

## THOMAS A KEMPIS, *Imitatio Christi*

In Latin, manuscript on paper

Austria (Tirol) or Southern Germany, c. 1469-1491

i + 153 + i (parchment, leaf from another manuscript, described below) + i (paper) folios on paper, watermark, crossed keys with cross above, same type as Piccard Online 121266, Nördlingen 1469; 121284, Ansbach 1469; 121265, Munich 1468; 121289, Hohenreichen 1469; 121291, Augsburg 1483; and 121299, Öhringen 1471, modern foliation in pencil, top outer corner recto, 1-152 omits the first blank leaf, complete (i<sup>12</sup> [1, unnumbered, 2, f. 1] ii-xii<sup>12</sup> xiii<sup>12</sup> [-10, 11, 12, cancelled with no loss of text]), horizontal catchwords very bottom inside margin (many partially or mostly trimmed), no signatures, frame ruled in ink with all bounding lines full-length (justification, 137 x 95-50 mm.), written below the top line in a formal hybrida script in twenty-three to twenty long lines, red rubrics, four- to two-line red, blue, or green initials, f. 1, six-line red initial, with extensions forming a partial border in the inner and lower margins, with infilling and exuberant pen decoration in brown ink, including three faces in profile, and a green laurel wreath enclosing a coat-of-arms (described in provenance, below) in excellent condition, slight stain outer margins ff. 1-13, a few leaves soiled. Bound in nineteenth-century (?) brown leather over pasteboard, front and back covers with double fillets in gilt, smooth spine, gold-tooled with simple stamps and rules forming five compartments, title on black leather in the second compartment, lettered, "De Imitatione Christi," and in the lower, "Manuscript. Circa 1463-1470," worn along hinges, especially at the top of the spine, cracked at the upper edge, otherwise in very good condition. Includes as a binding fragment parchment leaf from another manuscript, Southern Germany or Austria (?), c. 1275-1300, now the back endleaf, presumably preserved from an earlier binding, blank on recto, with ex-libris from the monastery of St. Georgenberg dated 165[7], partially erased, "montis," ruled in lead, justification 159 x 108 mm., written in an upright gothic bookhand in two columns of 36 lines, text in the lower half of column a has been erased, measures 207 x 137 mm., text: St. Bernard, De consideratione, Book 5, parts of chapters two and three (see Migne, Patrologia latina 182, 789C-790B. incipit, "[per]hibet. Inde est quod dicebat . . . species propriis" [second half of column a erased]; column b, incipit, "quidem optat secunda adorat . . . spiritus tribus//." Dimensions 206 x 145 mm.

This is an attractive copy of one of the most enduring expressions of the spirituality of the Modern Devotion. It includes a coat-of-arms that demonstrates it belonged to the Austrian Benedictine monastery of St. Georgenberg while Kaspar II Augsburgur was Abbot, and as such it is an interesting demonstration of the dissemination of this text. In its neat hybrida script, numbered tables of chapters (here following each of the four books), and careful explanatory rubrics, it is a good example of up-to-date fifteenth-century bookmaking.

### PROVENANCE

1. The manuscript includes on f. 1 a coat-of-arms, based on the arms of Kaspar II Augsburgur and the monastery of St. Georgenberg; the arms in this manuscript are quartered, with two crosses, gules, and two watering cans, gules. The coat-of-arms in an incunabula from the same monastery, now Oxford, Bodleian, Auct.6Q 5.7, are more formally depicted (cross of St George, gules, with escutcheon en surtont, argent, a watering can; see online resources below for image), who was Abbot of St. Georgenberg from 1469-91. It may have been written for him in the neighborhood of the Abbey, or even at St. Georgenberg itself, or possibly in Southern Germany. The watermark was widely used in Southern Germany and has been recorded from 1469 to 1483. No internal verification now survives in the manuscript to support the narrower range of

dates, c.1463-1470, recorded on the binding, which may preserve evidence from an earlier binding.

Abbot Kaspar II Augsburg (abbot, 1469-91) was instrumental in enlarging the monastery's library; he had humanistic interests, and spent time in Italy on diplomatic missions, acquiring at least eight manuscripts in Italy, and commissioning a copy of Petrarch in Mainz in 1466 (Jeffrey and Yates, 1985, p. xi).

The monastery of St. Georgenberg was founded on the site of a hermitage on the Georgenberg ("St. George's Mont"), near Stans, in the Tirol, Austria; in 1138 the community was recognized as a Benedictine monastery. The monastery suffered a series of fires (in 1284, 1448, 1637, and finally in 1705); after this last disaster, it was moved to Fiecht in the Inn valley, and reopened in 1708. Suppressed in 1807, it was restored in 1816, and is still the site of a monastery. A number of its most precious manuscripts were sold in 1850 to raise money (many are now in the British Library, where they were "purchased of Mr. Asher of Berlin"; see Yates and Jeffrey, 1985, p. xiii).

