

## LACTANTIUS, *De opificio dei* and *De ira dei*

In Latin and Greek, decorated manuscript on paper

Italy (Ferrara or Rome?), c. 1440-1450

*i* (paper) + 35 + *i* (paper) folios on paper, watermark, triple mount with a one-line rod ending in a cross, the closest matches are to Piccard 150432, Ferrara 1447, and Piccard 150625, Ferrara 1449; cf. also Piccard 150439, Ferrara 1428; very similar marks include Piccard 150516, Rome 1430; Piccard 150863, Bologna 1438; Piccard 150907, Ferrara 1419; Piccard 150908, Bologna 1441; Piccard 150910, Bologna 1417-20; Piccard 150911, Bologna 1441; Piccard 150537, Genoa 1386; Piccard 1505624, Ferrara 1449; and Piccard 150565, Ferrara 1449, modern foliation in pencil top outer corner recto (collation, i-iii<sup>10</sup> iv<sup>4</sup> [+5, f. 35, later replacement leaf], quires 1-3 reinforced at the beginning, middle and end with very narrow strips from earlier manuscripts, probably dating from the thirteenth century, on parchment, vertical catchwords written top to bottom in the lower margin along the bounding line, partially trimmed, no signatures, ruled in blind with double vertical bounding lines, (justification, 212-210 x 112-110 mm.), written by two scribes, the first copied ff. 1-33, line 31, in a beautiful cursive humanistic script in thirty-eight long lines, the second scribe finished f. 33, and copied ff. 33v-34v in a bold upright idiosyncratic cursive humanistic script; the Greek passages on these folios are in a different color of ink but may be written by this scribe, f. 35 is a replacement leaf copied in a later hand, layout varies, scribe one, guide letters for the initials, one-line blue initials within the line of text or in the outer-margin if the beginning of a section coincides with the beginning of a new line, ff. 1 and 18, five to four-line blue initials, edged in a greenish-gold, scribe two, ff. 33v-35, red rubrics, blank spaces for two-line initials, in very fine condition, with ample margins, occasional staining to the outer edges, a few small worm holes in the later leaves, outer edges of ff. 31-32 have modern repairs, f. 35 is a later replacement leaf. Bound in a modern vellum binding; in sound condition, although the covers bowed, front and back covers are somewhat dirty, with a large orange stain on the back cover. Dimensions 285 x 208 mm.

This manuscript includes two short works by Lactantius, a fourth-century Christian apologist and theologian. One of the lesser known Latin Fathers, Lactantius was neglected during the Middle Ages, but was extremely important during the Italian Renaissance. This elegant, attractive copy with wide margins is written on paper with simple initials and distinguished by the exceptionally attractive script of the main scribe, and the passages in Greek by the second scribe. These texts survive in numerous manuscripts, mostly in libraries, but have rarely been available for sale since the mid-twentieth century.

## PROVENANCE

1. The manuscript was certainly copied in Italy, and the evidence of the script suggests a date c. 1440-50. Likely locations for its origin are Ferrara or Rome. It includes a watermark that was widely used in Italy from c. 1419-1449 (see above), and the closest matches are from Ferrara, 1447 and 1449, which would be in line with the evidence of the script. Historical evidence strengthens the possibility that the manuscript was copied in Ferrara, since Ferrara was both an important center of humanistic studies by the 1440s, and also a center for the study of Greek. The Greek passages on ff. 33-34 are copied by scribe who was obviously comfortable copying Greek. Theodore Gaza (c. 1400-1475), a distinguished scholar and translator, was a native Greek speaker from Macedonia. Gaza was professor of Greek at the University of Ferrara from 1441-50,

when he left for Rome. For the same reasons, Rome seems a possible place of origin for the manuscript. Variants of the watermark found in this manuscript are also found in Rome, and Rome in the middle of the fifteenth century was probably the most active center in Italy for the humanistic study of patristic authors, as well as of Greek, sponsored by Pope Nicholas V (1447-55) and the Byzantine Hellenists in the circle of Bessarion (1403-72).

The two texts in this manuscript are complete. Most copies of these two texts, however, are found in manuscripts that also include the much longer work by Lactantius, the *Divinae institutiones* ("Divine Institutes"), and it is at least possible that these two texts were once part of a longer manuscript.

2. A marginal note on f. 12 in a tiny elegant humanistic script cites Albertus Magnus, *In libro de animalibus*; added titles in the margins, ff. 1 and 18; and stains from fore-edge tabs, ff. 15-20.

3. Inside back cover, "108," in pencil.

## TEXT

ff. 1-17v, [title added in margin in an informal contemporary script: *Lactantius de opificio hominis*] incipit, "Quam minime sim quietus etiam in summis necessitatibus ex hoc libello poteris ... aliquos homines ab erroribus liberatos ad iter caeleste direxerit" *τελος*; ff. 16v-17v, list of chapters, incipit, "Quae causa praesentis operis et quod corpus est uas animae non a prometheo sed a deo confictum .... Operis conclusio quam perniciosi sint ... et quare uita sapientibus optanda sit."

