Spotlight on Collecting Medieval Text Manuscripts

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When considering collecting medieval manuscripts, it may seem difficult – at first – to decide how and what to collect. As the options are numerous, it is wise to consult an expert. We at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books are ready to inform and advise you.

In this spotlight we focus on a selection of early text manuscripts, which are quite intriguing, yet fairly priced.
Vitae Patrum sive Eremitarum. Manuscript made for use by the canons in the Duomo Santa Maria Assunta in Rieti, Central Tuscany, c. 1125-50. 310 x 210 mm, 143 leaves, vellum, 1 large decorated initial. € 180'000,-

Collecting 12th-century manuscripts provides a view of a period of revitalization in medieval Europe. This example highlights the history of an important institution on a pilgrim’s route to Rome with a fascinating history.
The manuscript at hand belonged to the Cathedral of Rieti, where at one point it was chained to a lectern. The diocese of Rieti in Lazio (central Italy) dates from the 5th century. The city is situated along the pilgrims’ route to Rome (60 km north-east). During the summer, Rieti was a favourite papal seat. In the 12th century, the episcopal-papal palace and the cathedral were directly connected.

The *Vitae Patrum*, ‘Lives of the Fathers’, is a collection of biographical data, anecdotes, and wise sayings of and about the first Christian martyrs that served to inspire monks and ecclesiastics in their clerical life.
This liaison with the papal curia contributed to the importance of Rieti. The manuscript dates to a flourishing period of the early 12th century, from which the crypt, the basilica inferior built c. 1109-57, remains a witness. In 1225, Pope Honorius III consecrated the new Duomo di Santa Maria Assunta.

The church was serviced by about 20 canons, many of whom came from the region. Together with the bishop, they formed the clergy who, over a long period of time, donated and used the books of the cathedral. Some of them will also have been instrumental as scribes and copyists.

Punctuation suggests the manuscript was used for reading out loud.
When the papal seat moved to Avignon, Rieti was conquered by the King of Naples, to be won back for the papal estates only in 1354.

By that time the church and its treasury was in disarray and precious items had been stolen or pawned. After this period of unrest (sources speak of ‘criminal clerks’) an inventory of the treasury was made (dated January 15, 1353), listing 89 books, among which a *Vite patrum*. The original (and first) 13th-century binding shows the codex functioned for some time as a chained book.
A Libellus precum contains various prayers and hymns and represents a distinct textual genre. These compilations circulated with variants from the 8th to the 12th centuries. The manuscript was written c. 1150 and bears an inscription of St. Martin’s Abbey, likely the former Benedictine abbey in Tournai.

230 x 155 mm, 48 leaves, vellum (incompl.), medieval binding. € 65’000,-
The origin and ownership of such books – presumably of monastic patronage – as well as the performative aspects of the prayers – associated with singing – is still under discussion as these codices combine prayers for private devotion as well as for communal liturgy. Such a 12th-century manuscript immerses us into a fascinating world.

*Libellus precum*, 230 x 155 mm, 48 leaves, vellum (incompl.), Tournai, St. Martin Abbey, c. 1150.
We know much about this period in the monastery because St. Martin’s had lodged a master storyteller in the person of Heriman of Tournai (d. after 1147), abbot and chronicler of the Restauratio sancti Martini Tornacensis. His history describes the crisis in Flanders of the 1090s when famine spread and paupers were dramatically forced out the church, but contains anecdotal accounts as well.

Heriman draws the reader into his world, writing about murder and treasure hunting but also showing a scriptorium at work and how searches for purloined parchments were executed. He offers the reader a lively view of the complex events surrounding the re-establishment of the monastic community at St. Martin, which originally dated from the Merovingian era but was abandoned after the Viking raids. He also includes an intimate look at values, attitudes, and social tensions of his time.

In this context the Libellus precum was composed, copied and used (map showing St. Martin’s Abbey: Braun & Hogenberg 1588).
Tournai was the Merovingian capital and the birthplace of King Clovis. The imposing Romanesque cathedral (a UNESCO world heritage site) dates from the early 12\textsuperscript{th} century and bears witness to artistic influences from the Ile-de-France, the Rhineland, and Normandy. St. Martin’s dates from the same period but did not survive the ages – although, today the former Abbot’s Palace houses City Hall.
An attractive, 12th-century, Tournai baptismal font survives in Winchester Cathedral, bearing witness to the religious and artistic Renaissance of the Scheldt valley that also brought forward the present Libellus precum.
Tournai: Notre Dame cathedral, Central Square and Belfry; reliquary shrine (13th century).
Dating from the same era as the *Libellus Precum* are the oldest houses in Tournai.
Gospel Lectionary for Franciscan use. Manuscript decorated with pen-flourishes in the style of Jacquet Maci. France, Avignon, c. 1325-50. 345 x 235 mm, 172 leaves, vellum. With numerous 3-4 line puzzle initials in azure, red and gold, surrounded by fine pen-flourishes. € 80'000,-

