

The Library of Raphael de Mercatellis

By Charlotte Haley

The collection of rare books and manuscripts is an ancient occupation, one which still bewitches many bibliophiles to this day. Raphael de Mercatellis (1437-1508) was such a collector, with a fascinating biography to match his extensive library. An abbot and scholar, one of Mercatellis's greatest passions was the collation of specialised knowledge, particularly when crafted into a bespoke, personally-stamped library of manuscripts.

Born in Bruges in 1437, Raphael was one of several illegitimate children of Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, his mother the wife of a member of the Venetian Mercatelli di Mercatello family. Raphael de Mercatellis chose an ecclesiastical lifestyle, studying theology in Paris to become the abbot of St Peter's Abbey in Oudenburg at the age of 26. His eminent career did not stop there, however, as in 1478 he became abbot of St Bavon, Ghent, an illustrious position that afforded him many benefits. In 1487, Mercatellis was made a consecrated bishop in partibus maritimis of the Sicilian diocese of Rhodus, and an auxiliary bishop of Tournai. A year later, Maximilian I employed Mercatellis as his counsellor, and while his many responsibilities surely took him far and wide, the abbot had built a refuge in Bruges for himself which he called Nazareth, a palace that allowed him to retire there in 1507. His death in 1508 completed a life of great expense and acquisition, and it is said that his corpse was processed through Ghent accompanied by one hundred horsemen.

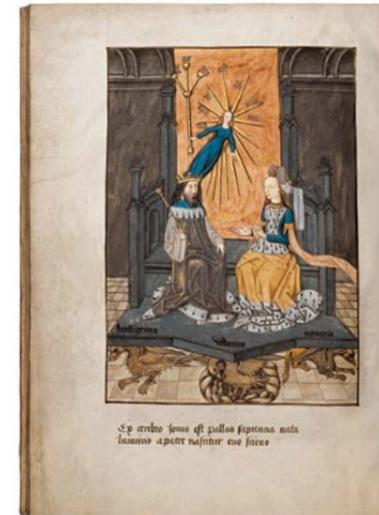
But was Mercatellis a much beloved figure of Bruges's history? Or a notorious megalomaniac who exploited his position for wealth? His sense of ambition is clear: in 1501, he ordered the creation of a marble monument for his tomb, including a white statue of

himself; his abbacy was characterized by confiscations and legal proceedings concerning tithes and possessions; in constructing his library, he attempted to collate a multi-volume, fully-illustrated Bible, with original commentary and poetry intermezzos - never completed.

The library itself holds many clues to his character. Mercatellis did not collect printed books, but instead exclusively commissioned manuscripts from artists and scribes that he chose, often having them copy and decorate printed texts by hand. Not only did this incur a huge cost, it was also completely anachronistic, the printing press having been invented decades earlier. Perhaps Mercatellis was clinging to a more austere past, where manuscripts denoted scholasticism and distinction, or perhaps he wished to exhibit his wealth to those around him through physical possessions. Whatever the reason, the variety of late 15th Century manuscripts makes this collection truly unique.

While there is no completely accurate list of the collection, a sixteenth-century catalogue, the *Recolletorium*, as well as many surviving manuscripts, allows us to picture the library of Mercatellis more clearly. The *Recolletorium* details eighty manuscripts, forty-one of which have been identified with extant texts and are considered 'true' Mercatellis books: written on fine white parchment, bound in silk, damask, and camlet in a variety of colours, and imprinted with the abbot's arms and curious monogram L. Y. S. (still a mystery to this day).

Yet there are twenty-three Mercatellis manuscripts not included in the inventory, and the catalogue also counts some printed books. As it lists the contents of



Birth of Pallas (Athena): Jupiter and Juno seated on a throne supported by the golden figure of Intelligentia (an eagle), Voluntas (a pelican feeding its young), and Memoria (a griffin, the three names written in black), e.g. powers of the soul and virtues related to the Trinity. Pallas, being born from Jupiter's head, holds a sceptre in her right hand.



Three right hands depicted with lines and other markings, with explanations in the captions and texts, helping the reader to connect the physical appearance of the hand to their meaning for man's destiny.

the library long after Mercatellis's death, when the books had been incorporated into the new Chapter library in 1540, it reflects a slightly distorted image of the collection.

Although Mercatellis commissioned a huge variety of texts, there were certainly themes that linked them. His interests were mainly geographical, especially Central and Eastern Europe, and medical, with deviations into astrology and occult sciences. The *Tresorier*, by author Jean d'Outremeuse, serves as an apt case-study for understanding the kind of texts this scholar was interested in.

One of the more peculiar works, the *Tresorier* is part of an illuminated manuscript concerning the formation, characteristics, and merits of precious gems, a lapidary specifying over 250 stones and their qualities. The author cites sorcerers and necromancers to support his claims, and the work is the oldest known systematic book on various processes relating to stones and crystals - such as colouring glass.

Combined with this unique work is a text on Chiromancy, copied after a rare Italian incunabulum and filled with vibrant paintings. The art of Chiromancy relies on the qualities of the hands to reveal things about a person: whether they are robust or frail, whether they are lustful or reserved, if they write well, or drink too much. One can only guess at the reason for Mercatellis commissioning a text on palmistry, but in conjunction with d'Outremeuse's lapidary and some seemingly misplaced paintings of Greco-Roman mythology, this item is a particularly interesting feature of the abbot's private collection.

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