Episode 2 - Why do you have parts missing?

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One of the medieval manuscripts held in The University of Iowa Libraries is a gorgeous example of a late 15th-century Book of Hours, likely produced in Paris, France. There are a large number of medieval Books of Hours that survive today because in the late Middle Ages, Books of Hours were the equivalent of today's best sellers!

For the Books of Hours that have survived, their current state and condition can vary widely. These books are well-known for their colorful marginal decorations, ornate capital letters and delicately-painted imagery that often introduce and accompany sections of text. Unfortunately, over the course of centuries many of these books have been damaged, destroyed

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or simply broken apart and sold as single leaves.

The manuscript in the The University of Iowa Libraries (xMMs.Bo5, henceforth referred to as Ms Bo5) is no exception. But the peculiar nature of our book of hours makes us ask the question...

Why do you have SO MANY PARTS missing?

Watch the video here and read more about the manuscript below!

BACKGROUND

In order to investigate our question, it might be a good idea to first understand what exactly a typical book of hours contained and why they were so popular. Books of Hours were principally structured around the eight canonical offices in which monks, nuns and priests said and sung prayers every day—i.e. matins, lauds, prime, terce, sext, none, vespers and compline. Both noble and non-noble persons commissioned these books to be made and then used them as manuals for their own daily prayers. Books of Hours became the vehicle of private, rather than communal devotion. They were also often used to teach children and adults to read Latin. Below is a typical layout of a medieval Book of Hours. The University of Iowa's Ms Bo5 looks just like this:
A Calendar for the Liturgical Year, indicating important holy days and saints' days.

Readings from the Four Gospels

Two important prayers to the Virgin Mary: "Obsecro te" and "O intemerata"

The Hours of the Virgin (adapted around the canonical hours)

The Hours of the Cross (adapted around the canonical hours)

The Hours of the Holy Spirit (adapted around the canonical hours)

The Seven Penitential Psalms, with Litanies

The Office of the Dead

The Commemoration of the Saints, also known as the Suffrages

(optional prayers and supplemental texts)

As these books became more and more popular, book producing workshops began to focus on increasing the efficiency of their production system. Scribes would copy out generic texts, illuminators would decorate initials and borders, artists would design and execute imagery, and binders would bind quires (also known as gatherings) into a codex format. At each stage of production however, the buyer could request personal touches to be included, such as the insertion of certain feast days in the calendar (often according to local usages or customs), or the addition of prayers to favored saints, or the inclusion of a specific decorative style that reflected personal symbols and/or family crests.

Asking the question "Why do you have so many missing parts?" makes for an interesting task. How can a manuscript provide clues as to why it's parts are missing when the clues would seem to be in the missing parts themselves? Fortunately our manuscript provides three important clues as to WHERE parts are missing. With this information, an understanding of what a typical book of hours contains, and a little research, we can look at the text around the missing parts and perhaps uncover WHAT exactly is missing and then surmise WHY!
The first clue lies in the presence of offprints, also known as shadows. On certain folios of our book of hours, the gold leaf decoration in the margins has left a shadow on the opposite page. For example fol. 135 has a three-sided marginal decoration with certain areas that have been filled in with gold-leaf. Over time, the gold-leaf parts of this geometric pattern have imprinted themselves on the facing page, fol. 134v. Thus we know that no folios are missing between what we now call folio 134v and 135.

However, there are other folios scattered throughout our manuscript that hold evidence of shadows, but the corresponding decoration that would have created the imprint is not present. Our book of hours has sixteen "missing" imprints, and thus ostensibly sixteen missing folios.

When these missing folios are placed within their textual context, it becomes clear that each missing folio falls at the beginning of a new section of the Book of Hours. In the example below, Fol. 41 displays a shadow, but fol. 40v has no decoration to match it. The text from fol. 41 begins "me festina. Gloria patri et filio...." This text is part of the introduction to the canonical hour of Lauds, found in the section called the Hours of the Virgin. However, it is missing its first few words: "Deus in adiutorium meum intende. Domine ad adiuvandum..."
The "missing" folio that preceded fol. 41 must have held the beginning words of this section. But since these words would not have taken up an entire folio, it is likely that there was something else that accompanied the words.

In other Books of Hours, new sections often began with an image for the reader to contemplate. The shadow in the top margin on fol. 41 indicates the presence of a niche, or frame, that would have provided an outline for a full-page image. The first words of the section would have then been written below the framed image. With further research, it becomes clear that the beginnings of all sections in our book of hours, bar one, are missing. That's sixteen full folios missing and these folios likely contained full-page illustrations of the artist who worked on this book.
CLUE TWO - HOLES INSIDE FOLIOS MISSING

In addition to whole folios missing, our book of hours contains two sections in which parts of pages are missing: at the front of the book, in the section of the Gospel Readings, and at the back of the book, in the section of the Suffrages.

