

**PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, [Collected Works], *De Caelesti Hierarchia, De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, De Mistica Theologia, De Divinis Nominibus, X Epistole*, etc., Latin translation by AMBROGIO TRAVERSARI  
In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment  
Central Italy, (Rome?), c. 1450-60**

iv (paper) + i (parchment) 104 + i (parchment) + iv (paper) folios on parchment (very fine), modern (eighteenth- or nineteenth-century?) foliation in ink in Arabic numerals top outer corner recto, complete (collation, i-x<sup>10</sup> xi<sup>4</sup>), vertical catchwords (lacking in quires one and two), leaf and quire signatures with a letter designating the quire and a roman numeral, the leaf (mostly trimmed, some remain in quires four and five), ruled very lightly probably in lead (often indiscernible, but occasionally visible, e.g. f. 44) with the top two and bottom two horizontal rules full across, and full-length single vertical bounding lines (justification 178-175 x 118-107 mm.), written on thirty-five long lines in a humanistic bookhand by a number of scribes, with possible changes of hand at f. 17v, line two from bottom, middle of f. 21v, f. 28, f. 58v, f. 65v (scribe four again), and so forth, pale red rubrics, two-line blue initials, FIVE six-line highly polished gold leaf INITIALS WITH WHITE VINE DECORATION (f. 1, f. 21, partially trimmed; f. 52, the decoration ending in an insect, filled in green; f. 90v, vinestem ending with an insect, touched with blue; f. 93, very slightly trimmed at top), infilled with red, bright green and deep blue, edged in blue; on f. 1, FULL WHITE VINESTEM FRONTISPIECE in the same colors with white (silver?) and gold dots, including a geometric trellis in gold around which the vines entwine, two birds (uncolored) depicted in the right hand margin, lozenge in the inner margin and coat of arms in the lower margin effaced, in excellent condition, almost pristine, apart from trimming (initial, f. 21, and ff. 1 and 93, very slightly), f. 1, gold slightly worn and cracking, and a few of the two-line blue initials slightly smudged. Bound in brown morocco gilt, arms of Count Lanjuinais on the front and back covers, spine with five raised bands, lettered in gilt "DYONISII AREOPAGITAE DE CAELESTI HIERARCHIA &/ MSC 1436," gilt edges, in excellent condition apart from slight wear to hinges and bottom outer corner, back cover. Dimensions 250 x 172 mm.

This Latin translation of the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus by the Camaldolese monk, Greek scholar, and humanist, Ambrogio Traversari (a friend of Niccolò Niccoli in Florence) is a beautiful example of a humanist manuscript with elegant initials and a full white vinestem frontispiece. Although slightly trimmed, it retains its wide margins, and is in extremely good condition. Probably made for a wealthy client, it has been owned by prestigious book collectors and would be an elegant addition to any collection today.

## PROVENANCE

1. Made in Italy, most likely in Rome, c. 1450-60, based on the script and style of the illumination, where it was copied by several foreign scribes. As pointed out by Dr. Xavier van Binnebeke (in correspondence), one can compare this manuscript with one copied at least a decade earlier in Florence in excellent humanistic scripts by two German scribes, presumably in Florence for the Council (1439-1443), now Bodleian Library, MS Canon. Pat. Lat. 91. Since this is a copy of the translation by the Florentine monk, Ambrogio Traversari, it may have been copied in Rome from a Florentine exemplar. The return of the papacy to Rome in 1443, and the election of Pope Nicholas V (Pope from 1447-1455), meant the center of humanistic scholarship and learning, and the copying of texts by both Italian and foreign scribes, to a large extent shifted from Florence to Rome (we thank Dr.

van Binnebeke for sharing his expertise on this manuscript). Further research could well allow a closer identification of the scribe and artist.

Two lozenges in the frontispiece have been expunged; the one in the lower margin almost certainly included the coat of arms of the original owner. The manuscript includes very few corrections and notes, and overall little sign of use, suggesting that it was always a collector's item. The number of scribes, however, is noteworthy, and seems a little at odds with the quality of the illuminated initials and frontispiece (see above for some suggested changes of hand; a complete analysis is needed, and it seems early hands reappear later in the volume).

