

GERARD ZERBOLT OF ZUTPHEN, *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* (On the Spiritual Ascents)

In Latin, decorated manuscript on paper

Southern Germany or Switzerland (Basel?), c. 1470-1486

i +108 folios on paper, watermark, angular letter 'P', two lines, above cloverleaf, Piccard Online 115689 and 115690, both Basel 1486, similar to Piccard Online 115694, (no location) 1491, 115701, (no location) 1480, 115702, Braunschweig 1477, and 115703, Frankfurt-am-Main 1475, modern foliation top outer corner verso, 1-108, numbering the front flyleaf as f. 1, and with one unnumbered leaf, the back pastedown, complete (collation, *i*¹²[beginning with f. 2]ii-viii¹² ix¹² [12, unnumbered back pastedown, following f. 108]), no catchwords, quires signed with a letter designating the quire and an arabic numeral, the leaf (some trimmed), frame ruled in ink with all rules full-length, (justification, 130-122 x 90-80 mm.), written below the top line in a quick cursive gothic bookhand in twenty-five to twenty-six long lines, guide letters for initials within initial, majuscules within the text stroked with red, red rubrics, paragraph marks and marginal headings, two- to three-line red initials, in excellent condition, with some worming, front flyleaf partly detached and frayed at edges. ORIGINAL BINDING of pigskin over heavy wooden boards, cut flush with the book block, spine with three raised bands, head and tail bands, the head band still wound decoratively in green thread, fastens back to front, decorative brass catch, upper board, and clasp, still extant, original vellum label on front cover, "Tractatus quidam de ascensionibus in deum," paper label, top of spine (script worn and illegible), and bottom of spine, "24," in ink, in excellent condition, some wear to edges, slight splitting, at the bottom and top of spine, worm holes. Dimensions 215 x 145 mm.

Perhaps the most important expression of the spirituality of the first generation of the *Devotio Moderna*, this text survives in numerous manuscripts, although only two are listed for sale in the last two centuries in the Schoenberg Database. Still in its original binding, this manuscript was given by Hilprand Brandenburg to the Carthusian monastery at Buxheim, and includes his hand-colored woodcut bookplate (one of the earliest examples of a bookplate). Its distinguished modern provenance adds to its interest.

PROVENANCE

1. The evidence of the script and decoration suggests an origin in Southern Germany or Switzerland in the second half of the fifteenth century, and based on the watermark evidence, it was likely copied in Switzerland, probably in Basel, c. 1480-90. It was owned by, and likely copied for, Hilprand of Brandenburg of Biberach (1442-1514), who acquired many of his manuscripts and printed books in Basel, c. 1469-1472 (Needham, 1996, pp. 100-103), but who evidently continued to acquire books from Basel later in life (e.g., Needham, 1996, p. 117, no. 107, printed in Basel in 1495, p. 118, no. 116, printed in Basel in 1498, and p. 119, no. 126, printed in Basel 1504).

Belonged to Hilprand Brandenburg of Biberach (1442-1514); includes his bookplate, inside front cover. This handsome woodcut of an Angel, holding the Brandenburg shield (azure charged with an ox argent, ringed sable), hand colored in yellow, green, red and blue, is often said to be the earliest known bookplate; Needham, 1996, records one hundred and twenty-six books from Hilprand's library, including thirty-five manuscripts;

this manuscript listed p. 110, no. 35 (see also Needham, 1999, Armstrong, 2010, de Marez Oyens, 1979, Scholderer, 1949).

Hilprand was born in Biberach to a patrician family; he studied at both the University of Pavia (in 1467, and again in 1469), and at the University at Basel from 1468 to 1469, where he later served as rector in 1471. He was ordained in 1473, and held various ecclesiastical appointments in Southern Germany and Strasbourg, until 1505-1506, when he became a priest-donate at the Carthusian monastery at Buxheim. He is remembered today primarily for his generous gifts of books to the library at Buxheim. His first recorded donation to Buxheim was in 1479; by the end of his life he donated as many as 450 manuscripts and printed books to Buxheim, including this one.

