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LACTANTIUS, *Divinarum institutionum libri VII* (Divine Institutes)

In Latin, manuscript on paper

Central Italy (perhaps Rome), c. 1450-1475

i + 136 + i folios on paper, two watermarks, both vertically oriented: at ff. 1–48, a flower with leaves and stipe, offering a near-identical match to Piccard online, no. 127159 (Rome, 1451) and, at ff. 49-136, a set of scissors of a type found across Italy, 1430s-1490s (compare, e.g., Piccard online, no. 122406, Venice, 1471, no. 122456, Udine, 1438, no. 122502, Lucca, 1481, no. 122511, Urbino, 1492), modern foliation in pencil in Arabic numerals, upper fore-edge recto, 1-136 (collation, i-xi¹⁰ xii-xiii⁸ xiv¹⁰ [last folio blank]), contemporary leaf signatures of varying format and location in quires ii, vi, viii, xii, xiv, quires iv, vi-ix numbered in a contemporary hand in brown ink at upper outer edge recto of first leaf, innermost and outermost gutters of gatherings supported by strips of parchment, horizontal catchwords at gutter-side verso of last leaf in quires i-xii, blind ruled with top and bottom horizontal rules and vertical bounding lines doubled and extending into margins (justification 345-350 x c. 245 mm), copied by a single scribe in a semi-Humanist cursiva, in brown ink, in 36 long lines, with spaces left for insertion of rubrics, titles, and Greek passages, and 4-line (ff. 1, 113) or 3-line (ff. 20v, 38, 58v, 78, 95) spaces, with guide letters, left for addition of initials, scribal emendations throughout, moderate contemporary marginalia including maniculæ and names of Classical authorities, occasional wormholes and staining, rust mark at ff. 129v-130, overall in excellent condition. Bound in late-nineteenth or early-twentieth century cream half-vellum over pasteboard with brown marbled paper, black-green label on spine stamped, in gold, "MANOSCRITTO ANTICO," some wear, but in good condition. Dimensions 360 × 255 mm.

One of the lesser-known Latin Fathers, Lactantius was neglected during the Middle Ages, but enjoyed exceptional popularity in the Renaissance as the "Christian Cicero." The work is valued by modern biblical scholars (there are 73 quotations from the *Vetus Latina*). Distinctive for its unusually large dimensions (360 × 255 mm), this codex – on good paper stock by a single scribe in an elegant, clearly legible hand – boasts generous margins teeming with contemporary marginalia. Frequent scribal emendations, as well as space left for addition of initials, titles, rubrics, and passages in Greek, offer a glimpse into the working process of a Renaissance copyist.

PROVENANCE

1. Copied in Central Italy, perhaps in Rome, c. 1450-1475, likely c. 1450, as suggested by evidence of script, as well as watermarks – particularly the flower with leaves and stipe at ff. 1-48, a near-identical match to Piccard online, no. 127159 (Rome, 1451) – and ruling pattern – a schema Derolez locates most frequently in Latium, Southern Italy, and Tuscany (Derolez, 2018, pp. 114-132). Peppered throughout with scribal emendations – via strike-through (e.g., f. 1 line 30), subpunct (e.g., f. 2 line 25), interlinear insertion (e.g., f. 2 line 25), or marginal annotation linked via *signe-de-renvoi* (e.g., f. 7v line 28) – and contemporary marginalia – including maniculæ (ff. 8, 23, 30v, 54, 58v, 88, 93v, 94, 114v) and names of Classical authorities (e.g., f. 8, "Tullius") – the broad margins show frequent engagement by the producer and early users.

2. Possible link to ownership in early nineteenth-century Florence, as suggested by label pasted to inside of left board. The ink has partially bled through the covering paper revealing text reading, in part, "... di Firenze ... 1811 ..."

3. Private Collection.

TEXT

ff. 1-135v, incipit, "[M]AGNO ET EXCELLENTI INGENIO VIRI CVM se doctrine penitus dedissent quicquid laboris poterat impendi contemptis omnibus ... aduersario triumphantes premium uirtutis quod ipse promisit a domino consequamur."

Lactantius (Lucii Caecilii Firmiani), *Divinarum institutionum libri VII*, [books I.1-VII.27]; edited by Brandt and Larbmann, *Opera omnia*, part II, fasc. 1, CSEL 19. pp. 1-672.