2. Count Lanjuinais Collection (binding bearing his arms in gilt; note the family arms at [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famille\\_Lanjuinais](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Famille_Lanjuinais) : *quarterly, 1 and 4 azure a lion or holding in its sinister paw a scale argent and in its dexter paw a of the last; 2 argent a cross potent coupé vert; 3 argent three hands proper fesswise, 2 and 1, all within a bordure sable. Supporters: two lions proper. Motto: "Dieu et ses loi"; God and his laws*), here combined with another coat of arms. Jean-Denis Lanjuinais (1753-1827) was a professor of canon law in Rennes, who served in Estates General in 1789, then to the Convention, and to the Anciens. He became a senator in 1800, and a count in 1808. His eldest son Paul-Eugene (1799-1872) succeeded his father in the House of Peers, and his grandson Paul-Henri, comte Lanjuinais (b. 1834), was a representative from Brittany.
3. Count Dimitri Boutourlin (1763-1829), one of the most outstanding book collectors of nineteenth-century Russia. Boutourlin (or Buturlin) was a Russian soldier, military historian, politician, and librarian of the Imperial Russian Library (his heraldic bookplate, inside front cover); his sale, Paris, 16 November 1840, lot 91.
4. London, Christie's 17 July 1985, lot 394, and 27 November 1985, lot 231.
5. Joost R. Ritman (b. 1941--), Dutch businessman and book collector, founder of The Ritman Library, Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, Amsterdam (their bookplate glued to the front pastedown), their shelfmark BPH MS 9 (Gentile, 1999, no. 21, pp. 174-177; briefly described in Gumbert, 1987, no. 111, Vlist, 1991, p. 11, and in *Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections*, online resources); deaccessioned in 2011.

## TEXT

ff. 1-20v, [D]yonisii Areopagitae Atheniensis Episcopi De Caelesti Hierarchia Ad Thimotheum Episcopum Ephesi Liber Incipit Feliciter. Quod Omnis Divina Lux Licet Varias Per Summam Benignitatem Ad Creaturam Prodeat Simplex Tamen Manet Neque Id Solum Verum Et Quae Illustrat Vnum Efficit. Capitulum Primum, incipit, "Omne datum optimum et omne donum perfectum .... Sed et candidissime illius lucis ... caelestia silentio honoranda putauimus," *Finis. Dionisi Areopagite Atheniensium Episcopi ad Timotheum Ephesine Civitatis Episcopi De Caelesti Hierarchia Explicit. ΤΕΛΟΣ*;

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De caelesti hierarchia*, translated from Greek into Latin by Ambrogio Traversari; Chevallier, ed., 1937, volume 2, pp. 727-1039.

ff. 20v-52, *Eiusdem De Ecclesiastica hierarchia Liber ad Eundem Incipit Com Presbitero Tymotheo Dionisius Praesbiter Quatenam Sit Ecclesiasticae Hierarchiae Intentio Et Quatenam Eius Traditio Capitulum Primum*, incipit, "Sacerdotii quidem nostri functionem sanctissime fili tymothee ... excudendasque scintillas," *Explicit Liber de Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*;

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, translated from Greek into Latin by Ambrogio Traversari; Chevallier, ed., 1937, volume 2, pp. 1071-1476.

ff. 52-90, *Con Presbitero Timotheo Dionisius Presbiter Quenam Sit Intentio Operis & Quae De Divinis Nominibus Tradita Sunt. Capitulum Primum*, incipit, "Nunc iam vir dei post theologorum [sic] hypotyposcon [sic] librum . . . transeamus . . . ad significatiuam theologiam conscribendam. *Finis. Dionisi Areopagitae Atheniensis Episcopi Ad Timotheum Episcopum Ephesinum De Divinis Nominibus Explicit. Finis;*

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De divinis nominibus*, translated from Greek into Latin by Ambrosius Traversari; Chevallier, ed., 1937, volume 1, pp. 5-561.

ff. 90v-92v, *Dionisi[us] Areopagite Ad Timotheum Ephesi Episcopum De Mistica Theologia Incipit Con Presbitero Timotheo Dionisius Presbiter Quem Sit Divina Caligo Capitulum Primo*, incipit, "Trinitas supersubstantialis omni bonitate et deitate superior . . . et ultra omnia est. *Finis,*" *Dionysii Areopagitae De Mistica Theologia Liber Explicit. Finis. Absolvi Ambrosius Peccator Dionisii Opuscula In Monasterio Fontis Boni XV Kalendas Aprilis Anno dominice Incarnationis M CCCC XXXVI Inditione XV Emendavi et Cum Greco Contuli In Heremo III Idus Aprilis. ΤΕΛΟΣ. Finis.*