Many of the books donated by Hilprand to Buxheim, like this manuscript, include his bookplate and an inscription recording the donation by the Buxheim librarian. Opinions vary on the date of the bookplate; traditionally dated c.1480, Scholderer and others have suggested that it was probably added to the books donated by Hilprand at Buxheim, and cannot date before 1501 (Scholderer, 1949, pp. 198-199). In any event, it is a very early example of a bookplate – and a very attractive one. There has of yet been no complete census of the bookplates, many of which were removed from their volumes.

This is a very clean copy of the text, with few marginal additions apart from a occasional nota marks and a red pointing hand on f. 7; it is carefully corrected, and the biblical citations are noted in the margins in red through f. 61v. Early in the text (through chapter seven), the scribe failed to leave room for the author's lengthy chapter headings, which were added in red by the scribe or a contemporary in the margins, or in a cramped script between the chapters.

2. Given by Hilprand to the Carthusian monastery of Buxheim; early sixteenth-century note recording its contents and the donation of f. 1, "T. Tractatus beatus vir de ascensionibus spiritualis etc.; Liber cartusienium in Buchshaim prope Memmingen proueniens a confratre nostro domino hilprando Brandenburg de Bibraco donato sacerdote continens subscripta. Oretur pro eo et pro quibus desideravit." Seventeenth-century notes from Buxheim, f. 2, top margin in ink, "Buxheim," with cross inscribed within a circle below; their manuscript, no. 24 (in ink, inside front cover), and in ink, lower spine.

The Charterhouse of *Aula beatae mariae* of Buxheim, near the imperial town of Memmingen in Swabia, fifty miles south-west of Augsburg, was founded in 1402, and became a Carthusian foundation in 1406. In the fifteenth century it was one of the largest and wealthiest Carthusian houses in Germany, with a substantial library of manuscripts and printed books that continued to grow (accounts of the library its catalogues, include Ruf, 1932, listing this manuscript as Maggs, Cat. 54, and Krämer, 1989-1990, p. 140, listing this manuscript from the 1883 auction catalogue of the collection; see also Online Resources). In 1803 all the monastic houses in Bavaria were dissolved, and Buxheim's library and archives were given to the Counts of Ostein.; in 1810, the Counts of Waldbott-Bassenheim inherited Buxheim and its books

3. In 1882, due to bad financial management, Count Hugo of Waldbott-Bassenheim was forced to sell the library; his sale, Carl Förster, Munich, 20 September, and following, 1883 (which included 451 manuscripts among the 16,680 volumes), this manuscript was no. 2524 in that sale.
4. Sold by J. Halle, Cat. 50 (1914), no. 33 (as listed in Schoenberg Database, no. 9950; no independent verification).
5. Maggs, Cat. 542 (1930), no. 170; and 1940, Cat. 687 (1940), no. 222, to Lyell.
6. Belonged to J. P. R. Lyell (1871-1948), solicitor, book collector and bibliographer; he began collecting medieval manuscripts in the 1930s, and assembled a distinguished collection of 250 manuscripts, 100 of which he bequeathed to the Bodleian library, Oxford; his heraldic bookplate, inside front cover (Ex libris Jacobi P. R. Lyell, with motto). Most of the books not given to the Bodleian were sold by his estate to Quaritch (mentioned de la Mare, 1971, p. xxviii).
7. Sold by Lyell's executors in 1951 to Quaritch, cat. 699 (1952), no. 66, and cat. 716 (1953), no. 307; sold in 1957 to Heilbrun.
8. P. J. van Alfen, Doorn (near Utrecht); his sale Sotheby's London, 10 July 1972, lot 60 to Alan G. Thomas (bookplate, A. G. T., inside front cover).
9. Belonged to Alan G. Thomas (1911-1992), book dealer; his sale, London, Sotheby's, 21 June 1993, lot 37, to Quaritch.
10. Belonged to Helmut Friedlaender (1913-2008), lawyer, financial consultant and book collector; inside front cover, small bookplate, with initials in red, "HNF"; his sale, Christie's, New York, 23 April, 2001 lot 7.
11. Belonged to Joost R. Ritman (b. 1941), Amsterdam, the Dutch businessman and distinguished collector of art and books; Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica MS 208; bookplate, inside front cover, briefly described in *Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections* (see Online Resources)

