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## Psalter

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment

Italy (Padua), c. 1390-1410

ii + 96 folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil in top outer corner recto, 1-98, flyleaves foliated as 1-2, complete (collation i-vi<sup>10</sup> vii-viii<sup>8</sup> ix-x<sup>10</sup>), some catchwords visible, ruled in brown ink for twenty-seven lines (justification 135 x 85 mm), written in an Italian gothic bookhand in black ink, psalms numbered in an early hand, contemporary marginal additions, capitals in red and blue throughout, two- to three-lines initials in red or blue with red flourishes for each psalm, SIX ILLUMINATED INITIALS four- to five-lines in green or purple on blue grounds with white penwork, infilled with red and purple flowers at the major divisions of the Psalms (ff. 27, 35, 43, 53v, 62v, and 71), ONE ILLUMINATED INITIAL, twelve-lines, in purple, red, and green on gold and blue grounds, with white penwork, introducing the opening psalm (f. 3), some browning, staining, and cockling, creases to the opening initial with smudges to red pigment, occasional marginal dampstaining, otherwise in very good condition. Fifteenth-century binding of leather over wooden boards, tooled in blind with Italian knot tools, traces of clasps, boards cracks and reinforced, rebacked, scuffed, and worn, lacking catches. Dimensions 201 x 143 mm.

This refined devotional Psalter preserves a complete series of psalms in a fifteenth-century blind-stamped leather binding, adorned with knot tools typical of Italian bookbinding. One large and six smaller initials introduce the seven main divisions; their style compares with that in two manuscripts illuminated in Padua around 1410. Early additions witness the devotional use of this Psalter. Alcuin of York's preface to the *De psalmodium usu* (present here) would have guided the reader in finding the most appropriate psalms for penance, prayer, and praising God.

## PROVENANCE

1. Based on stylistic evidence, the present manuscript was written and illuminated in Padua near the beginning of the fifteenth century, c.1390-1410, for an unknown patron. The choice of psalms introduced by illuminated initials follow secular use (seven of the usual eight divisions are marked here), suitable for the laity (but also broadly used by religious, male and female, who were not members of monastic orders, including Franciscan and Dominicans, canons, and parish and diocesan clergy).
2. The manuscript contains a number of early additions in a fifteenth-century cursive hand, beginning on the front pastedown with "*Spiritus quidem promptus [sic] est, charo autem infirma...*" (Matthew 26, 41). The back pastedown includes an abridged version of Alcuin of York's *Dicta Augustini de laude psalmodium*, written around 800 as a preface to *De psalmodium usu* (see below, Text). Both the script and ink suggest that the same hand, presumably that of the first owner of the Psalter, is responsible for two further additions in Italian, in the margins of Psalms 63 and 128, ff. 40 and 81.
3. Marginal addition in a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century hand on f. 40v.

4. Unidentified label, written "N.1286 / da.tax," in a nineteenth-century hand, inside cover.
5. Dawson's Bookshop, Los Angeles, sold to Marvin Colker in 1944.
6. Marvin L. Colker (1927-2020), Professor of Classics at the University of Virginia and renowned paleographer, who catalogued the manuscripts at Trinity College Library, Dublin. His ex libris, "Sum ex libris Marci Leonardi, 19X44," is written on f. 1, while his shelfmark "MLC 4" appears in the lower inner corner of ff. 1 and 3 (see Faye and Bond, 1962, no. 4).

## TEXT

ff. 3-89, Psalms 1-150, complete, copied without rubrics, numbered in an early hand in the margins, 1-160, with the ten subdivisions of Psalm 118 numbered as 119 to 129 (ff. 74v-79);

ff. 89-98, Liturgical canticles, hymns, and Apostles' creed, and Athanasian creed, continuing the numbering from the psalms in an early hand in the margins, 161-171: *Confitebor* (Isaiah 12), *Ego dixi* (Isaiah 38:10-21), *Exultavit* (1 Kings 2:1-11), *Cantemus* (Exodus 15:1-20), *Domini audivi* (Habbakuk 3), *Audite celi* (Deut. 32:1-44), *Te deum*, *Benedicte omnia*, *Benedictus dominus*, *Magnificat*, *Nunc dimittis*, *Gloria in excelsis*, *Pater noster*, *Credo in Deum Patrem*, *Quicumque Vult*;

Back pastedown, [fifteenth-century addition; Alcuin of York, *Dicta Augustini de laude psalorum*], incipit, "Si vis pro peccate tuis paenitentiam agree...".

