

**Essays in Medieval Studies 4**

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**page 143****Franciscan Books of Hours from Italy in the Newberry Library****Paula Hutton**

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The study of illuminated books has been largely restricted to those books that feature the most remarkable miniatures: the splendid, the bizarre, the possessions of the rich and famous. The more ordinary, less lavishly illustrated Volumes have been virtually ignored. In particular, the relationship between books and the evolution of the Church, liturgy, and religious orders has been little explored,<sup>1</sup> but research into their pictures and texts may very well yield valuable insight into late medieval life, literacy and thought. It is in this light that I shall discuss three such books, now housed in the collections of the Newberry Library (MSS 84, 85, 86); all are books of hours in Latin, written in Gothic script; they are considered to be products of late fifteenth-century Italy. An important resource for my discussion has been Paul Saenger's catalogue of Newberry manuscripts, now in press, almost the only source of information about the books.<sup>2</sup>

Intended as they were for a relatively broad and diverse segment of the populace for their daily devotions, books of hours varied widely according to local religious custom and preferences and wealth of individual owners.<sup>3</sup> It would not be surprising, therefore, to discover such variation in the three Newberry books, but I hope to demonstrate that, in fact, these books are characterized by some striking similarities, similarities which have their roots in social and liturgical developments in late medieval Italy.

The first book, Newberry MS 84, is a very small (2 1/2" x 2"), leather-bound Volume; its format is

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shorter and simpler than that of many books of hours: Calendar, Hours of the Virgin (the major prayers), six psalms for the Office of the Virgin, the Changed Office of the Virgin, the seven Penitential Psalms, Litany, Office of the Dead, Hours of the Holy Cross, and the Mass in Honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Noticeably omitted are two fairly standard components of these books: the Gospel sequences and the Suffrages of the Saints; common popular prayers like the St. Jerome Psalter are also excluded. Several of the inner leaves, however, are filled with prayers added by the hands of later owners, one of whom also tried to retrace faded parts of the book.

The book's program of illustration is straightforward and directly related to the accompanying text. A historiated initial introduces each of the five major divisions of the Book: The Hours of the Virgin is marked by the Virgin and Child; the seven Penitential Psalms, by David in Penance; the Office of the Dead by a human skull; the Hours of the Cross by a cross with instruments of torture; the Mass for the Blessed Virgin Mary by a priest celebrating Mass. Thus, these illustration seem to have served a practical, as well as decorative, function in demarcating the most important prayers. Each of the principal illustrations is further elaborated by a order or roundel figure of a symbolic animal (e.g., a hart to represent the soul). The Calendar is illuminated with filagree borders of magenta, green and gold; the body of the text with alternating gold and blue initials. The relative prominence of gold leaf suggests that this is the most expensive of the three manuscripts. However, the illustration as a whole is relatively subdued and simple, befitting a book cherished for its spiritual, rather than material, value.

Paul Saenger's conclusion that this manuscript was "produced in northern or central Italy, possibly in Bologna,<sup>4</sup> is supported by a wealth of evidence, notably the Calendar's inclusion of the patron saints of Bologna, Sts. Dominic, Francis of Assisi,

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and the bishop Petronius. Among other figures whose presence lends further weight to a Bolognese origin are Peter of Verona, a thirteenth-century north Italian martyr, and St. Vincent Ferrer, a fifteenth-century friar who linked the

Franciscan and Dominican movements. A prayer scrawled in by a later owner contains the date "1474," providing a substantial clue for dating the book.

The second manuscript (MS 85) is the largest (3" x 2") and most unprepossessing of these books. Bound in limp vellum, its decorative scheme is restricted to enlarged initials in red and blue and delicate flourishes of red, blue and violet. Its text follows much the same format as MS 84; the one significant difference is that the Hours of the Holy Spirit replaces the Mass of the Blessed Virgin as the final segment of prayers.

The present starkness of the book is misleading. Several leaves, including the November leaves of the Calendar, have been removed, leaving the text incomplete. The fact that the missing folios occur just before the Hours of the Virgin, the seven Penitential Psalms, the Office of the Dead, the Hours of the Cross, and the Hours of the Holy Spirit strongly suggests that these missing leaves were illustrated, perhaps resembling those of the Bolognese book.

There is one small but quite remarkable feature of this book: the catchwords are placed vertically, in the left border of the recto, rather than in their usual site at the base of the verso. It is difficult to ascertain what such placement may indicate about the production of this particular book; it may well be that by this time the devotional texts were so familiar that the catchwords had become purely decorative.

