

LES ENLUMINURES, LTD

2970 North Lake Shore Drive 11B
Chicago, Illinois 60657

tel. 1-773-929-5986

fax. 1-773-528-3976

chicago@lesenluminures.com

LES ENLUMINURES

Le Louvre des Antiquaires
2 place du Palais-Royal
75001 Paris

tél : 33 1 42 60 15 58

fax : 33 1 40 15 00 25

info@lesenluminures.com

NICOLAS DE BIARD, *Distinctiones*

In Latin, decorated manuscript on parchment

[northern France (probably Paris), c. 1250-75]

240 ff., complete (collation i-xx¹²), old pencil foliation begins on f. 241 to 480 in upper right margin, double column, 36 lines, ruled in plummet, justification 132 x 92 mm., written in black ink in a small Gothic bookhand, headings in bright red, capitals touched in red, paragraph-marks and running titles through out in alternately red and blue, 2-line initials throughout in red or blue with long penwork decoration in both colors, 3-line divided initial on first page with full-length penwork decoration in both colors, 3-line divided initial on first page with full-length penwork, TWENTY-ONE VERY LARGE ORNAMENTAL PAINTED INITIALS in delicate leafy designs in color and white tracery on panel grounds with long branching marginal extensions including biting heads of dragons, lion masks, wings, snakes, birds, etc., some medieval notes, many erased, piece replaced in outer corner of last leaf with slight loss of piece replaced in outer corner of last leaf with slight loss of text, a few small stains, occasional extremities of decoration fractionally cropped, generally a luxurious copy in fine condition. Binding of modern quarter blind-stamped calf over wooden boards. Dimensions 182 x 129 mm.

Unusually early and richly illuminated copy of Nicolas of Biard's distinctions, of which among the 45 extant manuscripts there are relatively few examples from the thirteenth century (about 13) and none recorded in North American collections. The text went hand-in-hand with other thirteenth-century tools developed for biblical study and use, such as concordances, produced in the milieu of the University of Paris and employed by students, professors, and especially the mendicant orders.

PROVENANCE

1. Written and illuminated in Paris, c. 1250-75, based on comparisons with other manuscripts produced in professional workshops there (see below). Although Nicolas of Biard's *Distinctiones* was one of the manuscripts available for copy in *pecia* according to university records, there is no evidence that the present manuscript is a *pecia* manuscript. It is said by its previous owner to have belonged to the seminary library at Seez, Normandy, but no evidence of this is any longer apparent.

2. Dr. Andre Rooryck, Belgium, MS 27.

TEXT

ff. 1-9, rubric, *Capitula distinctionum fratris nicolai de Byard, Absconditum malum ...*,

f. 9v, blank (with contemporary inscription cut short : "[...] sola vexatio intellectum dabit [...]");

ff. 10-240, *Distinctiones*, incipit, "Incipiunt distinctiones fratris nicholai de byard, Absconditur malum a dyabolo sub declaratitione..." The text itself is divided into the 21 letters of the Latin alphabet, from "A" to "Z," ending on the last page, "... zelatus est dominus terram suam &c., Expliciunt distinctiones fratris nicolai de byard."

The present work is a late example of the genre known as biblical distinctions. Such compilations proliferate primarily in the thirteenth century, the earliest collection being the *Summa Abel* of Peter the Chanter (d. 1197). Other important examples include those by Alan of Lille (before 1195), Peter of Capua (after 1219), the Franciscan Maurice of Provins (c. 1248), and Nicolas Gorran (perhaps before 1280). Used as instruments in the teaching of theology, compilations of distinctions were "designed and employed equally, if not predominantly, for the writing of sermons" (Rouse, 1974, pp. 29-31, esp. p. 30). Distinctions "distinguish" the four levels of meaning (literal, allegorical, anagogic, and tropologic), and for each meaning a scriptural illustration is furnished.

The collections become increasingly lengthy in time, and there was a growing emphasis on virtues and vices, actions good and bad, and other moral topics. By the end of the century, it could be said that such collections were "topics in search of scriptural discussion," that is, part distinctions and part biblical subject concordance. Although twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts continue to be copied in the fourteenth century, there are no new versions of distinctions written after the end of the thirteenth century, Nicolas of Biard's being one of the last composed. Indeed, Rouse notes that in line with the later evolution of the genre Nicolas of Biard's *Distinctiones* could be better titled "Compilatio materie predicabilis."

Little is actually known of Nicolas of Biard. The primary evidence, summarized by Bataillon, comes from two sources, the records for the Parisian university exemplars giving numbers and prices of pieces of his works and the manuscripts themselves. University records date from the years 1274 and 1276, citing his sermons, and 1304, mentioning the sermons, the *Distinctiones*, and a second work of distinctions, called *De abstinentia*. He was certainly a mendicant, but it is not known for sure whether he was a Dominican or a Franciscan. Nor are the dates of his writings known, although the university records provide a *terminus ante quem*. It is not certain that the second work of distinctions *De abstinentia*

is actually by him, since only one of the extant manuscripts bears an attribution to him. His authorship of the *Distinctiones* is, however, secure, and two manuscripts antedate 1285 and 1288 (Paris, BnF, MSS lat. 12424 and 16489 respectively), giving us an earlier *terminus*. In all, Bataillon records about 45 manuscripts of the *Distinctiones*, of which only thirteen date in the thirteenth century. None are in North American collections. Curiously, only one of the 45 manuscripts preserves evidence that it was copied using the pecia method (Siena, Biblioteca Comunale G VII 23).

The present manuscript is of special interest for several reasons. Although undated, it must preserve a relatively early and richly illuminated copy of the text. The early date is proposed here because the decoration exemplifies Parisian work of c. 1250 to 1275 (see below). Beginning on folio 240 (later foliation), the present manuscript must originally have been accompanied by another text, most likely a biblical concordance or, possibly, a collection of his sermons, giving further credence to Rouse's characterization of the work as less a collection of distinctions than a "compilatio materie predicabilis," which would have required a concordance for ready use. Peculiarly, like the two other early exemplars cited above (and also like Paris, BnF, MSS lat. 16488, 16487, nouv. acq. lat. 419; and Avignon, BM, MS 308), the present copy does not include any of the "X" distinctions, although their titles are given in the contents at the beginning of the manuscripts, and the manuscript is complete.

ILLUSTRATION

In particular, the many finely executed decorated initials recall the style of the so-called Aurifaber Workshop, named after the Aurifaber Bible (Paris, Bibl. Ste.-Geneviève, MS 1181), painted by a group of artists who did a large number of manuscripts, mostly university Bibles, from c. 1250 through the 1290s. Our initials compare with those in works typifying the middle period of activity of the Aurifaber atelier, such as those in Branner, pls. 320-22, and 327-29 (manuscripts in Basel, Museum, KK, inv. A. 11; London, British Library, Harley MS 1297; and Nantes, BM, MS VIII, vol. II). Even taking into account the archaism of the style of the Aurifaber Workshop in the 1290s, it is still unlikely that the present manuscript dates as late as 1290, when the decorative forms had become much more geometric and angular, already anticipating developments in Paris of the later Gothic illumination of Master Honoré and Jean Pucelle.

LITERATURE

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