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Unfinished Book of Hours (use of Autun)

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment

France, Autun, c. 1450-1475

i (original) + 104 + i (later) folios on parchment (of varying quality, often sturdy, thick, and brownish, sometimes with follicles showing, hair and flesh sides clearly discernible, modern foliation in pencil, complete (collation i¹² ii⁴ iii-xiii⁸), catchwords at the end of every gathering often enclosed in simple banderoles, ruled in red ink, (justification 110 x 65 mm.), written in a neat gothic textualis in dark brown/ almost black ink on 15 long lines, with very wide (original) margins, untrimmed, both horizontal and vertical prickings visible throughout, notes to rubricator in ink in the outer margins, red rubrics, red and blue line fillers, alternating 1-line and 2-line initials in red and blue, 3- and 4-line initials introducing major sections in highly burnished gold leaf with alternating red and blue infill and surround with white tracery in the infill, generally in very good condition, f. 1 (beginning of January) erased (inexplicably), stitching traces of at least seven pilgrims's badges, now removed, on f. i. Bound in 19th-century full-grain sheep leather (basane), gold lettering on spine PRECES PIAE (upper) and MSS (lower), edges scuffed, some wear on spine, splitting. Dimensions: 187 x 140 mm.

This large Book of Hours is of special interest for what it tells us about bookmaking in the medieval workshop and book use. Untrimmed with wide original margins, it preserves its horizontal and vertical prickings, all its catchwords, and copious cursive guides to the rubricator. Textual evidence situates it securely in the active pilgrimage center of Autun in Burgundy in the second half of the century. A contemporary note recording an eclipse of the sun and moon and evidence of pilgrim badges offer tantalizing signs of early reader use. Inexplicably, the manuscript appears to be unfinished, although it entered into personal use nonetheless.

PROVENANCE

1. Certainly made for use in Autun in Burgundy, based on the calendar, the litany, and the Hours of the Virgin (see details below); the script and decoration suggest that the manuscript probably dates in the third quarter of the fifteenth century. The leading illuminator in Autun during this time period was the Master of the Burgundian Prelates (Pierre Changenet?, c. 1470-1490). The note recording a eclipse on the front flyleaf (see below, text), is evidence this must date before 1484.

The original cathedral of Autun was dedicated to Saints Nazarius and Celsus; when some relics of St. Lazarus were acquired in the 10th century, a new building was constructed adjacent to the old one, and rededicated to Lazarus, later to become a major pilgrimage site. It is a World Heritage site today.

2. Librairie Ecclesiastique de Toulouse & Taranne, 33 rue Caselle, Paris; their sticker on the front pastedown.

3. Edmund Steinheil, (1855-1923), engineer and book collector, Paris, his armorial ex libris on the front pastedown, with the added date 1909 written in ink on the label; the label reading "Aus dem Steine das heil" (tr. Salvation from the stones?). The Steinheil family, of noble rank and German origin, apparently had many branches in Paris, and the most important member of the family, Marguerite Steinheil (1867-1954) is celebrated for her many lovers and her sensational trial and acquittal for the murder of her husband and mother in 1909, coincidentally (?) the date inscribed on the ex libris.
4. Private collection, Paris, France.

TEXT

f. i verso, Handwritten note in a 15th-century script], incipit, "L'an 1484 le 16ieme jour du moies de mars fut cet eclisse de soulet et de lune envirunt 4ieme heure apres midi" (In the year 1484 on the 16th day of the month of March, there was an eclipse of the sun and the moon at around 4 o'clock in the afternoon);

It is not totally clear which eclipse this note refers to. A total eclipse of the sun occurred on March 26, 1484, not on March 16th, but it occurred at approximately 10 pm in the evening Greenwich mean time. The note does, however, provide a terminus for the execution of the manuscript. Books of Hours were often used to record not only family events but extraordinary weather phenomena (such as the famous, now dismantled, Chester Beatty Hours, which includes a note that it was written in 1408, the year a flood washed away [three of] the bridges of Paris; on this manuscript, see <https://fragmentarium.ms/description/F-4tau/1589>).

ff. 1-12v, Calendar; the first half of January erased; sparse listings, important saints marked in red, including Saints Nazarus and Celsus (28 July), Saint Andoche (24 September), Saint Lazarus (1 September), Saint Pragmatius, Bishop of Autun (18 November), and the "Revelatio Saint Lazarus" on the 20 October;

Lazarus is also in the litany (see below). The important pilgrimage church in Autun preserved the relics of St. Lazarus. Listed also is Abbot Philibert of Jumieges (20 August) near Autun.

ff. 13-16v, Sequences of the Gospels;

ff. 17-63v, Hours of the Virgin, Matins (f. 17), Lauds (f. 28), Prime (f. 39), Terce (f. 44), Sext (f. 48), None (f. 51), Vespers (f. 57), Compline (f. 59), use of Autun, conforms with the "tests for localization." The capitula at Prime and None are respectively "Virgo verbum concepit" and "Felix namque";

ff. 64-67v, Short Hours of the Cross;

ff. 68-71, Hours of the Holy Spirit;

ff. 71v-88, Seven Penitential Psalms and litany, including St. Lazarus;

ff. 88v-100, Office of the Dead, with three lessons;

ff. 100v-104v, Prayers including the "Obsecro te" (for masculine use).

This large Book of Hours was fully written, rubricated, and decorated, but then evidently left unfinished. Blank spaces for three-quarter page miniatures occur at the openings of the major sections of the manuscript (e.g. f. 17, Hours of the Virgin; f. 64, Short Hours of the Cross; f. 68, Short Hours of the Holy Spirit; f. 71v, Seven Penitential Psalms and litanies; f. 88v, Office of the Dead). Fully illustrated, it would still have been a relatively modest manuscript with a cycle of five illuminations.

Puzzling is the fact that the manuscript was used in its unfinished condition: it preserves not only the note concerning the eclipse but also evidence of pilgrim badges sewn (or pinned) onto the first flyleaf. Traces of sewing holes and impressions left by badges testify that many Books of Hours once held these thin metal badges. Sold as souvenirs at popular pilgrimage destinations, these badges could be worn by travelers as markers of their devout trajectories across Europe or even as protective talismans.

Of considerable interest for its evidence of bookmaking, the manuscript preserves its original prickings, both horizontal and vertical, as well as neatly written guides to the rubricator throughout (e.g., "ad vi," for Terce, f. 48, and elsewhere in the Hours of the Virgin; also "a" for antiphon, f. 63). All of its catchwords, guides to the binder, are also present. It thus provides an excellent resource for the study of the processes of bookmaking in the medieval workshop.

LITERATURE

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F. Madan, "Hours of the Virgin Mary" (Tests for Localization)
<http://manuscripts.org.uk/chd.dk/use/madantest.html>

Les Enluminures Blog Badges of Devotion (on pilgrim badges)

https://www.textmanuscripts.com/blog/entry/4_17_badges_of_devotion

Kunera (Database of Pilgrim Badges)

<https://database.kunera.nl/en/>

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