Likely made for the Franciscans or Cordeliers in Avignon, where the corrections were supervised by ‘Symon’; the motto (f. 172v, added later) refers to the bibliophile, Cardinal Pierre de Foix, OFM, buried at the Cordeliers (1464).
Gospel Lectionary for Franciscan use, made in Avignon, c. 1325-50. 345 x 235 mm, 172 leaves, vellum.

The motto Servire deo regnare est was used by Pierre de Foix, the Franciscan cardinal who played a prominent role in ending the Western Schism. He also succeeded in returning the papal library from Spain to Avignon – and from thereon to Rome.

Pierre had a taste for finely decorated (in gold and azure) manuscripts on which he is said to have spent ‘more than a 1000 gold pieces’. He bequeathed most of his collection to the Collège de Foix in Toulouse (now in Paris, BnF).
Gospel Lectionary made for Franciscan use, decorated with pen-flourishes in the style of Jacquet Maci. France, Avignon, c. 1325-50. 345 x 235 mm, 172 leaves, vellum. With numerous 3-4 line puzzle initials in azure, red and gold, surrounded by fine pen-flourishes.

Many of the esteemed Avignonese found their last resting place in the church of the Cordeliers, but most of the medieval buildings are lost today.
Map (Atlas van Loon, 1649) representing the Franciscan abbey and church where the manuscript at hand served in the liturgy (c. 1325-50).
What remains is a ruin of the old chapel and, of course, the codex at hand.

Gospel Lectionary for Franciscan use, in Latin. Manuscript on vellum, decorated with penwork in the style of Jacquet Maci. France, Avignon, c. 1325-50. 345 x 235 mm, 172 leaves, with numerous large 3-4 line puzzle initials and pen flourishes.
The finely decorated initials show the highly developed routine of the Avignonese decorators who also worked for the papal library. Jacquet Maci himself trained in Avignon and moved later to Paris where he worked with the best illuminators. See for example: London, BL, Yates Thompson ms. 34 (here left).
Leo Archipresbyter of Naples, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (*Historia de preliis*). Italy, Florence or Bologna?, c. 1380-1400. 190 x 132 mm, 52 leaves, paper. In first, early 16th-century Italian limp vellum binding. €85’000,-

Already a legend in his own time, the life and deeds of Alexander the Great (356-23 BCE) have found great public interest throughout world history and world cultures.
Alexander’s campaigns and his personality made him into a figure that fascinated people from early on. The first histories about him were the accounts of his own military advisors and friends.

The historian Callisthenes (c. 360-26 BCE) who also travelled with Alexander, described his early years (but he fell out of favour and was executed before the end of the Indian campaign). A 3rd-century romance about Alexander found public acclaim whereas essential, historical sources on the historical Alexander, such as the eyewitness accounts, survive only in excerpts quoted by later writers.
From Late Antiquity to the Renaissance, most knowledge of Alexander the Great derived from one source only: the strange and fantastic mixture of facts and fiction attributed to an unknown author. That story is a combination of sources, among which are a collection of letters and a political pamphlet written after Alexander’s death on the succession and guardianship of Alexander’s heir. These materials came into the hands of an enthusiast who combined them with local Egyptian legends on Alexander’s origin and birth, on the foundation of the city that bears his name, and on his adventures with Candace, queen of Kush (Nubia/Ethiopia).

This romanticized biography of Alexander was incorrectly attributed to the historian Callisthenes, hence the author is named ‘Pseudo-Callisthenes’. Although probably originating from the 3rd century AD, the oldest known preserved Greek manuscripts date from the 11th century. It survives in six redactions in Greek, in derivatives in Latin and in many other languages.

