

**ALEXANDER OF VILLEDIEU, *Doctrinale puerorum* (Teaching Manual for Children)**

**In Latin, manuscript on paper**

**Northern Italy (probably Verona), ca. 1450**

iii + 55 + iii paper leaves, watermark of three mountains surmounted by a cross similar to Briquet 11737 (Verona, 1444-1453), modern penciled foliation in arabic numerals upper right corner rectos (used here), traces of earlier ink foliation in arabic numbers same location before loss of the original f. 1, incomplete, lacking one leaf at the beginning and probably three at the end (present collation i<sup>7</sup> [of 8, lacking 1] ii-vii<sup>8</sup>), vertical catchwords lower right corner last versos, 22 lines and two full-height vertical bounding lines ruled lightly in lead (justification 150 x 90 mm.), neatly written by a single hand in semi-humanistic script, two-line initial spaces left at beginning of sections, guide letters in margins, interlinear and marginal glosses ff. 1-5 and 7, occasional corrections elsewhere in text, first leaf slightly darkened with minor staining, small losses to blank outer corners of ff. 1-7. Late nineteenth-century binding of dark blue morocco over pasteboards by James Macdonald of New York, covers blind-tooled with frame of ornamental roll and fillets, turn-ins finished with gilt-tooled rolls and fillets, gilt-stamped on back turn-in "Bound by Macdonald," title gilt-stamped on spine, marbled endpapers, gilt edges, the two outermost laid-paper endleaves (perhaps from an earlier re-binding) laid down to the reverse of the free marbled endleaves (the free marbled endleaves detached or detaching, minor splitting to hinges at head of spine, minor scuffing). Dimensions 210 x 140 mm.

This appealing manuscript from the library of a significant modern collector contains the versified Latin grammar of Alexander of Villedieu, one of the most frequently copied works of the later Middle Ages. In a culture where Latin was the language of the church, of schools and universities, and, to a great extent, of government, teaching the language was an essential part of the educational process. Although Alexander's work survives in hundreds of manuscripts and early printed books, most of them now in institutional collections, it is quite rare in the market.

## PROVENANCE

1. Copied in Northern Italy, probably Verona, in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, to judge from the paper. To a considerable extent the watermarks in this quarto-format volume are concealed by the tight binding, but the mountains are most visible on ff. 50, 51, and the cross on ff. 21, 24.
2. Contemporary interlinear or marginal glosses on ff. 1-5, 7.
3. Various booksellers' annotations penciled on the first and last paper endleaves now laid down to reverse of the free marbled endleaves.
4. No. 467 in an unidentified sale (De Ricci, 1935-1940, p. 154).
5. Sold by George D. Smith Company, New York, 16 May 1928, I, n. 197 (De Ricci, 1935-1940, p. 154).

6. Belonged to J. E. Zahn, Denver, Colorado (described in De Ricci, 1935-1940, vol. 1, p. 154, when it was in his collection; there identified incorrectly as "Grammatica, in Latin verse").
7. Marvin L. Colker, MS 14. Purchased from Stonehill in 1943 (Faye and Bond, p. 517). Inscription on front flyleaf: "Sum Marci [sic] Leonardi 19x43". Marvin L. Colker (1927-2020), professor of Classics at the University of Virginia 1953-1998, amassed a considerable collection of early manuscripts and fragments.

## TEXT

ff. 1-55v, [beginning imperfectly], incipit, "///versibus his nota fit declination prima ... Atque pronomia [sic] sarcosmos [sic] ac ironia///" [ending imperfectly, lacking the final 101 lines].

Alexander de Villa Dei, *Doctrinale puerorum* (lines 45-2544), edited by Reichling 1893, but this manuscript with many variants from the text established by him, for example, lines omitted, added, or transposed, as well as words omitted, transposed, or changed. Ff. 1-5 and 7 include intermittent contemporary interlinear or marginal glosses, probably by a reader, primarily adding examples of words spelled out according to the rule presented in that line of the poem. The lacuna at beginning and end are caused by the loss of leaves from this copy. The 44 lines missing at the beginning equate exactly to the loss of one leaf, as also attested by the early foliation. The loss of text at the end is indicated by the presence of a catchword on f. 55v, and the estimate of three leaves missing (probably from a final quire of four) results from the calculation that the final 101 lines lacking (lines 2545-2645, according to Reichling's edition) equals four pages plus part of a fifth.

