

Medieval Mastery

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

BREPOLS

Dauidsfonds/Leuven

fortune es aultres dyces et es siennes tres maleure.

Et lors salome sa sœur absout tous ceulx que le roy auoit commande a occir. Venn en son original saur mathy. dist que herodes se occist d'un contel de quoy il paroit la pomme et que salome sa sœur occist les iuifs ainsi comme il auoit ordonne.

Et commence la vie saint thomas De cantorbrie.

Thomas est expose abyssine double et trenchie il fu abyssine et parfent en humilite come il apparut en la hure et en lauer les pies aux poures double en prelacion cest en parole et en exēple trenchie en sa passion.



Thomas de cantorbrie quant il estoit ala court du roy d'engleterre il vey faire aulcunes dyces contre sa religion. sy delassa la court et se mist

83 *Legenda aurea* “Golden Legend”

Southern Netherlands (Bruges), around 1460-1470.—
New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M 672.

MANUSCRIPT Parchment; 114 fol.; 380 x 270 mm; 30 miniatures; Gothic *bâtarde* script.

CONTENT Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, from the prologue by the author to the Commemoration of the Septuagesima, in the French translation of Jean de Vignay (first of 5 vols).

BINDING Modern binding.

PROVENANCE Commissioned for Jean d'Auxy (d. 1474), Knight of the Order of the Golden Fleece and chamberlain and counsellor to Philip the Good (coat-of-arms on fol. 1r); Charles de Banannes, Lord of la Palissade (1540-1552); Henriette de la Guiche, wife of Louis de Valois, Duke of Angoulême (1598-1682); convent of the Minims of La Guiche (Saône-et-Loire) (fol. 1r: *Ex bibliotheca minimorum guichiensuum*); Moreau auction (1835); Lord Ashburnham (1849); collection Leboeuf de Montgermont (1914); acquired by the Pierpont Morgan Library in 1920.

BIBLIOGRAPHY Caswell 1985; Caswell 1993; Bousmanne 1997: 58-61, 281-283.

fol. 58r:

The Murder of St Thomas Becket

Jacobus de Voragine's *Legenda aurea* presents a considerable challenge to the illuminator: of illustrating an impressive gallery of saints—more than one hundred apostles, confessors, martyrs, and virgins—while avoiding falling into a routine which would risk affecting both the quality of his work and the reader's patience. The New York volume is only a fragment of an extremely luxurious *Legenda aurea*, which originally held at least 842 folios of 400 x 280 mm, divided in three thick volumes. The depiction of the numerous scenes was shared by at least ten illuminators, which gave the advantage of reducing the production time needed for the manuscript while ensuring a salutary diversity of styles and compositions.

The scene of the martyrdom of Thomas Becket, who was brutally murdered with a broadsword in his cathedral in Canterbury on the orders of King Henry II, is attributed to one of these anonymous craftsmen, known as the Master de Sapience. The illuminator chose to paint his composition on a dark grey background to represent this tragic episode. Then he managed to achieve an effect of lunar lighting by detailing the figures and décor in shades of grey, ochre, black and white, with a great dramatic effect. The few strokes of silver, currently blackened, that can be seen

in the glass window panes, would originally have reinforced this cold nocturnal effect, which corresponds well with the vision of night, when 'all cats are grey'. The strong impact of the shadows succeeds in evoking the threatening ambiance of an evening lit by a full moon. A few rare bright red dots, emphasizing the martyr's marks, are the sole concession to franker tones: here, the blood pouring from his wounds, elsewhere, the passion of the torture or stigmata of the blessed. The perspective contributes to the dramatization of the scene of the murder: the view from below introduces spatial distortions that fit well with the twisted cruelty of the assassination.

The very sober secondary decoration is limited to black and white initials on a golden background, perfectly in harmony with the text and the central scene. This extreme simplicity, also marked by the wide blank margins in the manuscript, echoes the aesthetics of manuscripts commissioned by Philip the Good. It should be remembered that Jean d'Auxy, the patron for this magnificent *Legenda aurea* was a close associate of the duke, who entrusted him with the education of his son, the future Charles the Bold.

The Master de Sapience was probably active in Bruges, following Willem Vrelant and Loyset Liédet. Jean Caswell has succeeded in attributing two other manuscripts to him—a *Doctrine du disciple de sapience* preserved in Munich (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Ms. gall. 28) and the *Trésor de sapience* by Brunetto Latini in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms. fr. 191)—where he is responsible for the entire programme of miniatures. This is probably an independent craftsman who, when the case arose, participated in projects requiring the collaboration of many hands.

This is the first of five volumes, the other four being New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. M 673, 674, 675 and Mâcon, Bibliothèque Municipale, Ms. 3. The series was originally divided in three volumes.

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