

HENRICUS SUSO, *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* (excerpt) [Little Book of Eternal Wisdom]

In German, manuscript on paper

Germany (southern Bavaria) or Austria, c. 1450-1500

i + 28 leaves (collation: *i*⁹ [wants 7 before fol. 1] + *ii*⁸ + *iii*¹¹ [wants 5 after fol. 28]), two watermarks are present, both of the same type: a set of scales, not in a circle, with rectilinear scale pans, placed between the chain-lines, but with an elongated and uneven central axis extending significantly above and below the design to mimic a central chain-line, the first, present only in the first quire, only partially preserved, both closest in form and in such measurements as can be established on such fragmentary evidence, the marks being cut both horizontally and vertically and now tightly held in the binding, to Piccard-Online no. 116140 (attested in Venice, 1451), but not dissimilar to Piccard-Online nos. 116117-19 (all attested in Vienna, c. 1480), the paper being of an Italian type not well attested in the repositories from which the standard databases are constructed, unfoliated, except for modern foliation in pencil, top, outer corner, recto, on ff. 10 and 20, written in a later fifteenth-century semi-hybrida libraria script in black ink on 19-21 lines, unruled (justification c. 105 x c. 70 mm.), three-line initials in red on ff. 1 and 7v, two-line initials in red on ff. 13 and 22, with occasional rubrication of majuscules and red underlining, and rubrics on ff. 7v, 12v and 22. Modern binding of brown marbled paper over pasteboard covers, half-bound in red leather, with a modern paper flyleaf and paper pastedowns front and rear, parchment reinforcing strips cut from a Latin manuscript between ff. 2-3, 13-14, and 25-26, and kept in a pasteboard box covered in brown leather, with gold-tooled lettering on the spine ("SUZO · EWIGE WEISHEIT"), inlaid with modern cream laid paper. Dimensions 160 x 125 mm. (box), 142 x 111 mm. (binding), 136 x 100 mm. (paper).

This manuscript is an excellent example of the material culture of personal religious devotion in medieval Germany. It contains the central chapters on Christ's Passion from the *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* ("Little Book of Eternal Wisdom") by the Dominican author Henricus Suso (d. 1366), arguably the bestselling work in the German language before the Reformation. The small format and neat, but relatively informal script point towards a book intended for private devotion, rather than an institutional context.

PROVENANCE

1. No evidence for the medieval provenance of this manuscript survives, aside from the Austro-Bavarian dialect in which it is written. The small format and neat, but relatively informal script point towards a book intended for private devotion, rather than an institutional context. Whilst the text, which contains chapters 14-17 of Suso's *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit*, may always have been an excerpt, the loss of leaves from the start of the first and the end of the third quires indicates that it once formed part of a more extensive book.
2. Belonged to Joost R. Ritman (b. 1941), Amsterdam, the Dutch businessman and distinguished collector of art and books, who acquired it from Sotheby's in 1990; his Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica BPH 47; their embossed colour-printed bookplate on the front pastedown, and on the rear pastedown, in pencil, bottom, right-hand corner, the shelfmark BPH 47, briefly described in *Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections* (see Online Resources); acquired Amsterdam, Van Gendt Book Auctions B. V., Book Auction No. 277, 1 July 1987, lot 366 (see their catalogue, and note on the rear

pastedown the entry "v. GENDT '87," in pencil, top, left-hand corner, below which the as yet undeciphered letters "KGGT" in the same tiny script).

TEXT

ff. 1-28v, Henricus Suso, "Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit", c. 14-17, incipit, c. 14 [1r] "Herr väterleicher es ist vor allen hertzen verporgen das grundlos güet das man in deinem leyden findet der ym zeit vnd stat geit waffen wie ist der weg deines leidens so gar ein gewares pfad durch den weg der warhait hin auf den högsten tolden aller volchommenhait wol dir edles liecht vnder allem himlischen gesti+ren...", c. 15, rubric, [7v] *von dem lieb chosen das dye sel mit got höt gehabt vnder dem chreücz chert si sich wider zw seinem leyden der dienär*, incipit, "DV hast mir geoffenbart dye vnmässigen not dye dein ausser mensch höt an dem hohen galgen des chreüczs wie durch martert er was vnd vmb geben mit den panden des iämerlichen tödes Ach herr wie stuend es aber vnder dem chraücz...", c. 16, rubric, [12v] *Von dem wirdigen lob der aller rainisten chüniginn von hymel reich der diener fragt also etc.*, incipit, [13r] "O hohe reichait der gotleichen chunst vnd weyshait Wye sind deine gericht so vnbegriffenlich vnd dein weg so vnerchant wye hastu so manigen fremden weg dye armen sel wider ze pringen...", c. 17, rubric, [22r] *Von ir vnsäglichem herczen laide*, incipit, "Der geit meinen augen als manigen czaher als manigen puechstab das ich mit liechten czähern geschreib dye ellenden czäher des grunt[22v]losen herczen laides meiner lieben frauen raine fraw vnd edlew chünigin himelreichs vnd erdreigs rüer mein erstaintes hertz..."

Edited in a critical edition by Bihlmeyer, *Heinrich Seuse. Deutsche Schriften*, pp. 254-71.

Henricus Suso's *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* ("Little Book of Eternal Wisdom") was one of the bestselling works of pre-Reformation Germany; the total number of extant manuscripts is not precisely known, but including excerpts lies in the low hundreds. Its composition can be dated to the years 1328-1330, at which point its author was resident in the Dominican convent in Constance, where he had moved after several years of study in the mid-1320s under the well-known mystic Meister Eckhart at the *studium generale* in Cologne. It is a guide to contemplation, in particular of the suffering of Christ, structured as a visionary dialogue between Eternal Wisdom and an anonymous Dominican friar, the Servant. The excerpt here contains the central chapters on the contemplation of the Passion and the *mater dolorosa*, in which Suso developed a remarkably innovative theology of the indulgence, with access to the Treasury of Merits secured through compassion with the crucified Christ and his grieving mother.

This text was often read in *Devotio Moderna* circles, for Geert Grote had included Suso as the only contemporary author on his list of recommended readings for the Devout. The "Little Book of Eternal Wisdom" includes comments by Suso on the efficacy of reading and listening to the German language for the purposes of meditation. The treatise is the basis for Suso's Latin work, the *Horologium Sapientiae*, written a few years later in 1334.

LITERATURE

Bihlmeyer, Karl, ed. *Heinrich Seuse. Deutsche Schriften*, Stuttgart, 1907 [with the *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* on pp. 196-325].

Haas, Alois M., and Kurt Ruh. "Seuse, Heinrich, OP", *Verfasserlexikon* 8 (1992), cols 1109-29.

McGinn, Bernard. *The Presence of God. A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 4, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, New York, 2005, esp. pp. 195-239.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Manuscripts of Suso's *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit*, partial listing (157 mss.)

<http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/512>

Bihlmeyer's edition of Suso's German works

<http://archive.org/details/deutscheschrift00seusgoog>

Stuttgart, Hauptstaatsarchiv, Bestand J 340, Wasserzeichensammlung Piccard

<http://www.piccard-online.de/start.php>

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