

# A Book of Hours *Horaæ* c.1420

Special Collections featured item for December 2005  
by Fiona Barnard

**A Book of Hours *Horaæ*. For Paris use, c. 1420. Reading University Library MS 2087.  
Item held in the Archives of University of Reading Library.**



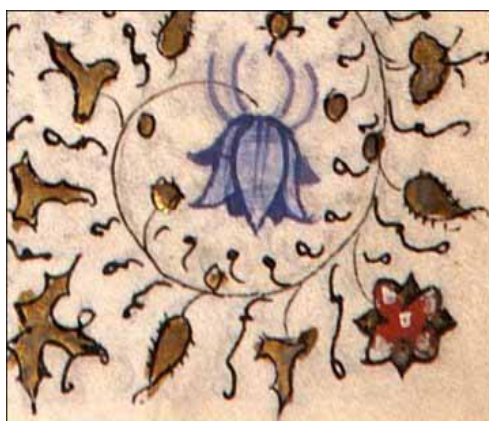
Books of Hours, or *Horaæ*, in Latin, were prayer books of private devotion for lay members of the Church. They were compilations of a number of different devotional texts which the owner could read at home or carry about on special occasions. Between the second half of the 13th century and the middle of the 15th, Books of Hours were the 'bestsellers' of their age, becoming by far the most popular and numerous kind of illuminated manuscript produced in monastic scriptoria. Indeed, for the great majority of those who owned a Book of Hours, it was probably the only book they possessed.

Both for the scribe and for his (necessarily) wealthy patron, a collection of prayers, psalms and lessons inspired by the adoration of the Virgin Mary merited the most skilful and elaborate decoration. Very few Books of Hours were signed by their makers. This beautifully decorated example dates from the early fifteenth century, and was produced for Paris use, possibly by a follower of the Bedford Master, at the Pedrizet school near Paris, between 1415 and 1435. Although the manuscript is written mainly in Latin, some of the prayers are in French and the manuscript throughout bears much evidence of its French origin.



Each of the 185 parchment leaves shows the text, written in dark brown ink in a gothic liturgical hand, with one- and two-line initials and line-fillers in blue, red and gold with white tracery. It is further 'illuminated' by miniatures, and decorative three-sided borders and jewel-like initials in a lively palette of burnished gold, blue, pink, red, orange and green. The miniatures act both as bookmarks, indicating where the major texts begin (Books of Hours were originally neither foliated nor paginated), and as embodiments of the texts, providing themes upon which to meditate.

The borders are in an ivyleaf design and are richly decorated, incorporating a variety of plant species including cornflowers, daisies, columbines, harebells and wild strawberries.



Books of Hours vary greatly in content and arrangement, but, in general, this manuscript is a typical example of its kind, although a number of the sections are imperfect with several pictures and sections of text missing. As with most Books of Hours, the manuscript begins with a perpetual calendar of the Church year. This example is written in French and lists the saints and feast days for each month alternately in red and blue ink, with particularly important days in gold, characteristic of the luxury French style. One of the key indications that this manuscript is Parisian is the highlighting of the name of St Geneviève, the patron saint of Paris, in gold on 3rd January. [see below]



Each month is illustrated with a miniature of the labour of the month, for example, harvesting grapes in September [below left], or striking trees with a stick to bring down acorns to fatten up pigs in November.[below right]



February shows a man warming himself at a fire [below]



There is also a miniature representing the appropriate sign of the Zodiac for each month, including Sagittarius, as depicted here.



The calendar is followed by a series of Gospel lessons by the four evangelists. The lessons are the same that were read at Mass on four of the Church's major feast days – Christmas (John), the Feast of Annunciation (Luke), Epiphany (Matthew) and the Feast of the Ascension (Mark).

Typically, the beginning of each of these readings is marked by a miniature of the author. This Book of Hours only contains the miniature for the first reading, that of John. He is depicted on the isle of Patmos, where he had been exiled by the Roman emperor Domitian, and where he received his vision of the Apocalypse and wrote the Book of Revelation. The miniature shows him at work, with his ink pot beside him, and his symbol, an eagle, hovering above him in the sky.



