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[ROBERT MESSIER], *La Vie de Dame Ysabel de France, soeur de Saint Louis et fille de Blanche de Castille*

In French, illuminated manuscript on parchment
[France, most likely Longchamp, c. 1518]

37 folios, on well-prepared parchment, complete (i-iv⁸, v⁶), written in a fine gothic bâtarde script on 23 long lines, ruled in brown ink, with wide margins (justification: 155 x 110), rubrics in red, some quire signatures, opening initial illuminated in goldleaf on a red ground, one-line initials and line endings throughout in alternating red and blue. Nineteenth-century binding in blue morocco (Trautz-Benzomet) decorated with fleurons and fleurs-de-lis, pastedowns of blue morocco decorated with fleur-de-lis, single gold fillet on board edges, edges gilt. Dimensions, 214 x 154 mm.

Long-lost and unique manuscript of a life of Isabelle, sister of Saint Louis, produced at the Abbey of Longchamp to promote her canonization. Unknown and unedited, the present manuscript is a fortuitous discovery. It clarifies large gaps in the historical facts about and the hagiographic traditions surrounding one of the most important Capetian princesses and the celebrated founder of the Abbey of Longchamp. No other medieval manuscripts of any of the lives of Isabelle survive.

PROVENANCE

1. The present manuscript was certainly produced at the Abbey of Longchamp, where it most likely remained until the abbey's dissolution in 1792. It must have been copied from an exemplar, but the latter is no longer extant. It was probably produced between 1517 and 1521, certainly before 1530, and no other copies of this work are known to survive.
2. Paris, Comte de Lignerolles, *Catalogue des livres rares et précieux manuscrits et imprimés composant la bibliothèque de feu M. le comte de Lignerolles, Première partie*, Paris, 1894, no. 32, pp. 20-21.

3. Paris, Baron Alphonse de Ruble (1834-1898), *Catalogue des livres rares et précieux composant le cabinet de feu M. le baron de Ruble*, Paris, 1899, no. 579, pp. 161-62.

TEXT

ff. 1-1v, opening lines : dedication and content of chapters; incipit : "A la louenge de Nostre Seigneur Dieu et de la tresacree mere de Jhesu Crist et a l'honneur de madame Nostre Sainte mere Ysabel de France...";

f. 1v, incipit: "Sensuit la sainte vie de treshaulte noble et excellente dame et de bonne memoire madame Ysabel de France seur du bon roy de France monseigneur saint Loys et fille du roy de France nomme Loys et de la royne son espouse nommee Blance fille du roy d'Espagne."

ff. 2-35, a previously unknown vernacular life of the blessed Isabelle of France (1225-1270); premier chapitre: incipit, "Ceste noble dame madame Ysabel de France..." ; explicit, "...pour occuper tout son temps et ses oeuvres a Nostre Seigneur" ; second chapitre: incipit, "Elle estoit trespiteuse et large aumosniere..." ; explicit, "...et ces enfermeries de gens de religion" ; tiers chapitre: incipit, "Et pour soy tousjours rendre en la presence..." ; explicit, "...venir a la creature par silence" ; quart chapitre: "Ceste benoite dame avoit si grant amour..." ; explicit, "...Et souvent en vouloit parler..." ; cinquiesme chapitre: incipit, "Et quant la royne sa mere..." ; explicit, "... a oeuvres salutaires et vie religieuse" ; sixiesme chapitre: incipit, "Et les richesses temporelles..." ; explicit, "...que lesdictes religieuses" ; septiesme chapitre: incipit, "Après ces choses..." ; explicit "...a ce faire pour l'honneur de Dieu" ; VIIIe chapitre: incipit, "Elle estoit de si grande vertu..." ; explicit, "... elle ne le pouvoit endurer" ; IXe chapitre: incipit, "Depuis ycelluy ravissement..." ; explicit, "...et principalement lez freres mineurs" ; Xe chapitre: incipit, "Nostre Seigneur Dieu juste..." ; explicit, "...et faisoit cela pour eviter la gloire presente" ; ff. 14-35, Miracles of saint Isabelle;

ff. 35-37, a later addition of two miracles; incipit, "A la louenge et gloire [sic] de Nostre Seigneur Dieu..." ; explicit : "par les merites de Nostre Sainte Mere a nostre monastere, louenge en soit donnee a Dieu. Amen";

ff. 37-37v, a paraphrase of a Bull from Pope Eugenius IV(1431-1447) regulating feasts for the second and third orders of St. Francis.

Saint Isabelle of France (b. 1225; d. 1270) was the younger sister of Saint Louis (1215-70) and daughter of Louis VIII and Blanche of Castille. Devoutly pious, she vowed to retain her virginity and refused betrothal to various European princes. Her wish to found a convent of the Order of Saint Clare was realized through the aid of her brother, Saint Louis, and the Monastery of the Humility of the Blessed Virgin, known as the Abbey of Longchamp, was built c. 1259 in the forest of Rouvray not far from Paris in the

present-day Bois de Boulogne. Originally, it followed its own rules based on the Rule of St. Clare. Although Isabelle herself never entered the cloister, she observed its rules from her own home nearby. Dissatisfied with the first rule, she submitted a revised rule to Urban IV, who approved the new constitution in 1263. She was buried in the abbey church, and after nine days when her body was exhumed it showed no signs of decay. Many miracles were wrought at her grave, and finally in 1521, Leo X allowed nuns of the Abbey of Longchamp to celebrate her feast with a special office.

