirteenth century (and often much later). In the thirteenth century, as Judith Oliver phrased it, "the medieval Psalter achieved its peak popularity as the devotional book of the laity par excellence" (Oliver, 2005, p. 259). The popularity of the Psalter for the private use of lay people has been explained in part as a belated response to the requirement introduced at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 that the laity make an annual confession to their parish priest before their Easter communion (Stones, 2013, I, p. 30). The psalms were the texts devout Christians prayed throughout their life; Psalters were commissioned to mark important occasions, such as marriages, and they were the texts used to teach children how to read.

LITERATURE

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Arras, BM, MS 58 (Initiale, IRHT-CNRS)

<http://initiale.irht.cnrs.fr/codex/12919>

TM 1171