The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the Hours of the Virgin, which follow the Gospel lessons, form the central core of every Book of Hours. The Hours are usually made up of a series of prayers and psalms to the Virgin Mary in Latin to be said or sung throughout the course of the day at the canonical hours of Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. The Hours are thought to date at least from the 9th century, and to have been developed by Benedict of Ariane (c. 750-821). Part of the appeal of the Hours of the Virgin for the laity is their simplicity. Although there are some occasional variations, the same basic Hours were prayed every day. The Hours of the Virgin in most Books of Hours are illustrated by the major events in the Virgin's life surrounding the Infancy of Christ, although some of the miniatures in this manuscript appear to have been removed.

Of the four that remain, the first marks the beginning of Terce. As is traditional for this Hour, the illustration is of the Annunciation of the Shepherds. The Hour of Sext is marked with a miniature of the Adoration of the Magi. In this highly decorative scene, the eldest of the Magi is seen kneeling to present his gift and to kiss the Child's hand. The attention to detail in this miniature extends to the depiction of a hole in the roof of the stable.





An image of Christ's Presentation in the Temple illustrates the Hour of None. Here, the Christ Child is shown being presented by his mother to the high priest Simeon. The Virgin holds a basket of turtle doves, the sacrificial offering, while a handmaiden holds a candle for the procession of lights following the ceremony (from which the name Candlemas is derived).

The final Hour of Compline is marked by an image of the Coronation of the Virgin, the last momentous event in her life. The Virgin is shown kneeling as she is crowned as Queen of Heaven by her Son, who is seated on a throne, while two angels play stringed instruments in the background.



The seven penitential psalms that follow are all on the theme of the sinner seeking forgiveness, and are recited to help resist temptation to commit any of the seven Deadly Sins. The litany that accompanies them is an ancient incantation listing a whole series of saints, with appeals to each for prayers. This is followed by the Hours of the Cross and the Hours of the Holy Spirit. These sections are to be found in most Books of Hours, and follow the same canonical sequencing as the Hours of the Virgin, from Matins through to Compline, although they are much shorter and do not include the hour of Lauds.

The Office of the Dead is a long section of further psalms and readings intended to be said at a funeral, but, as with the Hours of the Virgin, and the Hours of the Cross, and of the Holy Spirit, it was intended to be recited daily as a reminder of one's mortality and possibly as a protection against dying suddenly and unprepared. The office was recited at a funeral as a means of reducing the time spent by one's friends and relatives in the fires of purgatory.



The miniature at the opening of the section depicts a burial scene, with a priest reading from a manuscript and shaking holy water over the corpse. The hooded figures behind him are professional mourners, dressed in black, and the figures in red hats are possibly representatives of the confraternity or parish guild of the deceased. A charnel house filled with skulls encloses the graveyard in which the burial takes place. In the Middle Ages, most people were only temporarily buried, as the concept of a permanent individual burial plot did not apply for most individuals. The constant digging and redigging of the cemetery would disturb the bones of previous occupants, as can be seen in this miniature. Once the flesh had been eaten away, the bones were collected and then stored in the charnel houses that surrounded the cemetery.

The Office of the Dead is followed by two French prayers, 'Tres douce Dame' (Fifteen joys of the Virgin) and 'Beau Sire Dieu' (Seven requests of the Lord) and two prayers to the Virgin, known by their opening words, 'Obsecro Te' and 'O Intemerata'. The manuscript concludes, as in most Books of Hours, with the Suffrages or Memoria to Saints. These are further appeals to the saints for aid from God through each saint's intercession, with reference to episodes from the life of each saint or an aspect of their holiness. This section is illustrated with twenty-one small miniatures of the saints, arranged in order of the celestial hierarchy, and identifiable by their personal emblems.

One of the most important saints is St. Michael the Archangel, the leader of the good angels who quashed Lucifer's revolt and sent the rebels to hell and the judge at the Last Judgement. In the miniature he is shown set before a shimmering gilt diaper pattern, holding the scales of judgement, with which he is weighing the souls of two tiny figures, and battling a demon with the aid of a processional cross.



St. Margaret was a particularly popular saint in the Middle Ages. Margaret, having rejected the amorous advances of the Roman prefect Olybrius, was subjected to tortures and imprisoned with a devil, in the form of a dragon, swallowed her. However, she was saved by the cross that she carried, which upset the beast's stomach that then miraculously opened and released her. In the miniature the saint is depicted through the window of her prison tower, holding her cross and emerging from the dragon, even as it continues to consume her cloak.