Dating this book is a much easier matter than determining its place of origin. The presence of the litany of St. Bonaventure, canonized in 1482, and a reference to Sixtus IV, who died in 1484, as the current pope, provide a precise time frame. On the other hand, there are no clear clues to help in localizing the manuscript. Some saints included in

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the Calendar, such as Sts. Viviana and Placidius, were especially venerated in Rome, but others, like Apollinaris of Ravenna and Vitalis of Milan, were celebrated in northern Italy. Obviously, further study into this matter is needed.

The third of these books of hours (Newberry MS 86) is the tiniest (1 1/3" x 9/10"). Its texts are identical with those of MS 85, but its program of illustration is far more extensive and complex. Its border illustrations depict playfully intertwining flora and fauna and architectural motifs in a wide array of colors. Birds adorn almost every illustrated leaf, while on several occasions a monkey, a hare, or even a human head makes an appearance. Whatever the symbolic origin of such a decorative scheme may have been, by the late fifteenth century these had become rather routine motifs in books of hours. An examination of these marginal illustrations reveals that the degree of completion varies: some leaves display an elaborate and quite detailed use of color, while others are merely outlined. Indeed, a number of folios have no decoration at all. Thus, an initial impression is that the illumination of this manuscript was unfinished.

This impression is further strengthened upon inspection of the entire book. There are two full-page miniatures: the *Annunciation*, which precedes the Hours of the Virgin, and the *Massacre of the Innocents*, which appears *within* the text of the Hours of the Virgin, but these were not original components of the Volume. They are considered to be sixteenth-century Venetian works inserted into the book.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, six blank, ruled folios in intervals where miniatures might be expected to occur: before the Hours of the Virgin; the six psalms for Matins; the Seven Penitential Psalms; the Office of the Dead; the Office of the Holy Cross; and the Office of the Holy Spirit. There is certainly reason to believe that the program of illustration originally planned for this book was similar in subject matter and function to that for the Bolognese book of Hours.

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There are no firm guidelines by which to date this book, but a comparison with others suggests the last quarter of the fifteenth century. There are more solid grounds for Saenger's suggestion that the book is from "north Italy, possibly Padua,"<sup>6</sup> since the Calendar lists several figures prominent in the religious history of that city: St. Anthony; the first bishop Prosdocimus; the virgin martyr Justina; and Nicolai de Tolentino.

The differences in the Calendars help to establish the regions in which the books were produced and to provide guidelines for dating them. But do these local variations in feast days apply as well to the other principal texts of the books and to their makeup as a whole.?

When one accounts for the missing segments of the latter two Newberry books, one finds a surprising degree of uniformity in the organization and content of the devotional texts. The arrangement of the individual prayers is very much the same, and the wording of most of the texts is identical. Furthermore, all three books exhibit a similar hierarchy of decoration. Major initials at the beginning of each text (e.g., "D" in "Dominus") are given the greatest prominence, while within the text itself, specific letters ("b" in "beatus," for instance) are highlighted. Finally, as previously mentioned, the major illustrations that were originally planned or executed would have appeared at the same points in the texts. Given the oft-cited statements about the dissimilarity of books of hours,<sup>7</sup> this phenomenon requires some investigation.

The fact that all three books adhere to the Use of Rome (that is, the prayers are drawn from the breviary established by the Roman Curia) might be cited as a partial explanation. However, a comparison with other books of hours that followed this usage reveals that this did not necessarily produce a standardized format. For example, a contemporary book from northwestern France following this usage includes both Gospel sequences and Suffrages, and its order of prayers is different.<sup>8</sup> In a fif-

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teenth-century Flemish book, the Hours of the Holy Spirit and several additional prayers *precede* the Hours of the Virgin.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, then, the Use of Rome allowed for considerable diversity.

Nor is the similarity of the Newberry books simply a result of their Italian origin. Although the Use of Rome dominated the liturgy in Italian cities, strong local traditions were even more pronounced there than in France or England. Comparisons with other Italian books of hours again disclose great variation in both text and illustration. The celebrated Visconti Hours seems to follow French models for books of hours.<sup>10</sup> The Florentine Serristori Hours and the Hours of Alfonso of Aragon, from Naples, both in the Victoria and Albert Museum, contain entirely different prayers: the latter is distinguished by its humanist script.<sup>11</sup> The opulent sixteenth-century Farnese Hours, in the Pierpont Morgan Library, omits the Calendar and features several rare prayers.