The poet and teacher Alexander of Villedieu (Latin: Alexander de Villa Dei), c. 1170-c. 1240, was born in Villedieu-les-Poêles in Normandy, studied in Paris, and later taught in Dol, Brittany. According to tradition, among his pupils were nephews of the Bishop of Dol, whose difficulty in recalling the traditional explanations of Latin grammar led him to compose this poem consisting of 2645 Latin hexameters summarizing the principles of Latin grammar and versification (Dupont, 1914; Barroux, 1933). The work proved popular, and, for centuries after its composition c. 1199, enjoyed phenomenal success as a school book. From the thirteenth century onward it was frequently transmitted with the emendations and additions of glossators. In fact, of the 115 known print editions of the *Doctrinale* produced before the end of the fifteenth-century (GW 933-967, 982-1029, 1031-1048, 1122-1130, 1135-1136, 1184-1186), 80 of contained added commentary (See Online resources; also Reichling, 1893, pp. LXXXIII-CX).

As a work of pedagogy, the *Doctrinale* offered primarily a re-interpretation of the ancient grammars of Donatus and Priscian, but also took into account the changes which Latin had undergone in the Middle Ages. The work was divided into several topical sections (not specifically reflected in the mis-en-page of the present manuscript); these dealt with Latin declensions and conjugations (chapters 1-7), agreement and syntax (chapters 8-9), prosody (chapter 10), and figures of speech and faults of style (chapters 11-12). Many of Alexander's poetic lines appear to consist of what seem to be nonsense syllables or random words that were in fact selected to remind the reader of the successive grammatical elements relating to the topic under discussion. Mnemonic texts of this type were not uncommon in the later Middle

Ages. However, their large dependence on possible oral transmission and other interventions, in addition to the normal accidents of copying, resulted in texts that can vary widely from one copy to another. The function of such mnemonic texts and the complications of their transmission have been studied using as an example the *Summarium Biblie*, a similar compendium sometimes attributed to Alexander that was intended to facilitate recall of the content of the Bible (Doležalová, 2012). The present manuscript of the *Doctrinale* exhibits notable differences from the text presented in Reichling's critical edition. It deserves careful comparison with his apparatus, both of readings and of sources.

The popularity of the *Doctrinale* is demonstrated by the fact that it survives in more than 400 manuscripts that include the text in whole or in part; in addition, more than 300 printed editions were produced by the end of the sixteenth century (Bursill-Hall, 1977, pp. 6-12; see also Bursill-Hall, 1981; and Online resources). Most of the known manuscripts are found in institutional libraries in Europe. Only a few copies have North American associations. Faye and Bond recorded several copies in private American collections: the present copy, then in the collection of Marvin L. Colker; T. E. Marston, MS 64, now Yale University, Beinecke Library, Marston MS 64; Phyllis Goodhart Gordan, MS 151 [perhaps at Bryn Mawr College]; and B. L. Ullman, MS 40 (fragments only) (Faye and Bond, 1962, pp. 71, 404, 424, 517). There is a copy at the University of Pennsylvania Library (Schoenberg database), an incomplete copy at the University of Illinois, MS 57 (Faye and Bond, 1962, p. 168), and two leaves at Harvard University, Houghton Library, as flyleaves in MS Lat 120 (Light, 1995, p. 136). The work is rare in the market. The Schoenberg database lists only three auction sales since 1950, including the sale of the present manuscript.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

ARLIMA : Archives de littérature du moyen âge  
[https://www.arlima.net/ad/alexandre\\_de\\_villedieu.html](https://www.arlima.net/ad/alexandre_de_villedieu.html)

Briquet Online  
<https://www.briquet-online.at>

GW: Gesamtkatalog der Wiegendrucke  
<https://www.gesamtkatalogderwiegendrucke.de/>

ISTC: Incunabula Short Title Catalogue  
<https://data.cerl.org/istc/>

Mirabile: Archivio digitale della cultura medievale = Digital Archives for Medieval Culture  
<https://mirabileweb.it/mediolatino>

Schoenberg Database of Manuscripts  
<https://sdbm.library.upenn.edu/>

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