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *De mystica theologia*, translated from Greek into Latin by Ambrogio Traversari; Chevallier, 1937, ed., volume 1, pp. 565-602.

ff. 92v-104v, *Incipiunt Epistole Eiusdem Dionisii Areopagite Atheniensium Episcopi Ad Caium Cultorem Epistola*, incipit, "Tenebre Luce Vanescunt . . . easque posteris trades," *Finis. Expliciunt X Epistole Dionisii Areopagitae. Meminit Se Scripsisse Quae Consequuntur Nominatim Quae Periere Scilicet De Divinis Hymnis De Intellectualibus et Sensibilibus De Theologica Informatione De Anima De Significativa Theologia De Legali Hierarchia De Angelicis Proprietatibus & Ordinibus De Ivsto Divinoque Iudicio Amen. Deo Gratias.*

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Epistolae diversae*, translated from Greek into Latin by Ambrogio Traversari; ed. in *Dionysiaca*, volume 1:605-669 and volume 2:1479-1578 (f. 93, *ad Gaium*, ed. 1:605-7; f. 93, *ad eundem Gaium*, ed. 1:608-10; f. 93rv, *ad eundem Gaium*, ed. 1:611-12; f. 93v, *ad eundem Gaium*, ed. 1:613-19; ff. 93v-94, *Dorotheo ministro*, ed. 1:620-3; f. 94, *Sosisprato sacerdote*, ed. 2:1479-81; ff. 94-95v, *Polocarpo episcopo*, ed. 2:1482-1500; ff. 95v-100v, *Demophilo monacho de benignitate*, ed. 2:1501-1571; ff. 100v-104, *Tito pontifici per epistolam interroganti que sit sapientie domus que patera qui cibi eius et qui potus*, ed. 1:624-669; ff. 104rv, *Johanni Theologo apostolo et euangeliste in pathmos insula relegato. Epistola decima et ultima*, ed., 2:1572-1578).

This manuscript contains the complete Dionysian Collection of the five known surviving works by the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, also known as Pseudo-Denys, and it follows the order of the Dionysius Corpus. The author represented himself as St. Dionysius the Areopagite, an Athenian member of the judicial council, the Areopagus, who was converted instantly by St. Paul. His work, strictly speaking, thus might be regarded as a successful "forgery," but it provided him with impeccable Christian credentials that conveniently antedated Plotinus by over two hundred years. So successful was this stratagem that Dionysius acquired almost apostolic authority, giving his writings enormous influence in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Dionysius's fictitious identity was first seriously called into question by Lorenzo Valla in 1457, a viewpoint later accepted and publicized by Erasmus from 1504 onward. But it has only become generally accepted in modern times that instead of being the disciple of St. Paul, Dionysius must have lived in the time of Proclus, most probably being a pupil of Proclus, perhaps of Syrian origin, who knew enough of Platonism and the Christian

tradition to transform them both. Since Proclus died in 485 CE, and since the first clear citation of Dionysius's works is by Severus of Antioch between 518 and 528, then we can place Dionysius's authorship between 485 and 518–28 CE.