Is the similarity of the Italian books of hours in the Newberry Library, then, merely a matter of coincidence? There is another prominent element common to all three, which is expressed in both Calendars and Litanies. While it is to be expected that such figures as apostles and church fathers should be celebrated, other feasts indicate a more particular religious affiliation: loyalty to the Franciscan order. The feast day of St. Francis of Assisi is denoted on all three calendars; in MSS 84 and 85, it is a red-letter day, while in MS 86 the day is said to commemorate the "seraphic St. Francis"; he is also listed in all three litanies among monks and hermits. Furthermore, two important women in the early Franciscan movement, Sts. Clare and Elisabeth, are celebrated in all three Calendars and are included among the virgins in the Litanies. Prominent among other Franciscan saints are St. Anthony of Padua, St. Bonaventure, and a more contemporary Franciscan leader, Bernardino of Siena.

Despite the presence of several figures in the Dominican movement, an important feature of all

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three calendars argues quite strongly against a Dominican origin and bolsters the case for a Franciscan attribution. The day of December 8 is celebrated in each book as the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin. The debate on the idea of the Immaculate Conception was one of the most heated theological controversies of the Middle Ages. The Franciscans were in the forefront of the popular movement espousing this cause; the Dominicans, loyal to arguments advanced by St. Thomas Aquinas, strenuously opposed this development and refused to recognize the feast of the Immaculate Conception until the seventeenth century. It was proclaimed as a feast day for the entire church by Pope Sixtus IV in 1477, thus raising some questions about the date of 1474 that appears in the first book of hours. It is, however, possible that this feast was already included in the usage of specific orders.

How might adherence to Franciscan ideals explain the relatively standard structure of these books? The Franciscan movement had led a movement for liturgical reform since the thirteenth century, when the possible variations in the liturgy had seemed almost infinite. Basing their devotional formulas upon the reforms of their first papal sponsor, Innocent III, they aimed at a shorter, simpler, and more uniform program, for both friars and laity. It should come as no surprise that books of hours produced under the aegis of the Franciscans should reflect this spirit.

We must also consider the possible ownership of these books. In comparison with such Volumes as the Visconti or Farnese Hours, these are humble, unpretentious books. They are intended to function as devotional books, not to serve as display items of luxury. The illustration plays a decidedly subordinate role to the text. One can assume that they originally belonged to people who were both prosperous and pious, with some relationship to the Franciscan movement. The small dimensions of the books initially suggest the possibility that they served as portable Volumes for itinerant friars; however, it

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is equally possible that they were the property of lay people. By the end of the fifteenth century, there was quite substantial support for the Franciscans, especially in the phenomenon of the Observant movement, among the laity in Italy. The Franciscans encouraged active lay participation in religious affairs and fostered the development of a "Third Order"--those who carried out many required duties of the Franciscans without actually taking the vows of the Order. In fact, it has been estimated that by 1500, some 600,000 Italians were connected in some way with this movement. While it is impossible to be certain, it appears very likely that the Newberry's books of hours were produced within the context of this phenomenon.

In his study of books of hours, John Harthan suggests that all these books "modest and magnificent, have something to teach us."<sup>12</sup> The Newberry manuscripts, while modest in comparison to some of the most lavish books of hours, confirm this assessment. However, in order to grasp these lessons, we must look at the book as a whole and as an integral part and a product of its society.

Notes

1. The specific phenomenon of "hours" of prayer is discussed in several works on illuminated books, probably most thoroughly in John Harthan, *The Book of Hours* (New York, 1977).
2. Paul Saenger, *Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Newberry Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; in press).
3. Harthan, *op. cit.*, p. 9; Robert G. Calkins, *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), p. 243.
4. Saenger, *op. cit.*, MS 84.
5. Saenger, *op. cit.*, MS 86.
6. Saenger, *ibid.*

7. See, for example, Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, vol. I (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 27.
8. Bibliotheque National MS lat. 10553.
9. Bibliotheque National MS lat 13286.
10. G. Grassi, *The Visconti Hours* (Turin, 1972).
11. The Serristori Hours, London L1722-1921; Hours of Alfonso of Aragon, Salting Collection No. 1224.
12. Harthan, *op. cit.*, p. 9.