Benedikt Herschl from Tegernsee, who became abbot in 1639 (resigned 1660, d. 1671), reorganized the library, and wrote a catalogue listing 2,000 books and 173 manuscripts. During this period, the books were given new ex-libris, written on the first and last folios, and usually dated (most often in 1652, 1659, and 1661; see Jeffrey and Yates, 1985, p. xii). This manuscript includes several ex-libris notes from that time: f. 1, "Ad Bibliothecam Monasterii Montis S. <erased, Georgii> 1659, in the margin, "<erasure> 1652; f. 152, "Ad Bibliothecam Monasterii <erased: montis S. Georgi>, 1659."

The manuscript was presumably still at the Abbey in the eighteenth century; after the rebuilding at Fiecht, Abbot Pirmin Seidl (abbot, 1772-89) reorganized the library. At that time many of the manuscripts were given a new shelf-mark with a roman numeral I to V and an Arabic numeral, 1-over 200, written on the opening folio, this manuscript is "II, 62," recorded in ink on the front flyleaf.

Jeffrey and Yates catalogued around eighty manuscripts (and additional archival material), from the filming of the monastery's library by HMML, published in 1984; at that time they identified fifty-six manuscripts that once belonged to the collection and now are in the British Library and in the Landesarchiv in Innsbruck, as well as thirteen manuscripts in unknown locations (this manuscript not among them).

2. Possibly sold by Lardanchet, Cat. 45 (1951), no. 893, and Maggs, Cat. 816 (1954), no. 162; see Schoenberg Database nos. 52553, and 92231 (unverified). The provenance, watermark and number of folios suggest these references are to this manuscript; however, the Database records somewhat different outer dimensions and more significantly, a different binding. Further research is needed on this point.
3. Belonged to Joost R. Ritman (b. 1941), Amsterdam, the Dutch businessman and distinguished collector of art and books, who acquired it from Bernhard Rosenthal in 1990; Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica MS 200; bookplate, inside front cover, briefly described in *Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections* (see Online Resources).

## TEXT

ff. 1-152 [preceded by a blank, unnumbered folio], *Sequitur libellus consolatorius ad institutionem deuotorum. Cuius primum Capitulum est de Imitacione christi et contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi. Et quidam totum librum sic appellant scilicet liber de Imitacione Christi. Sicut ewangelium mathei appellatur liber generacionis ihesu chrsti. Eo quod in primo capitulo fit mencio de generatione christi secundum carnem. Sequitur Capitulum primum, incipit, "Qui sequitur me non ambulat in tenebris dicit dominus. Hec sunt verba Christi quibus admonitionem .... Proficies quantum tibi ipsi vim intuleris," Explicit liber primis de Imitacione christi et de contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi; f. 32v, Sequitur tabula primi libri, incipit, "De imitacione christi et de contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi, i, ..."; [book two] ff. 33v-51v, Sequitur nunc secunda pars istius libri que tractat de ammonicione ad interna trahentem siue ammonicionibus ad interna trahentes, Capitula primum de interna conuersatione, incipit, "Regnum dei intra vos est dicit dominus ... oportet nos intrare in regnum dei," Explicit liber secundus de Imitacione christi De ammonicionibus ad interna trahentibus"; f. 51v, Sequitur tabula, incipit, "De Interna conuersacione, i ..."; ff. 51v-119v, Sequitur liber tertius de Imitacione christi in quo tractatur de interna consolacione etc. De interna christi locucione ad animam fidelem, Capitulum primum, incipit, "[A]vdiam quid loquatur in me dominus deus, Beata anima que dominum ... ad patriam perpetue claritatis. Amen," Explicit liber interne consolacionis qui est tercius de Imitacione christi"; f. 119v, Sequitur tabula huius libri tercii qui tratcatatur de Interna christi locucione ad animam fidelem, i [chapter one copied by error as part of the rubric] ..."; ff. 121v-151v, Sequitur liber quartus de Imitacione christi In quo tractatur de venerabili sacramento Eukaristie, Deuota exhortatio ad sacram communionem, Vox christi, incipit, "Venite ad me omnes qui laboratis ... non essent mirabilia nec ineffabilia dicenda," Explicit liber quartus de Imitacione christi in quo de venerabili sacramento altaris tractatur"; ff. 151v-152, Sequitur tabula huius quarti libri, incipit, "Primo deuota exhortacio ad sacram christi communionem ...," Compilatio huius libelli fuit quidam frater Thomas nomine ordine canonicorum regularium augustini montis sancte agnetis Traiectensis.*

Thomas a Kempis, *Imitatio christi*, ed. Pohl, 1904, and Lupo, 1982; this manuscript includes four books, arranged in the order found in Pohl's and most other printed editions.

