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Epistolae Phalaridis (The Epistles of Phalaris), Latin translation by FRANCESCO GRIFFOLINI

In Latin, decorated manuscript on parchment
Italy (Northern?), c. 1460-1480

iii (modern paper) + 80 + iii (modern paper) folios on parchment, eighteenth- or nineteenth-century foliation in brown ink made before any leaves were removed, 17-88, 97-104, lacking 40 leaves: quires A, B, M, O and P (collation [lacking A-B^s] C-L^s [lacking M^s] N^s [lacking O-P^s]), alphanumerical leaf signatures, Ci, Cii...Niii, Niiii, horizontal catchwords, ruled in brown ink (justification 95 x 57 mm.), written in gray ink in a fine humanistic minuscule in a single column on 16 lines, addressees of letters in red capitals, letter numbers in red in the margins, each letter begins with a very fine 2-line initial in burnished gold on a ground painted in red and blue, highlighted with white penwork, light scribbles in black ink on ff. 40v-41, f. 1 darkened and stained, further stains and signs of use especially in the lower margins at the beginning and the end, edges darkened, but in overall good condition. In modern light brown calf binding, spine almost entirely detached, slightly scratched on the back board. Dimensions 164 x 113 mm.

The Italian humanists were fascinated by this collection of fictional letters by the monstrous Sicilian tyrant, Phalaris, famous for torturing his enemies inside a bronze bull and eating human babies. In keeping with the established tradition in Ancient Greece of epistolary fiction, these letters are a literary creation by a yet unknown author, who reinvented Phalaris and explored his public and private life through the fictional letters. Still lacking a modern critical edition of the original Greek, or this Latin translation, this text is rare on the market (only two copies, including this one, listed in the Schoenberg Database since 2000).

PROVENANCE

1. The style of the script and initials suggests that the manuscript was made in Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century, c. 1460-1480, perhaps in Northern Italy, although comparable initials and script can also be found elsewhere, including in Naples.
2. Evidence of erasure in the lower margin of the first and last leaves (ff. 17, 104v): probably deletion of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century ownership inscriptions, now illegible.

TEXT

The work comprises of 148 letters, of which this manuscript contains letters 17-115 and 124-130, thus lacking letters 1-16, 116-123 and 131-148.

ff. 17-88v, [ff. 1-16v, lacking; beginning imperfectly at the end of letter 16], “//te tanto studio contendo: non quod matri et huiusmodi maxime in filii benivolentia diffidam: sed ut pater unico filio metuens ... ad te scribam ignoscere”; [f. 17, letter 17], *Paurole*, incipit, “Maxime utrunque parentum ...”; [f. 88r-v, letter 115], *Pteucro*, incipit, “Hilodemi filie nuptias ... hae igitur ca-//”;

ff. 97-104v, [ff. 89-96v, lacking; beginning imperfectly in letter 124], incipit, “//sichorum ingrato et ...”; [f. 104r-v, letter 130], *Stesichoro*, incipit, “Nicodes Syracusanus non ignores ... noli tamen tui erga me animi consue[tudine]//”.

The *Letters of Phalaris*, beginning imperfectly at the end of letter 16, and then continuing with letters 17-115, ending imperfectly on f. 88v in letter 115. The text continues on f. 97 until the end with letters 124-130, ending imperfectly in letter 130.

The text in our manuscript is the Latin translation by Francesco Griffolini (1420-after 1465), who was from Arezzo and thus was also known as Francesco Aretino. Griffolini translated the text from the Greek sometime between 1440 and 1452 and dedicated his translation to Malatesta Novella of Cesena (1418-1465). Some 190 manuscripts of the manuscript survive from the fifteenth century (Hinz, 2001, p. 162). Translations into Italian and other vernacular languages followed. It was printed first in Rome in 1468/9, and in Treviso by Gerardus de Lisa in 1471 (cf. a digitized copy of the 1471 edition at the BnF, Paris; Online Resources). The first Greek edition was printed in 1498. These extremely early printed editions, as well as the extant manuscript copies demonstrate the great success that the work met all over Europe. Interest continued over the centuries. The text was translated into English by Solomon Whately (1699) and Thomas Francklin (1749), and a new Latin translation was made for Rudolf Hercher's edition of the original Greek text, as part of his *Epistolographi graeci* (1873). There is no modern critical edition of the letters in the original Greek or their Latin translation.

