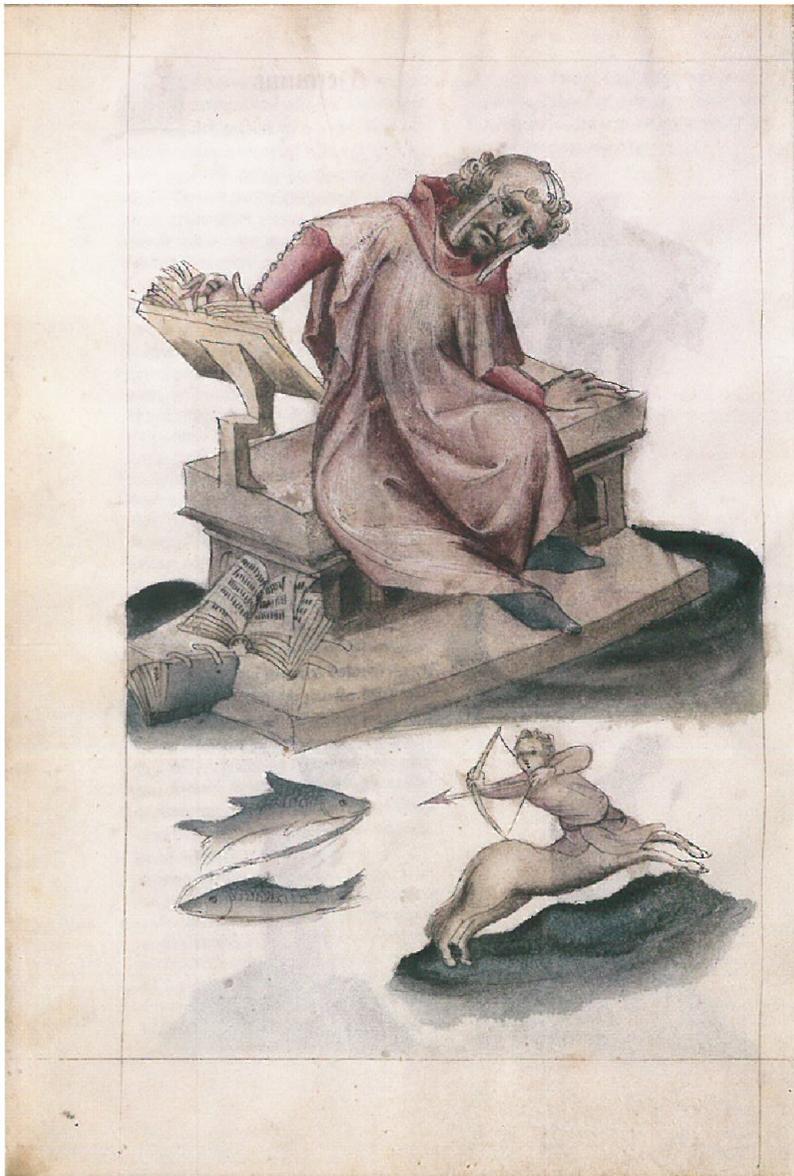


# **Medieval Mastery**

Book Illumination from Charlemagne  
to Charles the Bold | 800-1475

BREPOLS

Dauidsfonds/Leuven



## 68 Liber astrologiae “Book of Astrology”

Bruges, before 7 June 1403.—New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M 785.

**MANUSCRIPT** Parchment; IV + 52 fol.; 248 x 175 mm; 76 full-page miniatures; cursive script.

**CONTENT** Georgius Zothori Zapari Fenduli, *Liber astrologiae*

**BINDING** Modern binding.

**PROVENANCE** Presented to Jean Duc de Berry (d. 1416) by Abbot Lubert Hautscilt (1393-1417) of the of Abbey of Eeckhout in Bruges, on 7 June 1403; Baron J.-B. Gaignarre de Joursanvault (1748-93): *ex libris* (fol. IV), *Le baron de Joursanvault, 1790* (fol. 51v); collection of Mr Court in Dijon (1907); acquired from Jacques Rosenthal in Zurich in 1935.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY** Leuven 1993: 93-96, no. 31.

fol. 47v-48r:

### ‘Exile’ of Mercury, ‘Exaltation’ of Mercury

This astrological treatise, presented to the bibliophile Duke Jean de Berry by Lubert Hautscilt, abbot of Eeckhout in Bruges, is one of the pinnacles of Flemish illumination at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The name of the illuminator, who was very probably active in Bruges, remains unknown. This is a perfect representation of the so-called ‘pre-Eyckian’ style and seems by its raw realism to announce the art of the Van Eycks and the other great Primitives with them.

The technical methods used are surprisingly simple: the outline, drawn in ink, with a very sure hand, on blank parchment, is set off by an ink wash, greatly diluted in places, that allows the off-white parchment to breathe. The bodies and fluidly draped clothes are powerfully shaped with brushwork. The illuminator again emphasises the plasticity by using light to enhance the folds and limbs. Edging and hollows are picked out in bright red strokes, with impressive pictorial mastery. The illuminator shows his brilliance and does not try to hide his brushwork. There is a certain coarseness in the treatment, which gives the compositions powerful visual impact.

The book is open at a double illuminated page. Two people are sitting facing each other at a lectern. The first one looks away from his book, taking care to keep his finger on his page. Two manuscripts are nonchalantly thrown at his feet. The man is hunched up, as though racked by torment. His companion, on the other hand, is serenely reading the book before him. Seated far to the right on his seat, he is holding a *virole* in his left hand. A sense of balance emanates from his person, which singularly contrasts with his neigh-

bour’s attitude.

These pages illustrate a chapter in the treatise about the planets. The two people are a magnificent visual translation of a basic astrological principle: the law according to which the meaning of heavenly bodies may change depending on the sign of the zodiac in which they are present. In this case, the drawings illustrate the ‘dignities’ and ‘debilities’ of Mercury: on the left, the ‘exile’ that occurs when the planet is in the sign opposite to its position in the circle of the zodiac. Its strength then operates at cross-purposes; it is drawn towards the sign. Mercury’s exile is Sagittarius or Pisces, which are represented at the bottom of the page. The illuminator has managed to express this abstract notion of opposition and resistance in the picture by showing a person in torment, distracted from his reading, and torn from the book before him. On the other hand, the ‘exaltation’ of the planet, which is the position in which its characteristics and those of the sign are mutually reinforced, is represented on the right. Mercury is exalted when he enters the sign of Virgo, represented at his feet. In complete possession of his mental faculties, he concentrates on his reading. The musical instrument carried in one hand reminds us that he invented the lyre.

The strength of these paintings is undoubtedly because they are placed in isolation, without any artfulness, on the bare surface of the parchment. The details are also remarkable, whether considering the beautiful face of the Virgin, the fishes picked out in one stroke of colour, or—a sublime anecdotal note—the hand of Mercury ‘in exile’, placed on his book, in a frozen instance of incomparable spontaneity.