This is a very clean copy of the text; the lack of any marginal annotations is notable. Its careful, very legible hybrid script, numbered table of chapters (here following each book), and detailed rubrics are all characteristics of the concern for visual and textual clarity characteristic of many fifteenth-century manuscripts (see Rouse, 1991). In this case the opening rubric is, however, identical to the rubric in the first printed addition of the text, printed in Augsburg by Güther Zainer before 1473, Hain 8589\*. Further research would be needed to determine whether this is a copy of the printed edition (the final rubric differs in wording from the printed edition).

Delaissé, 1956, is a diplomatic edition of Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 5855-61, copied by Thomas a Kempis in 1441, which includes the *Imitatio christi*, as well as other texts by Thomas. Many manuscripts of the *Imitatio* differ in the number of books they include and in their order. The earliest dated copy of Book One was copied in 1424; all four books can be found in a dated manuscript from 1427, but there was certainly considerable variability, especially in the early manuscripts, and in different regions (English copies, for example, often include only Books 1-3). Compared with the usual printed texts including Pohl's edition, the Brussels autograph of 1441 includes four books, arranged Book 1, 2, 4, 3.

Axters, 1971, assembled a lengthy inventory of the surviving manuscripts. Since then, the estimate of the number of surviving manuscripts and printed editions of the *Imitatio* has increased

steadily. Van Engen, 1988, p. 8, suggested there were 750 manuscripts and that the text was printed in more than 3,000 editions from the first edition in 1472 down to the last century, fifty of which date before 1500; Van Engen, 2008, p. 9, mentions 900 fifteenth-century manuscripts and one hundred early printed editions; Von Habsburg, 2011, suggests there are 800 manuscripts, and more than 740 printed editions from its composition up to 1650, making it the most frequently printed book in the sixteenth century apart from Bible, with over 100 editions before 1500. During the fifteenth century it was translated into French, German, Dutch, Middle English, Castilian, Catalan, Italian, and Portuguese among other languages.

The *Imitatio Christi* ("The Imitation of Christ") has been called "the most influential devotional book in Western Christian History" (Van Engen, 1988, p. 8), and it has been the subject of countless scholarly works, many of which have been concerned with the lively and enduring debate about the identity of its author. It has been ascribed to a very long list of authors including, among many others, Augustine, Bernard, Bonaventure, Jean Gerson, Chancellor of Paris (d. 1429), and to a presumed Italian Abbot, "John Gersen," and to Geert Grote (1340-1384) himself. Delaissé's critical study, published in 1956, of the Brussels manuscript (MS 5855-61) that was signed and dated by Thomas a Kempis in 1441, was key to convincing most scholars that it was by Thomas a Kempis, and he is widely accepted as the author today.

Thomas a Kempis (1379/80-1471), or Thomas of Kempen, born in Kempen, Germany, was part of the second generation of the *Devotio Moderna* after Geert Grote, the founder of this religious movement. He was educated in a school of the Brothers of the Common Life in Grote's native Deventer, Holland, and then became a canon at the Agnietenberg priory (Mount Saint Agnes), near Zwolle, a priory of the Congregation of Windesheim, where his brother John served as prior. He made his profession there in 1406 and was ordained in 1413. He was a prolific author, composing numerous devotional tracts, as well as a Chronicle of the priory.

In this work, Thomas encapsulated the spirituality of the *Devotio moderna*, or the New Devout, especially their emphatic emphasis on Christ, the importance of the Bible, the recommendation of the use of the vernacular for religious writings, and their focus on the interior life and a calm withdrawal from the world. The importance of the Bible, especially the Gospels, is found throughout the *Imitation*, since hearing and reading the Bible in the right spirit is central to a desire to follow Christ (Book one, chapter five). The degree to which Thomas himself internalized the Bible is found in the astounding number of scriptural citations found throughout the work; Becker, 2002, lists 3,815 scriptural sources in the *Imitation*.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

Watermarks, Piccard Online

<http://www.piccard-online.de/ergebnis1.php>

Benediktinabtei Sankt Georgenerg-Fiecht

[http://www.st-georgenberg.at/geschichte\\_fiecht.phtml](http://www.st-georgenberg.at/geschichte_fiecht.phtml)

Library

<http://www.st-georgenberg.at/bibliothek.phtml>

Medieval Manuscripts in Dutch Collections (Amsterdam, BPH MS 200)

<http://www.mmdc.nl/static/site/>

Bodleian Library,

<http://theconveyor.wordpress.com/2012/03/13/monastic-provenances-of-early-printed-books-in-bodleian-collections-case-3/>

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