Ps.-Callisthenes \( \delta^* \) version is the last redaction and does not survive in Greek, but is known from the Latin version of Archipresbyter (archpriest) Leo of Naples.
Around 950, Dukes John III and Marinus II of Campania sent a certain archpriest Leo from Naples on a diplomatic mission to the Byzantine court in Constantinople. Here he found a manuscript of Ps.-Callisthenes in Greek (δ* version), which he copied and later translated into Latin. His Latin was modest, easy to understand, and easy to read and therefore had a wider influence than any other version of the Alexander romance. Collecting such texts not only brings us back to Antiquity, it broadens our view on world history.

Leo Archipresbyter of Naples, *Historia de preliis Alexandri Magni*. Italy, Florence or Bologna (?), c. 1380-1400. 190 x 132 mm, 52 leaves, paper. In first, early 16th-century Italian limp vellum binding.
The analysis of Greek codices can be more complicated because of the use of Italian paper – exported to all corners of the Eastern Empire – which offers no definitive information about the localization of the origin of a manuscript. Yet, the fact that one of the scribes who contributed to the codex at hand is documented in Venice and Padua, suggests that this book (or at least part of it) was made in Italy, perhaps in Venice. Latin notes show that it was subsequently used in the West also.
Composite codex of Canon Law, Homilies, and other religious texts. Decorated manuscript in Greek. Italy, Venice (?), c. 1430-40, c. 1470-1500. 295 x 205 mm, 231+6 leaves, paper. Manuscript composed of several units. In its original, medieval binding.

Throughout the Middle Ages, contacts between Italy and the East continued but it was only in the Renaissance at the end of the 14th century that knowledge of Greek renewed. In the first half of the 15th century, several Italian humanists visited Byzantium in order to learn Greek and to buy Greek manuscripts, saved from pillages and devastation of the invaded countryside.

Well before 1453 – when the Ottomans captured Constantinople – many Greek books had already found their way to the West. This number increased dramatically after the fall of the great city, when many Greek scholars fled and moved to Italy permanently.
Composite codex of Canon Law, Homilies, and other religious texts. Decorated manuscript in Greek. Italy, Venice (?), c. 1430-40, c. 1470-1500. 295 x 205 mm, 231+6 leaves, paper.

Libraries were founded and schools for the study of Greek were opened in several towns. The Pope in Rome laid the basis for the Greek collection in the Vatican and Cardinal Bessarion (above) did the same for the library of St. Mark at Venice. Basileos or Johannes Bessarion of Trebizond (1403-72) had come to the council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438-45. He settled in Italy and converted to the Western church. He became cardinal and later donated his books to Venice, where they are preserved in the Bibliotheca Marciana.
Composite codex of Canon Law, Homilies, and other religious texts in Greek. Italy, Venice (?), c. 1430-40, c. 1470-1500. 295 x 205 mm, 231+6 leaves, paper.

The present codex was made at different stages, presumably in part at least in Venice at the end of the 15th century. Although containing a mixture of theological treatises going back to the early Middle Ages, the most recent text is the sermon on the Transfiguration of Christ, written by Joseph Bryennios.

Bryennios was an orthodox Byzantine theologian (d. c. 1436), who had been imperial ambassador to the West in 1416 and 1418. When in 1422 the pressures exerted by the Ottomans laying siege to Constantinople caused a severe crisis, Byzantine statesmen entertained the idea of an allegiance with the West. At meetings organized with representatives of the papacy in 1422 and 1431, Bryennios played a central role in the resistance to that Roman project.

However, a few years later, at the beginning of the Council in Ferrara (1438), he died and the influence of this man without sympathy for humanism or Western thought ended. His work apparently continued to circulate in Italy, as the present manuscript shows.
Price List

1. *Vitae Patrum sive Eremitarum*. Manuscript made for use by the canons in the Duomo Santa Maria Assunta in Rieti, Central Tuscany, c. 1125-50. € 180’000,-

2. *Libellus precum*. Tournai, St. Martin Abbey, c. 1150. € 65’000,-


4. Leo Archipresbyter of Naples, *Historia Alexandri Magni* (*Historia de preliis*). Italy, Florence or Bologna?, c. 1380-1400. € 85’000,-

5. Composite codex of Canon Law, Homilies, and other religious texts. Decorated manuscript in Greek. Italy, Venice (?), c. 1430-1440, c. 1470-1500. € 85’000,-
Building a collection of medieval manuscripts opens doors to a seemingly bygone world. Yet all the books discussed here have a connection to today’s context: in the cities in which we live, the characters that still mark our world, the legacy of languages, in the spirituality that inspired many around us.

We at Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books cordially invite you to step into this world of precious, fine, and ancient books, which are alive, intriguing, and exciting!