

## Calendar from a Book of Hours

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment

France (likely Paris), c. 1400-1420

*i (paper) + 12 + i (paper) on parchment, foliated in pencil, (collation, one quire of twelve leaves), ruled in plummet, written in a gothic quadrata bookband in black and red ink on 17 long lines, with 12 illuminated initials in burnished goldleaf on grounds of blue and purple with white tracery, with ivy leaf foliate and floral ornament in goldleaf extending into margin in the upper left quadrant of the leaves, light staining throughout, mild cockling, some initials rubbed, generally in very good clean condition. Modern binding in quarter black morocco, engraved on spine in gold "15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY MS. CALENDAR." Dimensions 155 x 107 mm.*

Calendars from medieval manuscripts offer an unparalleled glimpse into day-to-day life in the Middle Ages. Without today's modern devices, they were how people saw what day it was and why it was important: the special feast days throughout the year so important to daily life. Medieval calendars also include tools for figuring out the days of the week, Easter, means of following the Kalends, Ides, and Nones of Roman calendars, ways of finding out when the moon rises and sets, and clues to dark or Egyptian days each month. They are rich sources for anyone who wants to learn about and vicariously experience the medieval world.

## PROVENANCE

1. France, likely Paris, compare to Parisian calendars (see links below). The decoration also resembles most closely Parisian Books of Hours from the first two decades of the fifteenth century (for other examples, see Wieck, 2018, figs. 5, 8, 39).
2. The Folio Society, London (their inventory number MS. 2983 (?) on inside front pastedown).
3. Marvin L. Colker (1927-2020), Emeritus Professor of Classics at the University of Virginia, world-renowned paleographer, classicist, author of the first comprehensive catalogue of the manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin, and collector of manuscripts. Colker MS 144, marked on the front cover and in pencil in the lower left margin on f. 1. Acquired in 1968. Professor Colker assembled a large personal collection spanning more than 1,500 years of written history and subject matters ranging from astrology to music, literature, medicine, Church history, humanism, liturgy, Hebraica, law, and theology.

## TEXT

ff. 1-12, Calendar, with the following saints in red, possibly indicating a use of Paris, with a few outliers pointing toward Rouen (such as Ursin, bishop of Bourges, in red, 11 June; and Mellon, bishop of Rouen, in black, 22 October):

f. 1-1v, 1 January, Circumcision of Christ; 6 January, Epiphany; 19 January, Fabian and Sebastian; 20 January, Agnes virgin; 21 January, Vincent martyr; 25 January, Conversion of St. Paul;

f. 2-2v, 2 February, Purification of Mary; 22 February, Chair of St. Peter; 24 February, Matthias apostle;

f. 3-3v, 25 March, Annunciation of the Virgin;

f. 4-4v, 23 April, Gregory martyr; 25, Mark the Evangelist;

f. 5-5v, 1 May, Philip and James; 3 May, Invention of the Cross; 6 May, John before the Latin Gate; 9 May, Nicholas;

f. 6-6v, 11 June, Barnabus apostle and Saint Ursin; 19 June, Gervasius and Protasius; 24 June, St. John the Baptist; 29 June, Apostles Peter and Paul;

f. 7-7v, 4 July, Martin archbishop; 22 Mary Magdalene; 25, Jacob and Christopher; 26 Anne the mother of Mary;

f. 8-8v, 1 August, Peter in Chains; 3 August, Stephen; 10 August, Lawrence; 15 August, Assumption of Mary; 24 Bartholomew; 29 Beheading of John the Baptist;

f. 9-9v, 8 September, the Nativity of Mary; 14 September, Exaltation of the Holy Cross; 21 September, Mathew apostle; 29 September, Michael;

f. 10-10v, 9 October, Denis; 16 October, Michael; 18 October, Luke the Evangelist; 28 October, Simon and Jude;

f. 11-11v, 1 November, All Saints; 2 November, All Souls; 11 November, Martin; 23 Clement; 25 November, Catherine virgin; 30 November, Andrew apostle;

f. 12-12v, 6 December, Nicholas; 8 December, Conception of Mary; 21 December, Thomas apostle; 25 December, Birth of Christ; 26 December, Stephen; 27 December, John; 28 December, Holy Innocents; 29 December, Thomas of Canterbury.