Leading scholar of the court of Charlemagne, Alcuin of York (c. 735–d. 804) composed the *Dicta Augustini de laude psalorum* as a preface to the *De psalorum usu*, one of the most important collection of devotional texts for the Carolingian period. Selected parts of the text were added in a fifteenth-century hand on the back pastedown of the original binding. The text lists a series of specific Psalms, prescribed for six of the nine specific uses first defined by Alcuin: to do penance (i), to pray (ii), to praise God (iii), in times of temptation (iv) and tribulation (v), and to contemplate divine laws (vi). A narrow column on the outer margin lists the number of each of the psalms cited. Since the psalms had also been numbered in the margins by an early hand, this system certainly allowed for a convenient use of the manuscript for one's private devotion. In his study of this textual tradition, Jonathan Black provides a provisional list of some forty manuscripts in public collections, dated from the ninth to the fifteenth century, mostly Psalters, which include the preface with the same incipit (Black 2002, pp. 41-42). It remains to be ascertained whether the selection of six uses seen here was widespread or depends on the owner's personal interests. Although the *Dicta Augustini de laude psalorum* benefited from a large diffusion, its occurrence in a fifteenth-century manuscript appears to be quite rare and certainly deserves further study.

## ILLUMINATION

Seven illuminated initials, marking the weekly Psalms for Matins and Sunday Vespers:

f. 3, Psalm 1, Initial 'B', "Beatus vir...";

f. 27, Psalm 38, Initial 'D', "Dixi custodiam...";

- f. 35, Psalm 52, Initial 'D', "Dixit insipiens...";
- f. 43, Psalm 68, Initial 'S', "Salvum me fac deus...";
- f. 53v, Psalm 80, Initial 'E', "Exultate deo...";
- f. 62v, Psalm 97, Initial 'C', "Cantate domino...";
- f. 71v, Psalm 109, Initial 'D', "Dixit dominus."

This complete Psalter gathers the one hundred and fifty psalms to be recited each week during the Divine Office. The seven illuminated initials introduce the secular division of the Psalter, distinguishing the first psalm to be said at Matins for each day of the week. It begins with Psalm 1 for Sunday, Psalm 26 for Monday, Psalm 38 for Tuesday, Psalm 52 for Wednesday, Psalm 68 for Thursday, Psalm 80 for Friday, Psalm 97 for Saturday, alongside Psalm 109 for the Sunday Vespers. The absence of illumination for the initial of Psalm 26 most likely results from a mistake by the scribe, who had already copied it in blue ink (f. 18v).

These refined illuminated initials reflect developments of Paduan illumination at the beginning of the fifteenth century, which are closely related to the characteristics of mid-fourteenth-century Bolognese illumination. The large initial introducing the opening Psalm (f. 3) displays characteristic features, such as the soft undulation of the foliate extensions in light pink, green, and red, the gold bezants with sharp endings, and the delicate, swift decoration of the blue ground with white penwork. A rather peculiar motif is the figure-of-eight foliate knotting of the opening initial's first stave. This motif, alongside the characteristics previously described, is also found in the historiated initials of two further manuscripts illuminated in Padua around 1410. These are the last of the six-volume Antiphony of the Collegiate Church of Monselice, Northern Italy (Padua, Biblioteca Capitolare, MS E 18 to E 24, especially E24; see Mariani Canova, 1999, pp. 205-206, no 75), and a copy of Dante's *Divina commedia*, dated 1411 (Paris, BnF, MS it. 530; see Avril, 1984, pp. 90-91). Based on their historiated as well as secondary decoration, these two manuscripts have been attributed to a master active in the workshop responsible for the *Bibbia istoriata padovana* (Rovigo, Accademia dei Concordi, MS Silvestriano 212; London, British Library, Add. MS 15277), a monument of Paduan illumination around 1400 (Huter, 1974; Cozzi, 1994; Mariani Canova, 1999). This Psalter might thus have been decorated in the workshop of this same artist.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the psalms were central to Christian devotion. The weekly recital of the 150 Psalms was the heart of the Divine Office, the daily cycle of prayers sung in common by monks and nuns (as well as members of other religious orders and the secular clergy). Psalters were also the primary book for private, lay devotion from early in the Middle Ages and well into the thirteenth century, and often much later. The additions made to this finely decorated Psalter are evidence that it was made for, and indeed actively used, for private prayer.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

"Liturgical Manuscripts," based on the Introduction to liturgical manuscripts, "Celebrating the Liturgy's Books" by Susan Boynton and Consuelo Dutschke  
<https://liturgicalmanuscripts.sandbox.library.columbia.edu/>

"Psalms", *New Catholic Encyclopedia*  
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12533a.htm>

Latin edition of the preface to the *De Psalmodorum usu*, by Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, t. 101, 1844  
[https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/De\\_usu\\_Psalmodorum](https://la.wikisource.org/wiki/De_usu_Psalmodorum)

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