TEXT

ff. 2-99, [f. 1, blank, with added notes] *Deuotus et perutilis Tractatus de ascensionibus spiritualibus dominum Gerardi de Zutphanie capitulum primum de quinque necessariis in vita religiosa proficere disponentibus [in margin:] Capitulum primum, incipit, "Beatus vir cuius est auxilium abs te ascensiones in corde suo disposuit in valle lacrimarum Novi homo quod ascensionum sis cupidus ... ut enim exterioribus officiis inoffense deserviant ad secreta cordis recurrere incessabiliter curant. Trinitati laudes in omnium. Amen. [Ends top f. 99; ff. 99v-108v, blank].*

Gerard Zerbolt de Zutphen, *De spiritualibus ascensionibus* ("Spiritual Ascensions"), edition with French translation, Legrand, 2006; survives in at least 125 manuscripts (Van Rooij, 1936, pp. 287-322, listed sixty-six manuscripts; Gerrits, 1986, pp. 27-30, listed fourteen additional manuscripts; Lagrand added fifty-five, pp., 41-45, and appendix 1, pp. 89-91, not including this

manuscript). First published in Deventer, c. 1488, it circulated in at least ten editions in the fifteenth century, and twenty-three by 1677 (Van Rooij, pp. 358-9, and Legrand, p. 54, note 58). Its popularity is further demonstrated by early translations into Middle Dutch and Middle High German, which survive in nineteen manuscripts and four editions by the end of fifteenth century. Modern English translations by Arthur, 1908, and Van Engen, 1988 (slightly abbreviated).

Gerard Zerbolt de Zutphen (1367-1398), one of the earliest followers of the Modern Devotion, may be considered, together with Geert Grote (1340-1384) himself, and Florens Radewijns (1350-1400), one of their most important and intellectually influential authors. Relatively little is known of his short life, although he emerges from Thomas a Kempis' account as an appealing figure, known chiefly for his devotion to his studies and love of books. He was born of a well-to-do family in Zutphen and attended the chapter school at Deventer. Probably c. 1383-1385, he joined the original community of the Brethren of the Common Life in Deventer – a group which first lived at Florens Radewijn's vicarage and later acquired their own house known as "Master Florens house." Gerard lived and wrote within the confines of that community, where he served as librarian and head of the scriptorium. He died of plague when he was only thirty-one in 1398.

De spiritualibus ascensionibus was recommended reading by Johannes Busch and Florens Radewijns, as well as in the *consuetudines* of the House of Brothers at Wesel, and it offered directions in how to work continually for moral and spiritual perfection. We can assume that it was found in nearly every house of the Modern Devotion, and copies were also found in many of the reformed contemplative orders of the later Middle Ages, including the Carthusians (such as this manuscript). It was known to Luther as an observant Augustinian, and influenced St. Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*.

The text is an account of the progress in virtue – the spiritual ascent – that was at the heart of the New Devotion, describing the path of turning back from sin through contrition, confession, and satisfaction, then restoring the original purity of heart – driving out impurity through fear (i.e. meditating on death, judgment and hell), balanced by thoughts of the goodness and benefits of God, and systematic meditation of the life of Christ, with refreshment provided by holy reading, meditation and prayer. The third ascent strives to reform the fallen powers or faculties of the soul – i.e. those affected by original sin – with lengthy discussion of each of the vices (gluttony, lust, avarice, anger, envy, tedium, vainglory, and pride), and the text ends with the duty to "descend" and help others. It is a relatively brief and readable approach to spirituality, and was applicable to people living many different forms of religious life. In this work, Gerard successfully summarized the teachings of the first generation of the Modern Devotion, and transmitted these ideals to the succeeding generations.

In addition to his two widely disseminated treatises on the spiritual life, the treatise included in this manuscript, and his *De Reformatione trium virium animae*, Gerard was the author of three important works defending the Brethren and their way of life, *De libris teutonicalibus* (defending the use of the vernacular devotional books), *Super modo vivendi devotorum hominum simul commorantium* (on living communal life without religious vows), and *De vestibus preciosis* (on simplicity of living and appropriate clothing).

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Bookplate of Hildebrand of Brandenburg

<http://brandeisspecialcollections.blogspot.com/search?q=brandenburg>

Charterhouse Buxheim and its library (digital reconstruction at Yale)

<http://www.yale.edu/german182b/buxheim/>

[Munich 1883 Sale Catalogue, manuscript portion \(cited in full, above\)](#)

<http://www.yale.edu/german182b/buxheim/1883/cat1883frameset.html>

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