Calendars from the Middle Ages have the same function as they do today: they tell us what day it is. How much more important this was in the medieval era, before other modern time-telling devices existed such as computers, iPad, iPhone, watches, clocks, etc. Calendars prefaced different types of medieval manuscripts including Books of Hours, Psalters, and Breviaries, and tell the date by citing the feast that was celebrated on that day. This is the medieval way of telling time. Some local feasts help determine the Calendar's "use," the place where the manuscript was intended to be used. This was often, but not always, the place where the manuscript was actually made.

Medieval calendar pages look rather complicated to the modern eye. Typically, they are laid out in four columns. In the far right appear the special feasts for each day of the month. These are mostly commemorations of the day the saints were martyred (their "birthdays" into heaven).

Other feasts commemorate important events in the lives of Christ and the Virgin. But no Calendars include the events of Christ's Passion (Resurrection, Ascension, or the Descent of the Holy Spirit): these were movable feasts whose dates depend upon that of Easter, the celebration of which changed from year to year. Calendars in Books of Hours are perpetual calendars since they can be used from one year to the next.

The majority of feasts are written in black (or dark brown) ink, whereas the more important feasts appear in red (hence, our term "red-letter day," signifying a major event). Sometimes in deluxe manuscripts, the most important feasts are written with gold leaf, and some calendars are triple graded with a hierarchy of important feasts in three colors, gold, blue, and red. Along with the major feasts celebrated by the medieval Catholic Church as a whole, Calendars also include feasts of a more local interest, that is, the deposit of the relics of a saint in a church in town, the birthday of a local bishop or martyr, and so forth. In addition to geographic uses, some Books of Hours were made for particular religious orders, such as Franciscan or Dominican.

Letters (running from lower case "a" through "g") and Roman numbers (from i to xix) appear to the left of the list of saints' days: the Dominical Letters help finding Sundays and all the other days of the week throughout the year (each year this Sunday Letter changed, moving backward); the Golden Numbers indicate the appearances of new moons and full moons throughout the year (the latter by counting ahead fourteen days). This esoteric information was extremely important to the medieval Christian, since it helped determine the date of Easter, the Church's most important feast, in any given year (for the most user-friendly explanation of Golden Numbers and Dominical Letters, see Wieck, 2018).

Finally, many Calendars, especially those from the thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth century, include the ancient Roman calendrical system. Each month had but three fixed points: Kalends (always the first day of the month and from which we derive our term "calendar"), Ides (the middle of the month, either the thirteenth or fifteenth), and Nones (the ninth day before the Ides, counting inclusively; it fell on the fifth or seventh of the month). All the days in between were counted backward from these three fixed points.

Independent calendars are collectible in their own right. They offer a valuable resource for information on the veneration of saints in different areas of Europe and are good study tools for the telling of time. Just when calendars began to be extracted from their source manuscripts is unknown, but some examples have early bindings, suggesting that the practice of extracting calendars from their larger host manuscript pre-dates modern times.

## LITERATURE

Grotefend, H. *Zeitrechnung des deutschen Mittelalters und der Neuzeit*, 2 vols., Hannover 1891-98 (reprint available; see an [online version](#)).

Perdrizet, Paul. *Le calendrier parisien à la fin du moyen âge d'après le bréviaire et les livres d'heures*, Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg, Fascicule 63, Paris 1933

Pickering, F. P. *Calendar Pages of Medieval Service Books: Prefatory Note or an Introduction for Historians*, Reading Medieval Studies Monograph, Reading, 1980.

Wieck, Roger S. *Painted Prayers. The Book of Hours in Medieval and Renaissance Art*, New York, George Braziller in association with The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1997.

Wieck, Roger S. *Time Sanctified. The Book of Hours in Medieval Art and Life*, New York, George Braziller in association with The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, 1988.

Wieck, Roger S. *The Medieval Calendar. Locating Time in the Middle Ages*, New York, 2018.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

The Center for Handskriftstudier i Danmark, introduction and Tutorial on Books of Hours by Erik Drigsdahl

<https://web.archive.org/web/20150327154053/http://www.chd.dk/cals/index.html>

Calendoscope, IRHT (tool for studying liturgical calendars)

[calendoscope.irht.cnrs.fr/accueil](http://calendoscope.irht.cnrs.fr/accueil)

Online Calendar of Saints Days

<http://www.medievalist.net/calendar/home.htm>

Medieval Calendars in British Library Manuscripts (Kathleen Doyle)

<https://www.bl.uk/medieval-english-french-manuscripts/articles/medieval-calendars>

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