There is an interesting scribal error in the text: f. 132v ends in VII.24.2 ("... nec uarios discet mentiri lana colores ipse"); f. 133, blank; f. 133v bears VII.18.1 ("omnibus malis pios liberet. Quod hermes tamen ...") through VII.19.2 ("... contriuerunt orbem. simul cum eo cuncti [*sic, recte*: vincti] adducentur") – duplicate text from f. 130. Evidently recognizing the error, the scribe struck through f. 133v, resuming on f. 134 at VII.24.3 ("sed in pratis aries iam suaue rubenti murice..."). Thus the text correctly runs ff. 1-132v + ff. 134-135v. The error suggests a scribe working with bifolia in a disbound state.

Although the noted rhetorician and early Christian apologist Lactantius – Lucii Caecilii Firmiani Lactantius (c. 250-c. 325) – fell out of favor during the medieval era, the Renaissance embraced his work, enamored of his elaborate style. From the late fourteenth century, early humanists portrayed him as the ideal Christian orator, with Gianfrancesco Pico dell Mirandola dubbing him the "Cicero Christianus" (the Christian Cicero) and Leonardo Bruni recommending his works above all others: "But the greatest of all those who have ever written of the Christian religion, the one who excels them all with his brilliance and richness of expression, is Lactantius Firmianus, without doubt the most eloquent of all Christian authors" The October 1465 *Opera omnia* of Lactantius' works (ISTC No. il00001000) was one of the earliest books Sweynheym and Pannartz printed in Italy, as well as the first dated book printed in Italy, and the first example of printing with a Greek font. Fifteen further editions of the *Opera* were issued before 1500, then another seventy-four in the next century, making him one of the most frequently published patristic authors.

Born to a pagan family in Roman North Africa, Lactantius had studied with Arnobius (d. c. 330) at Sicca Veneria, then travelled widely as a teacher in the Eastern Empire. Appointed, c. 290, to a professorship at Nicomedia by Diocletian, he entered the imperial circle, likely encountering the future emperor Constantine who held the office of military tribune in the court. It was probably here that he converted to Christianity, abandoning his post and fleeing in fear of Diocletian's purge of Christians and the first imperial edict against the religion (issued 24 February 303). Thereafter, reports Jerome, he eked out a meagre living by his pen until Constantine came to power and, seeking a tutor for his son, Crispus, summoned the elderly rhetor to Trier (c. 312-313).

Between his sojourns in Nicomedia and in Trier, Lactantius composed his magnum opus, *Divinarum institutionum libri VII* (The Divine Institutes). Probably completed in 311, its seven books present a systematic exposition of Christian doctrine. Rebutting the criticisms of Hellenistic philosophers, it sets out an argument intended to persuade educated pagans of the futility of their beliefs, and the truth and reasonableness of Christianity. Many Renaissance readers encountered the Latin Classics via this work, and the text draws upon a wide range of sources, including the Sibylline Oracles, the lost Oracle of Hystaspes, the Hermetica, and early apocalyptic material (McGinn, 1998, pp. 21-27). In addition, Lactantius quotes extensively from two lost works of Cicero, the *Consolatio* and the *Hortensius*, along with Cicero's *De Legibus*, a text now extant only in a fragmentary state (Ogilvie, 1978, pp. 59-63). Book IV of *Divinarum institutionum* also incorporates seventy-three quotations from the *Vetus Latina* (Old Latin Bible), with important variants for Luke 3:22 – where, as in other *Vetus Latina* witnesses, the text is conflated with Psalm 2:7 and the Codex Bezae – and John 1:1-3, where Lactantius translates *λόγος* as “verbum” rather than “sermo,” thus agreeing with Western rather than Eastern or African witnesses (these quotations tabulated by Ogilvie, 1978, pp. 98-100).

Humanist enthusiasm for Lactantius yielded an avalanche of manuscripts of his works; over 150 are currently extant, chiefly dating from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Nearly all, however, are held in institutional repositories. They appear on the market very rarely: the Schoenberg Database records a mere seven manuscripts since 1956 described as including only the *Divinarum institutionum*.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Digization of Migne's *Patrologia Latina* editions of Lactantius' works

http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/30_10_0240-0320-_Lactantius.html

Synoptical presentation of Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms. 147

<http://monumenta.ch/latein/yyy.php?table=Lactantius&linkname=bmv00147&prefix=&bildnummer=5>

Lactantius, *Opera omnia* (Sweynheym and Pannartz, 1465), Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, BSB-Ink L-2 - GW M16541

http://daten.digital-sammlungen.de/bsb00036840/image_1

Incunabula Short Title Catalogue

https://data.cerl.org/istc/_search

Piccard Online

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

Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts

<https://sdbm.library.upenn.edu/>

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