The alleged author of this fictional epistolary work is the historical figure Phalaris, the cruel tyrant of Agrigento in Sicily c.570-554 BC. Undoubtedly recognized as a literary invention when it first appeared, Politian and Erasmus continued to question the authorship of the letters in the Renaissance, and persistent doubt incited a famous debate in seventeenth-century England between Charles Boyle and Richard Bentley. In 1699, Bentley demonstrated in his *Dissertation on the Epistles of Phalaris* that the work was not by Phalaris, but was written centuries after his time (Bentley, Online resources). The debate continues to this day, with propositions ranging from the fourth century BC to the fourth century AD; Bentley, however, provided perhaps the most convincing argument, attributing the work to a second-century AD contemporary of the satirist Lucian, who was an apologist of Phalaris (MacLeod, 1987, p. XVI).

A recent study by Emeline Marquis, who approaches the work by examining the different characters mentioned in the letters, offers an excellent introduction to the content and structure of the work (Marquis, 2014). The letters are addressed to individuals and different cities, including 106 different recipients. The first complete letter in our manuscript is addressed to Phalaris's son, Paurolas (f. 17), who is the addressee of five letters. The last letter in our manuscript is written to the poet Stesikhoros (f. 104), who is the addressee of 8 letters and is mentioned in 26 letters, making him the most prominent figure in the corpus (Marquis, 2014, 2§3-4). Marquis's study complements that of Stefan Merkle and Andreas Beschorner, which gives a careful account of the narrative in the letters (Merkle and Beschorner, 1994, pp. 120–165). The letter addressed to the city of Leontinoi, for instance, presents Phalaris as a statesman and military chief in his war against this Sicilian city (ff. 23v-24, 44v, 57v); the letters to the poet Stesikhoros reveal Phalaris as a patron and admirer of poetry (ff. 97v-103, 104r-v); and the letters to his close friend Lakritos concern the battles of this military chief (ff. 60-62) (Marquis, 2014, 3§2, 3, 6). Letters to his subjects, enemies, public figures, and friends explore

Phalaris's personality as a leader, politician, tyrant, but also as a patron of poetry (see Stesikhoros). On a more personal note, Phalaris's activities in private life are described in his letters to his wife Erythia (ff. 17, 18v-20) and son Paurolas (ff. 17-18v, 20-22) (Marquis. 2014, 3§5).

The letters are grouped neither chronologically nor thematically, and their varying order in different manuscripts prevents us knowing how they were originally read, nonetheless, Marquis's study of the interconnections of the characters in the letters reveals a conscious design of a fiction developed from different points of view, which suggests that most of the work was written by a single author, as opposed to earlier contentions that it was a collection formed progressively from different origins and authors (Marquis, 2014; Hinz, 2001, p. 415).

Although our modern definition of "a letter" is an actual written communication sent from one person to another, from Antiquity through the Renaissance "letters" (or epistles) were often formal literary compositions, which might include factual information, but which did not originate as actual communications. In Ancient Greece there was an established tradition of epistolary fiction, where letters, although written as if they were sent to actual recipients, were entirely made-up creations designed to tell a story about an historical figure. The Letters of Phalaris included in the manuscript described here are the most famous examples of fictional letters of this sort from Antiquity.

In the High Middle Ages and Renaissance letter-writing was taught as a branch of rhetoric; public letters from these periods were by definition fictional, or if you like, literary, and their contemporary audience was well aware of the fact. Petrarch, the father of humanism, was not only a poet, but a prolific writer of letters intended for a public audience addressed both to his contemporaries and also to long-dead authors from Antiquity. Humanist scholars across Europe published collections of letters; the letters of early sixteenth century humanists including Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus are well-known examples. *Letters of Obscure Men*, an anonymous collection written in the name of religious reform in 1515-1510, continues the tradition of frankly fictional letters.

The present work is an engaging example of epistolary writing, and the great success of its Latin translation in the fifteenth century demonstrates its importance during the Renaissance. Studying the transmission of this text, and its status in the "mirror of the prince" genre in literature, provides a compelling point of view for examining the development of humanism in Europe.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

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