A bit of context for the Gospel Readings. This section held excerpts from the four evangelists featured in the New Testament, John, Luke, Matthew and Mark. When we look closely at the missing parts in Ms Bo5, we see that they occur at the beginning of a given evangelist's excerpt, but no textual content is missing. Thus the only thing that could be missing are the images that once again accompanied the gospel readings. In our manuscript three images have been cut out of the pages, those of Luke, Matthew and Mark!
A bit of context for the Suffrages section. This section contained prayers directed towards specific saints. The owner of our Book of Hours chose only a few of these prayers to be copied into his/her book. But the missing parts in the Suffrages section are not as straightforward as the Gospel Readings section because not all the textual content is present. Some has been cut out. This can be explained however through careful analysis of the entire section. To begin with, if we look at the prayer dedicated to Saint Margaret. We see that the beginning text of her prayer is not missing, only her image is missing.
However, on the verso of this folio, there is text that was written on the verso of Margaret's image and this text is consequently missing as well. What we might conclude is that the image of Margaret is what was sought and that the text on the verso was collateral damage. This helps to clarify the other places in the Suffrages section in which text appears to be missing alongside images.
We can see that on the recto of fol. 135 one of the saints' images is missing; and the text next to it is missing as well. But the missing text does not mean this was simply careless cutting. The text next to the image on the recto also played the role as the back side of the image that appeared in that particular place on the verso of the same folio! So in these cases, the two images were targetted for extraction and the text that just happened to be on the opposite side of each image was also taken as collateral damage.

Thus once again the holes in the pages, both in the Gospel Readings and in the Suffrages, reveal missing images!
Our final clue is another place in Ms Bo5 where parts of folios are missing. In these cases, it is the folio margins that are missing and this occurs in two distinct places. First the Calendar section is missing some of its foredge and bottom margins. Second, one particular folio is missing only a sliver of its foredge and bottom margin, reducing it in size compared to all other folios.

A bit of context for the Calendar section. In Books of Hours, the calendar laid out the liturgical year for the reader. It included the month, the days, the weeks, and even the phases of the moon. Perhaps most importantly, it reminded the book's owner when he/she need to celebrate and commemorate important holy days and feast days.

In many Books of Hours the calendars also included images of activities pertinent to a specific month or season. These were often accompanied by an astrological sign.

So for example, in the image here, we see that the month of June might be accompanied by an image denoting a summer activity, like that of sheep shearing in this example, and the astrological sign of the crab (cancer). With this information, along with the knowledge that other images are missing in this manuscript, and indeed only images, we can surmise that the missing margins in our book of hours's Calendar section contained images that related to a specific month.

Yet, this leaves us with one very enigmatic question. If we are to conclude that someone has gone to great effort to painstakingly extract all the images from our
beautiful Book of Hours, **why then does one image remain?** That is a very good question!

What remains in our manuscript is a full-folio image of the apostle John that signals the opening of his Gospel excerpt. It is gorgeously executed and shows John in the traditional activity of writing his book on the Isle of Patmos, accompanied by his symbol, the eagle. The blue and red of his robe are highlighted with crossstrokes of gold. The grass of the island is defined with dark green brush strokes against a lighter green background. In the distance are blue hues that denote a castle, a church spire, and some smaller buildings. And all this is painted within its niche, or frame.

However, the folio on which this image appears is missing a slender portion of its foredge and bottom margins. In other words, while it aligns with the top margin of the rest of the book's folios, it falls short of being the same size as the other folios. These missing margins have provided a clue as to why this image has been retained in our manuscript. Cornelia Kennedy, a former graduate student in the Department of Art History at The University of Iowa, wrote her MA thesis on Ms Bo5 and has suggested that the folio with John's image was originally cut out along with all the other images. But after having cut it out, it may have occurred to the bookowner that the manuscript would not sell as well without any image whatsoever. Thus the bookseller likely reattached the folio with the manuscript, after it had already been trimmed for individual sale. Indeed the evidence suggests that the folio was tipped back into the manuscript so that it might look like it belonged to the original quire. But this is only supposition and we would welcome any other ideas as to why this one image has stayed with the book.

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As pointed out by Cornelia Kennedy, the evidence confirms that this image is original to this particular manuscript and was not imported from another. Its lateral borders
conform in style, type, and color to the other folios and the offset of the frames and decoration from the missing images—those detected on their facing folios—are similar to the frame and decoration of John on Patmos. Furthermore, the text under the image suggests the same script and hand as the rest of the manuscript and continues uninterrupted from fol. 14v into fol. 15.

CONCLUSION

After identifying and researching the three clues offered by Ms Bo5, it appears that there is only one answer to the question for this episode. The parts missing from this Book of Hours are all images! Their retail value as individual items would have surpassed what the manuscript could have fetched as a complete codex. It seems that what made a Book of Hours so beautiful also made it more valuable for collectors in later centuries.

If the missing images were executed by the same artist who painted John on the isle of Patmos, these would have been beautiful indeed. Cornelia Kennedy has suggested that the artist may have come from one of two workshops, but we have yet to identify him or her. If you have any thoughts or suggestions about this book's artist, or any other comments to add, or would just like to see the manuscript in real life, please do not hesitate to email me, Heather Wacha, at heather-wacha@uiowa.edu or tweet @UISpecColl or @hgwacha.

And finally, you may be wondering why this book of hours is bound in pink leather. This is the work of a former conservator and bookbinder at The University of Iowa Libraries Conservation Lab, Pamela Spitzmueller. After researching different coverings for medieval Books of Hours, she found that these books were often covered in pink leather, especially if they had been owned or used by a woman.

For further information see:


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