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ARISTOTLE, *Poetics*

In Greek, manuscript on paper

Central Italy, c. 1500

8 folios (ff. 5-8 uncut) on paper, folded in 8°, chain-distance 32 mm, watermark, simple fleur de lis, similar to Briquet, 1966, no. 6893, Pisa, 1499, single unnumbered quire, ruled in blind, (justification 122 x 72 mm.), copied with 23 lines per page, blank space left for a title and a decorated initial 'Π' at the beginning of the text (f. 2), leaves slightly frayed and stained at the edges, lower corner of f. 1 torn off. Unbound. Dimensions 175 x 120 mm.

Perfect for use in the classroom, this is a rare and very important survival of an uncut quire of eight leaves, used by a scribe (possibly Bernardino Donato) to copy the beginning of Aristotle's *Poetics*. It is thus a new addition to the known examples of a manuscript made with imposed sheets. As such, it shows the process of a medieval scribe at work, employing the same system of large uncut sheets used by early printers. Aristotle's original Greek text is known in only forty-five manuscripts, all but two copied in Western Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

PROVENANCE

1. Written in Central Italy c. 1500, based on the evidence of the script and watermark. The handwriting resembles MS ω.I.1 of the Escorial Library, copied in 1523 by 'Donatos Bontourellios', evidently a Hellenised name of Bernardino Donato, who died in 1542 or 1543. This humanist taught grammar and rhetoric in Carpi, Emilia Romagna, during the first decade of the sixteenth century, and this manuscript could have been produced during this early stage of his career.

TEXT

[f. 1r, blank]; ff. 2-3, [Aristotle, *Poetics*], incipit, "[Π]ερὶ ποιητικῆς αὐτῆς τὲ κ(αὶ) τῶν εἰδῶν αὐτῆς ...", the text breaks off at the bottom of f. 3 with the words "... Διονύσιος δὲ ὁμοίους εἴκαζε, δῆλον δὲ ὅτι κ(αὶ) τ(ῶν) λεχθησῶν"; [ff. 3v-8v are blank].

The original Greek text of the *Poetics* survives in forty-five manuscript copies. With the exception of two which date from the Byzantine Middle Ages, virtually all were produced in Western Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. This manuscript, previously unknown to scholars, is a new witness to the Renaissance upsurge of interest in Aristotle's great work. It has a paper watermark from c. 1500 and must pre-date the first printed edition of the *Poetics*, published by Aldus Manutius in 1508 (on this edition see Sicherl, 1992, pp. 113-116).

It would be impossible to exaggerate the importance of Aristotle's (384-322 B.C.) writings to the history of philosophy and science in the West. The recovery and translation of his works in Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had a profound effect on the development of Scholasticism. The *Poetics*, composed c. 335 B.C., is the earliest extant work on

dramatic theory as well as the first Western philosophical work on literary theory. The Middle Ages knew it primarily through the thirteenth-century Latin translation by Hermannus Alemannus of the commentary on the text by the Andalusian scholar Averroës (Ibn Rushd, d. 1198). This changed in the fifteenth century.

In the fifteenth century, the study of classical Greek was an important part of Renaissance humanism, with scholars and scribes emigrating from the Byzantine Empire playing a key role in teaching Greek to the Latin West. Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) invited the Byzantine diplomat Manuel Chrysoloras to teach Greek literature and grammar in Florence in 1397, the beginning of a continuous tradition of teaching and studying Greek in Italy. The Vatican Library and the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice acquired significant numbers of manuscripts in Greek in the fifteenth century, and individual humanists collected and copied Greek as well as Latin manuscripts.

Certainly, the text of this quire is interesting; as a physical object, however, it may be even more important. For some reason it was not completed and contains just three written pages (the first two pages, and the final eleven pages are blank). As an unfinished fragment it is a remarkable illustration of the process of scribal work. We can clearly see that in this case a single large paper sheet was folded into a gathering (common practice for both paper and parchment manuscripts), and that the scribe began to copy the text before the pages were cut open to form individual bifolia. In the language of codicologists and bibliographers, our scribe was working on an imposed sheet.

To understand this, one needs to know that medieval manuscripts are constructed of quires, also called gatherings (parchment sheets or bifolia, folded down the middle and stacked together, or gathered, to form little booklets containing various numbers of pages). Both parchment and paper quires were made by folding large sheets. The process is the same as the one used by early printers, and early printed books were always printed in large sheets that were folded and cut after printing. Occasionally, unfolded and uncut printed sheets survive, rare opportunities to see the printer's work just as it emerged from the press (Kwakkel, Online Resources, and TM 764 and 765 in our archives). The realization that medieval manuscripts were made with a similar process from large folded sheets, cut only after they were written, is still somewhat controversial (Gilissen, 1972; Lieftinck, 1960-1961; Obbema, 1978, citing earlier studies). As Christopher de Hamel has remarked, "Palaeographers have been driven to distraction arguing one way and the other, basing generalisations on precious fragments which have survived against all odds showing parts of texts written out on entirely uncut sheets . . ." (De Hamel, 1992, p. 20). Our quire is one such rare and precious fragment (Obbema, 1978, knew of 22 examples). Whether or not all medieval and Renaissance manuscripts were copied in this way, our fragment is yet another piece of evidence that proves at least some books were. It is hard to think of an object more perfectly suited for use in the classroom.

LITERATURE

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Briquet Online

http://www.ksbm.oeaw.ac.at/_scripts/php/BR.php

Πίνακες: Textes et manuscrits grecs

<http://pinakes.irht.cnrs.fr>

"Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca et Byzantina"

<https://cagb-db.bbaw.de>

Álbum de copistas de manuscritos griegos en España, Biblioteca de El Escorial, MS ω.I.1

<https://webs.ucm.es/info/copistas/copista.html>

"Donato Bernardino," *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*

[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bernardino-donato_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/bernardino-donato_(Dizionario-Biografico)/)

Perseus Catalogue, Editions and translations of Aristotle, *Poetics*

<https://catalog.perseus.org/catalog/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0086.tlg034>

Erik Kwakkel (unfolded sheet at Folger Library)

<http://erikkwakkel.tumblr.com/post/61021070022/stop-the-press-this-object-is-both-very-odd-and>

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