Edited by Brandt and Larbmann, *Opera omnia*, part II, fasc. 1, CSEL 27, pp. 1-64, by Béatrice Bakhouché and Sabine Luciani, Turnhout, Brepols, 2009, and by Michel Perrins, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 1974.

Lactantius, *De opificio dei* ("The Works of God" or "On God's Workmanship"), is the earliest of Lactantius's works as a Christian, perhaps written in 303 or 304; it was dedicated to his pupil, Demetrianus. It presents Lactantius's views of God's providence as seen in his work of creation, and includes an extensive description of the human body – of particular interest for the author's medical knowledge -- and its relation to the immortal soul. In it Lactantius argues that the care and providence of God is evident in the glory of His creation, an argument designed to refute the Epicurean position.

Although there are no rubrics in this manuscript, a contemporary hand added a title in the margin, *De opificio hominis*. An investigation of this alternate title might be of interest. It is cited in only three manuscripts in the Schoenberg Database, Schoenberg 11859 (also listed as 13934, and 34320), last sold by Thomas, 1956, Schoenberg 112895, a copy now in Friuli, Bib. comunale, MS 23, and Schoenberg 139254, a fourteenth-century copy, Tours, BM, MS 258, but this may well reflect the fact that many catalogue descriptions have normalized the title and listed the work under the commonly accepted title, *De opificio dei*.

ff. 18-35, [title added in the margin in an informal contemporary hand, *Lactantius de ira dei*], incipit, "Animadverti saepe donate plurimos id existimare ... et nunquam uereamur iratum" *Finis*; [f. 35, later replacement leaf; f. 35v, blank].

Edited by Brandt and Larbmann, *Opera omnia*, part II, fasc. 1, CSEL 27, pp. 65-132, the last page of the text, f. 35, is a later replacement of the original leaf; f. 134v ends "... conscientiam suam polluerunt," ed. p. 131, line 21, and by Christiane Ingremeau, Sources Chrétiennes 289, Paris, 1982.

*De ira dei*, "The Anger of God," discusses the philosophical problem of how to interpret the emotions attributed to God in the Old Testament, especially, as the title indicates, his anger. Greek philosophical thought found the idea of an emotional God unacceptable. Lactantius interprets God's anger here in a Roman fashion as penal justice, "iustitia," and builds a picture of God as a Roman lord, or "dominus."

Both *De opificio dei* and the *De ira dei* survive in more than one hundred and fifty manuscripts, usually with the *Divinae Institutiones* of Lactantius, but occasionally alone or with works by other authors. Only a few of these manuscripts are early, and the vast majority date from the fourteenth and especially the fifteenth century. The editors of the *De opificio dei* established its text based on the evidence of three early manuscripts dating before the ninth century and an early fragment. *De ira dei* shows a similar pattern of transmission, and its text is established by two of the same early manuscripts that also include *De opificio dei*. The *Opera omnia* of Lactantius was one of the first works printed in Italy by Sweynheim and Pannartz in 1465, and Lactantius was one of the most frequently published patristic author, with fifteen more editions in the fifteenth century, and one hundred and twelve by 1800.

Many modern readers may know nothing about Lactantius, and he was generally neglected during the Middle Ages as well. During the Renaissance, in contrast, Lactantius was tremendously popular, and this popularity continued until the Enlightenment. The surviving manuscripts of these two works, as well as the manuscripts of Lactantius's longest treatise, *Divinae institutiones*, are proof of this popularity. From the time of Petrarch onwards, he was embraced as the ideal Christian orator; Jerome and Gianfrancesco Pico dell Mirandola called him the "Christian Cicero." In his *De studiis et literis* of 1424, Leonardo Bruni recommended Lactantius's 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 ...." Bruni concludes his praise by recommending Lactantius's *Against False Religion* and the two works included in this manuscript: "Please do read them if you love literature, and you will enjoy a pleasure like ambrosia and honey" (on Lactantius's popularity in the Renaissance see especially Stinger, 2000; Niles, 2000; and Panizza, 1978, cited below).

Lucius Caелиus Firmianus Lactantius (c. 250- c. 325) was born into a pagan family in Latin-speaking North Africa. He was well-educated and taught rhetoric, eventually becoming a teacher of rhetoric at Nicomedia, a position he lost when he converted to Christianity. His earliest works were written during the persecution of Christianity under Diocletian. They are strongly apologetic in tone and strive to present Christianity in a form that would be attractive to philosophical pagans. When Christianity became the official religion of the Empire under Constantine, Lactantius served as tutor to Constantine's son, Crispus.

Although these texts survive in numerous manuscripts, most are in institutional collections, and they appear only rarely on the market; since 1956, the Schoenberg Database has listed only three manuscripts which include these texts, and seven manuscripts described as including only the *Divinae institutiones*.

## LITERATURE

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