

BIRKBECK MS. I

■ THE BIRKBECK HOURS ■ France (north), s. XV<sup>2</sup>

Books of hours are Christian devotional books containing sets of prayers and psalms. They were often made for personal or family use, and therefore represent the most common type of medieval manuscript book – so much so that they have been defined as the “best seller” of the Middle Ages. Books of hours were often illuminated – images had an exemplary and meditative function – and richly illuminated, as is the case with this manuscript owned by Birkbeck College.

*The Birkbeck Hours* was made in France in the fifteenth century, which is commonly considered as the golden age (and place) of the book of hours. Its structure is absolutely typical: it begins with a calendar of Church feasts, followed by extracts from the four Gospels, two popular Marian orations, the Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the seven Penitential Psalms and a Litany of Saints, the Hours of the Cross and an Office for the Dead.

1. ff. 1–12v: Calendar in French.
2. ff. 13–18: Extracts from the four Gospels (Saint John, Saint Luke, Saint Matthew, Saint Mark). “Inicium sancti evangelii / secundum Iohannem ... sermonem confir / mante sequentibus signis. / Deo gratias”.
3. ff. 18–25: Two orations to the Virgin Mary, “Obsecro te” and “O intemerata”. “Oratio ad nostram dominam. / Obsecro te / domina ... et letitiam sempiternam / amen. Pater noster”.
4. ff. 25v–26: Added in a French hand (s. XVI/ XVII?), prayers headed “Les trois Aves Maria”. f. 26v is blank.
5. ff. 27–84: Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary. f. 84v is blank. “Domine labia / mea aperies ... ad dona perveniat sem / piterna. Per Christum dominum / nostrum amen”.
6. ff. 85–101: Seven Penitential Psalms and Litany of Saints. “Domine, ne in f / urore tuo argu / as me ... Sequuntur hore de sancta cruce”.
7. ff. 101v–108: Hours of the Cross. “Laudem tuam. / Deus in adiutorium me[um] ... Sequuntur vigilie mortuorum”.
8. ff. 108v–138v: Office for the Dead. “Dilexi, quoniam / exaudiet Dominus ... Fidelium Deus omnium est ut supra.

Parchment, ii+138+iii leaves (no foliation); 112 X 80 (67 X 44) mm. Collation : 1<sup>12</sup>, 2<sup>8</sup>, 3<sup>8</sup>( – 7, 8), 4–10<sup>8</sup>, 11<sup>4</sup>( – 3, 4), 12–17<sup>8</sup>, 18<sup>8</sup>( – 7, 8). 18 lines per page. Ruled in pale brown pencil. Gilded page edges. Humidity has bleached the first four folia (especially the blue ink).

Written in gothic *littera bastarda*. Borders of scrolling against the outer margin of each folio, in blue, gold, red and black, often with lozenges with floral motifs on a ground of gold paint. Line fillers in blue and red patterned in white, with black contours and occasionally spots of gold, of various forms (mostly rectangular, but also elliptical and flower-shaped). Twelve 60 X 40 miniatures picturing, at f. 27, the Annunciation; at f. 49, the Visitation; at f. 60, the Nativity; at f. 65v, the Annunciation to the Shepherds; at f. 69, the Adoration of the Magi; at f. 72v, the Presentation of Christ at the Temple; at f. 76, the Flight into Egypt; at f. 79v, the Coronation of the Virgin; at f.85, King David praying; at f. 101v, Christ on the Cross between the Virgin and Saint John; at f. 105, Pentecost with Virgin and Apostles; at f. 108v, burial with priest with two hooded weepers. On these same leaves, there are 4-line blue initials patterned in white on golden ground, with floral motifs inside, and the border scrolls frame the entire leaf. The decoration of the single sections is as follows:

1. Red, blue, and gold script. The names of the Saints of the day alternate in blue and red, though some are in gold. At the top of each folio recto, a 3-line miniature in blue, red, and gold with the letters “kl” (*kalendas*) precedes the name of the month.

2. At f. 13: 8-line initial framing picture of Saint John; at f. 14v, 3-line decorated initial, and picture of Saint Luke in a panel of the border scroll; at f. 15v, 6-line initial framing a picture of Saint Matthew; at f. 17, 8-line initial framing picture of Saint Mark.
3. At f. 18: 7-line initial framing picture of the Virgin Mary with the Child; at f. 20v: 6-line miniature with a picture of the Piety and a 2-line initial in the right-hand corner.
- 5–8. 1- and 2-line initials in gold paint, patterned in blue and red.  
Eighteenth/nineteenth century binding, red morocco with gold tooling.

Written in northern France (probably Paris or Reims) in the second half of the fifteenth century. Given to Birkbeck College in 1977 by Eileen Kaye, widow of Dr Charles Fox, Lecturer in Mathematics at Birkbeck between 1920 and 1951.

*Secundo folio* (f. 14): [potesta]tem filios Dei fieri hiis qui

Dr Giacomo Giudici, June 2017

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