

Master of the Cardinal of Bourbon (designer) (Paris, fl. c. 1480-95); Master of Robert Gaguin (illuminator) (Paris, fl. 1485-95)

Posidonius of Apameia, Astronomer, hand-colored woodcut on parchment (71 x 79 mm.), from the *Mer des hystoires*

France, Paris, likely 1488-1489

This cutting comes from the first edition of the *Mer des hystoires* [Rudimentum novitiorum], which is a universal chronicle published in Paris by Pierre le Rouge in 1488-1489. Repeated a number of times in the edition, it illustrates here Chapter 59, "On philosophers and poets," with a depiction of "Posidonius the astrologer." The *Mer des hystoires* is considered one of the most elegant illustrated books of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Copies were often hand-colored and printed on vellum, made to order for wealthy patrons and bibliophiles. The present cutting must have come from an elaborately illuminated copy, one that had painted paragraph marks and line-fillers, as well as woodcuts delicately hand-colored and highlighted in liquid gold.

Posidonius was a Greek Stoic, philosopher, politician, astronomer, native to Apamea (Syria), and was considered the greatest polymath of his age. He advanced the theory that the Sun emanated a vital force which permeated the world, and, according to Cicero, he is said to have invented a mechanism (like an orrery) that exhibited the diurnal motions of the sun, moon, and the five known planets.

The artist who designed the woodcuts is, according to Isabelle Delaunay, the Master of the Cardinal of Bourbon, and the painter is most likely the Master of Robert Gaguin. Both are Parisian artists, illuminators and designers of woodcuts, closely associated with the book trade and responsible for many luxury manuscripts and luxury editions around 1500. In the woodcut, Posidonius's dress evokes that of the ancients. He is seated in a landscape in front of a scientific instrument that resembles a Ptolemaic armillary sphere. Armillary spheres were used well into the seventeenth century to teach the concepts and coordinate systems of spherical astronomy, with the Earth at the center, and rings representing the horizon, equator, tropics, ecliptic, and important colures. In front of the sphere is a flat instrument, schematically rendered, that looks like a very simple type of sun dial.

Literature: Avril and Reynaud, 1993; Delaunay, 2000; Pellechet, 7839 (7777); BnF, Catalogue des incunables..., II, R-221, pp. 525-526; Goff, R-346; Monceaux, *Le Rouge*, I, 226-232; Van Praet, V, p. 7, no. 8; MacFarlane, 172 (for the third edition printed by Le Rouge for Antoine Verard).