The surviving writings are four treatises and ten letters. The four treatises are: 1) *On the divine names* (DN) (*Peri theion onomaton*, in Greek; *De Divinis Nominibus*, in Latin), the longest work of thirteen chapters that deals with affirmative or kataphatic theology, namely, the names attributed to God the creator in scripture and also in pagan texts, but also exploring the limits of language and therefore also involving negative or apophatic theology. 2) *On the celestial hierarchy* (CH) (*Peri tes ouranias hierarchias*, in Greek; *De coelesti hierarchia*, in Latin), a work that examines how the nine choirs of angels (in scripture) are to be understood in lifting us up to God. 3) *On the ecclesiastical hierarchy* (EH) (*Peri tes ekklesiastikes hierarchias*, in Greek; *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*, in Latin) that examines the various orders and liturgy of the church as relating us to God through a divinely appointed but human hierarchy. And 4) *On Mystical theology* (MT) (*Peri mustikes theologias*, in Greek; *De mystica theologia*, in Latin), a brief but powerful work that deals with negative or apophatic theology and in which theology becomes explicitly "mystical" for the first time in history. There follow ten letters that provide helpful comments upon topics in the above four treatises, especially letter 9 on what Dionysius calls symbolic theology of which works 2) and 3) above (CH; EH) form a substantial part. The ten letters appear to be arranged in a roughly hierarchical order, letters 1–4 being addressed to a monk (a certain Gaius, also the name of one or more of St. Paul's companions), letter 5 to a deacon, letter 6 to a priest, and letters 7 and 9 to hierarchs or bishops. Letter 8 disrupts this order since it is addressed to a monk charged with disrupting the hierarchical order itself!

During the medieval period Saint Dionysius the Areopagite and Saint Denis of Paris were considered to be the same "Dionysius" who had been converted by Saint Paul. Medieval tradition held that Saint Dionysius the Areopagite had traveled to Rome and then was commissioned by the Pope to preach in Gaul (France), where he was martyred. This confusion of historical detail was compounded by the common acceptance of Pseudo-Dionysius's writings as the authentic work of the biblical Dionysius of Acts 17:34. The great Abbey of Saint-Denis claimed to have the relics of Dionysius. Around 1121, Peter Abelard, a Benedictine monk at the basilica of Saint-Denis disentangled the three different Dionysiuses.

Considered a major proponent of Neo-Platonist thought, Dionysius struggled with a major tension between Platonism and Christianity. Luther claimed that "he platonizes more than he christianizes." What Dionysius manages to do is both to capture this spirit of Platonism profoundly, and, therefore, transform it, as well as to make it concrete and accessible in the scriptural, sacramental, and ordinary experiences of Christian practitioners. It comes as no surprise that his work was much admired in the Renaissance. Two important retranlations of the Corpus date from the fifteenth century: the first (the present one) was undertaken by a learned Camaldolese monk, Ambrogio Traversari, in 1436; and the second was done by Marcellus Ficino in 1491.

The humanist scholar Ambrogio Traversari (1386-1439) entered the Camadolese monastery in Florence in 1400. In Florence, his knowledge of Greek and interest in ancient Latin texts, attracted the attention of Niccolò Niccoli, who granted Ambrogio access to his library. He is noteworthy for his study of the Latin Church Fathers including St. Jerome and others, but especially for his study and translation of the Greek Fathers, including Athanasius, Basil, Greogory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, and, of course, Pseudo-Dionysius. As early as 1424 he had access to two Greek manuscripts of Pseudo-Dionysius in Niccoli's library, and in 1431

sent a letter to Niccoli discussing his translation (Stinger, 1977, 158-8); his translation was completed in 1436. It became the standard translation in most early printed editions, including the edition of Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples, Paris 1489/99 (GW 8409) and Venice 1502). Many of the extant manuscripts include his colophon, as does this example (e.g. Harvard, Houghton Library, MS Richardson 12, Ferrara, MS II 137, and Giessen, UB HS 723).

There is no complete census of the surviving manuscripts of the Pseudo-Dionysian *Corpus*; moreover, many descriptions of extant manuscripts do not identify the translation. Nonetheless, manuscripts are numerous; the first text in the West dating from the ninth century. The Schoenberg Database lists 161 entries, but many are duplicates, and others are in institutional libraries.

## LITERATURE

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Vlist, E. van der, ed., *Illuminated Manuscripts in Dutch Collections: Preliminary Precursor 1*, The Hague 1991, p. 111.

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

The Ritman Library (Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica)

<http://www.ritmanlibrary.com/collection/collection-profile/>

Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections (as Amsterdam, BPH, MS 9)

<http://www.mmdc.nl/static/site/>

[Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts, British Library](#)

[Harley 5261](#)

<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=7550&CollID=8&NStart=5261>

[Harley 5279](#)

<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=4821&CollID=8&NStart=5279>

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Article on Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite by Kevin Corrigan and Michael Harrington

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pseudo-dionysius-areopagite/>

Works of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite in English at CCEL

<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/dionysius/works.html>

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