Reconstruction of the life of Isabelle is based on a series of lives, the textual tradition of which follows. The earliest life, *Vie de Madame Isabel*, was written shortly after her death in 1283 by her contemporary Agnes d'Harcourt, the third Prioress of Longchamp (1263-70). This life survives only in a version edited by Du Cange in 1668 based on an exemplar that is unknown and presumably lost. No medieval manuscripts of it are extant. In 1619, Rouillard published the first printed biography of Isabelle in 1619. His biography expands Agnes's *Vie* and includes many details not found in it. In 1644, Caussin published a Life of Isabelle that acknowledges two previous biographies as his sources: Agnes of Harcourt and Rouillard.

Indeed, the only medieval manuscript containing details of Isabelle's life is an Epitaph located today in Paris (BnF, MS fr. 6214). The recent dissertation by Sean Field edits the Epitaph, Agnes's Letter, and a seventeenth-century French manuscript of Agnes's *Vie* (after MS BnF, fr. 13747).

The present text was an important source for the seventeenth-century *Vie* by Rouillard that expanded on Agnes of Harcourt's lost thirteenth-century *Vie*. It includes embellishments from the fifteenth-century Epitaph, emphasizes many features of Isabelle's religiosity and humility, and retells most of the miracles from Agnes's *Vie*, adding approximately ten more recent ones and concluding with the story of the healing of a novice at Longchamp named Jehanne Carphaude in 1516. This new Life was written between 1517 (after the miracle of Jehanne Carphaude) and 1521 (before the beatification), probably c. 1518.

In the present manuscript, chapters 1-6 draw primarily on the vernacular *Vie d'Isabel* written c. 1283 by Agnes of Harcourt, third abbess of Longchamp, with notable changes, omissions and alterations of emphasis. Other sources are an unpublished letter by Agnes on Louis IX's involvement with Longchamp and the fifteenth-century Epitaph of Isabelle. Chapters 7-9 depart from the existing sources to add new elements to Isabelle's legend, presumably filling in perceived holes in Agnes of Harcourt's narrative by fabricating descriptions of Isabelle's humble and wretched life at Longchamp and lending a mystical element to her piety. Chapters 10-11 return to Agnes's *Vie* and Letter to recount Isabelle's death and first miracles. According to the prologue, Chapter 12 deals with her posthumous miracles. In fact, the beginning of Chapter twelve is not noted in this manuscript. But assuming that it begins where posthumous miracles commence, this final chapter records most of the miracles contained in the thirteenth-century sources and then recounts later ones concluding in 1516/17.

The author of the text in the present manuscript is certainly a Franciscan close to the Abbey of Longchamp. Robert Messier, the Franciscan confessor at Longchamp at this period and the Order's Minister General of France, is known to have written a life of Isabelle at just this time, previously thought to have been lost. The probability is therefore extremely high that the life under consideration here is in fact the work of Messier.

The present manuscript probably remained at Longchamp until the abbey's dissolution in 1792. The later miracles on ff. 35-37 occurred c. 1530 and were added at Longchamp by a second hand after 1550 and probably before 1569. The paraphrase of a Papal Bull f. 37 appears to be in an eighteenth-century hand, or one that is certainly not earlier than the seventeenth-century. Discounting the remote possibility that the manuscript made its way to another house of the Order of St. Clare which would have copied this bull, the evidence of Hand Three indicates that the present manuscript did not leave Longchamp until the end of the eighteenth century.

Messier's *Vie* was enormously influential in adding to and changing the way later authors presented Isabelle of France's legend although it has little or no importance for establishing the actual facts of her life. When the first published biography of Isabelle of France appeared in 1619, it drew heavily on this text and others derived from it to present a picture of Isabelle markedly different from what can be found in the thirteenth-century sources. This gap has always puzzled scholars and produced wildly inaccurate summaries of Isabelle's life. The recovery of the life found in the present manuscript allows us to pinpoint the moment of transformation: c. 1519 the nuns of Longchamp and their Franciscan advisers began a new campaign to get their patron's sanctity recognized in Rome. This life was thus a key part of that process, as the nuns and their advisors sought to shape Isabelle's legend in ways that would make her a better candidate for canonization.

LITERATURE

the present manuscript is discussed, but unedited, by Sean Field, "The Princess, the Abbess, and the Friars: Isabelle of France (1225-1270) and the Course of Thirteenth-Century French History," Ph.D. thesis, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, 2002, pp. 37-38.

for further literature

Caussin, Nicolas. *La Vie de Sainte Isabel soeur du Roy Saint Loy et Fondatrice du Monastere Royal de Long-champ, Qui a donne un parfait exemple de la vie neutre des personnes non Mariees ny Religieuses*, Paris (Claude Sonnius, Denis Bechet, Jean du Bray), 1644.

Du Cange. *Histoire de S. Lovys IX du nom Roy de France, ecrite par Jean Sire de Ioinville Senechal de Champagne: Enrichie de nouvelles Observations & Dissertations Historiques. Avec les Etablissements de S. Lovys, le Conseil de Pierre de Fontaines, & plusieurs autres Pieces concernant ce regne, tirees des Manuscrits.*

Par Charles du Fresne, sieur du Cange, Conseiller de Roy, Tresorier de France, & General des Finances en la Generalite de Picardie, Paris (Sebastien Mabre-Cramois), 1668.

Duchesche, *Histoire de l'abbaye royale de Longchamp, 1255-1789, Paris, 2nd ed., 1904.*

Roulliard, Sebastien. *La Sainte Mere, ou vie, de M. Sainte Isabel de France, soeur unique du Roy S. Louys, Fondatrice de L'Abbaye de Long-champ, Paris (Adrian Taupinart), 1619.*