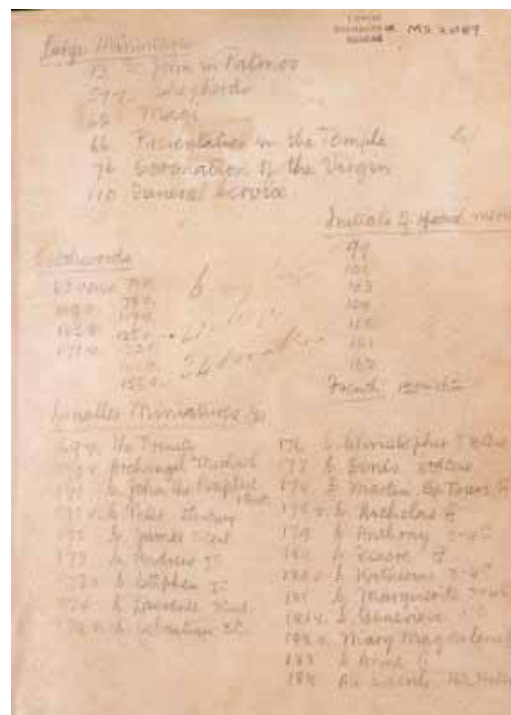


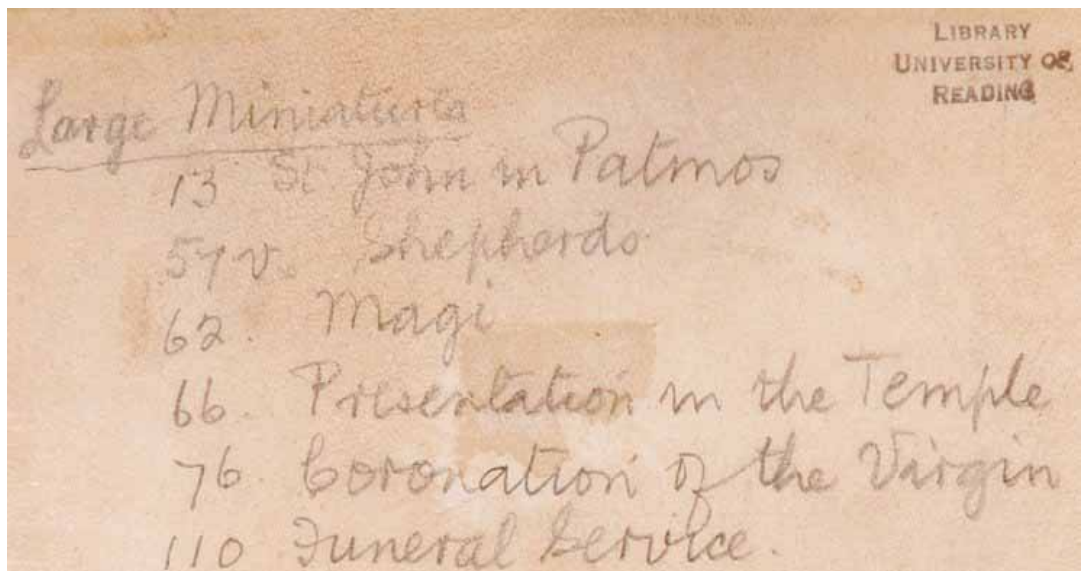


On the following page is a miniature of St. Geneviève, shown holding her symbol, a candle, which was continuously snuffed out by a devil with bellows and then relit by an angel, as the saint made her way to evening prayers.



The manuscript was donated to the Library in 1981 by Dr Nellie Eales, a former Senior Lecturer in Zoology at the University, and a student, colleague and friend of the late [Professor Francis Joseph Cole](#) FRS, Professor of Zoology at the University of Reading from 1907 to 1939. Dr Eales conducted extensive research on the manuscript, documented in pencil notes on the front end papers of the bound manuscript and on separate sheets and associated papers, identifying fourteen species of wild flower depicted in the ornamental borders and enquiring into the methods by which colours were made. She discovered that the colour green, for example, is a product of ‘malachite, carbonate of copper and wild iris flowers or leaves crushed with massicot’.





The manuscript has been rebound in crimson velvet and placed in a red morocco slip-case some time during the 19th century. Although it is known to have belonged to a book collector, Henry White JP DL FSA, (whose bookplate it bears) and was among the books from his Library sold by Sotheby in 1902, its earlier history has yet to be explored.



## References

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