LOT 26

ALDHELM, DE LAUDE VIRGINITATIS, IN PRAISE OF VIRGINITY, IN LATIN, IN INSULAR SOUTHUMBRIAN MINUSCULE, DECORATED MANUSCRIPT ON VELLUM [SOUTHERN ENGLAND (PROBABLY GLASTONBURY OR WORCESTER), C.800]

a bifolium, each leaf 180mm. by 135mm., single column, 22 lines in black ink in a fine and early Insular Southumbrian minuscule, initials and simple paragraph marks once touched in red (now oxidised to silver), a few small early corrections, 17 tiny glosses in Anglo-Saxon (dated by Ker to the second half of tenth-century), translating words in the main text, one large combined initial 'gl' (opening 'gloriosas itidem ...') in insular style with sweeping fishhook-like ascenders surrounded by tiny dots in faded red (with some damage primarily caused by oxidisation), vellum fine but notably thick, slight spotting in places, overall in outstanding condition, in red niger morocco gilt, by C.&C. McLeish, in two concentric fitted leather- or cloth-covered slipcases
ESTIMATE 300,000-500,000 GBP  
Lot Sold: 337,250 GBP

PROVENANCE
A bifolium from the oldest and most important extant manuscript of a text by the earliest major English author, with glosses in the Anglo-Saxon language; perhaps once owned by St. Dunstan (c.910-88)

(1) E.A. Lowe attributed these leaves palaeographically to Worcester: "The Anglo-Saxon script has some resemblance to Mercian charters and Nicholson's guess of a Worcester origin may not be wide of the mark" ('Membra Disiecta', p.191). However, Gwara has traced a textual origin in Glastonbury (Gwara, Aldhelmi, 2001), through descendants which appear to have been produced there. Mercia in c.800 stood equidistant between the golden ages of Bede's Northumbria and the unification of England under Alfred and the kings of Wessex. It was the period of Mercia's greatest ascendency under King Offa (d.796), ruler of Mercia and overlord of all the provinces south of the Humber, and his immediate successors. In correspondence Charlemagne called him 'brother', and proposed marriage between his son and one of Offa's daughters. He was unprecedented in his hegemony and patronage of the arts. Centres under Mercian rule in the late eighth and early ninth centuries produced "some of the finest examples of Anglo-Saxon art" including such splendid late Insular codices as the Vespasian Psalter (British Library, Cotton, Vesp.A.i), and the Stockholm Codex Aureus (Royal Library, MS.A.135). It was in this milieu that the parent volume of the present leaves was made, doubtless for a wealthy patron or community.

(2) By the second half of the tenth century the volume appears to have reached Canterbury, where it received Anglo-Saxon glosses in a Kentish dialect; and it may well be the two-volume "Aldelmius de laude uirginum" in the late twelfth-century booklist of Christ Church, Canterbury (James, Ancient Libraries, 1903, pp.21, nos.47-8). St. Dunstan, the royal court-scholar of King Edgar, book-collector and the driving force behind the reform of the English monasteries, held office as the abbot of Glastonbury soon after 940, the bishop of Worcester in 957, and was translated soon after to the archbishopric of Canterbury. St. Aldhelm was of great interest to him: he was an active promoter of his cult and translated his relics from Malmesbury to Canterbury, and the present text with its focus on correct monastic behaviour must have commanded his attention. It seems unlikely that a book in either of his two dioceses, so in accord with his own aims, should have escaped his attention, and its obvious antiquity may have suggested it to be a relic of St. Aldhelm himself.

(3) The manuscript was broken up in the early nineteenth century, most probably in Brighton by a bookseller named J. Bohn (R. Collins, Anglo-Saxon Vernacular MSS. in America, 1976, p.34). S.W. Singer (1783-1858) bought a clutch of leaves there in 1827 from Bohn, who was using them as wrappers for printed books. Singer presented one to Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792-1872), who acquired the remnant once in Singer's possession at the sales of the collections of Richard Heber in 1836 (lot 32), and Guglielmo Libri in 1859 (lot 111). He had this bound up to form his MS 8071, sold in our rooms, 25 November 1969, lot 442, to Yale, now Beinecke, MS 401 + 401A). The leaves in Cambridge University library (MS Add.3330) were obtained from Bohn and one W.V. Daniel. The Bodleian acquired their first leaf in 1895, adding to this in 1942 and 1965 (MS Lat., th.d.24, fols.1-24 + Arch. A.f.131). The British Museum acquired their first leaf as the limp vellum wrapping of a seventeenth-century printed book purchased in 1841, and later added another also recovered from a similar binding (Add. MS 50483K + 71687, from Bornitius, Emblemata ethico politica, Mainz, 1669, the printed volume now 637.d.23, and John Jones, Our Saviour's Journey to the Gadarenes, 1615, printed volume now C.123.a.29). Another is now in the Free Library of Philadelphia (J.F. Lewis collection, MS ET121) inscribed "Given me by Mr R. Contan, Mar. 1855". Altogether 38 leaves survive in six different libraries (see reconstruction in Gwara, Aldhelmi, pp.87-90). The bifolium here is the only recorded part of the manuscript still in private hands.

The present bifolium was bought by Wilfred Merton (1888-1957) from Tregaskis, probably in 1921 (his book-label).
Bernard Breslauer acquired it from Merton's estate (cat.90, 1958, no.3); sold to H.P. Kraus (cf. Rare Book Saga, 1979, p.210); his cats.88 (1958), no.5, and 95 (1961), no.3, to Dr Peter Ludwig (his Cubist bookplate by Hans Erni: Ludwig MS XI,5); sold with the Sammlung Ludwig to the J. Paul Getty Museum, CA., in 1983; their sale in our rooms, 6 December 1988, lot 33; Schøyen MS 197.

CATALOGUE NOTE

text

Aldhelm was born c.639, a relative of Ine, king of Wessex. He was educated at Malmesbury, became abbot there, and after 705 was elected the first bishop of Sherbourne (that see eventually transferred to Sarum). He died in 709. He was praised by both Bede and King Alfred as a scholar and had an international reputation as an energetic evangelist and founder of monasteries in the first century of English Christianity. He was convinced that learning should not be limited to men, and the present work, on the praise of virginity and its sanctity, was addressed to the abbess and nuns of Barking Abbey. It is his longest and most celebrated composition.

Manuscripts of the text are rare. This is the earliest witness to the text, written within a century of the author's death, and "predates the Würzburg copy [Würzburg, M.th.f.21, the only other ninth century witness] by at least a generation" (Gwara, Aldhelmi, p.85). It is almost certainly responsible for the entire textual tradition in pre-Conquest England. The leaves here comprise parts of chs.47 and 49-50 on SS.Scholastica, Christina and Dorothy (fol.1) and Eustochius, Demetria, Paula and Blesilla, and the Passions of the Diocletian martyrs Chiona, Irene and Agape (fol.2). Their readings are of Gwara's "class I", and the minor variations in the text "preserve orthographical peculiarities probably traceable to Aldhelm's own spelling" (Gwara, Aldhelm, p.93).

The Anglo-Saxon Glosses

"For centuries such manuscripts have been avidly sought by English collectors and scholars, and their scarcity is legendary" (T.E. Marston about the Yale leaves of the present manuscript). "Any manuscript which preserves so much as a phrase of original Anglo-Saxon is a noble relic" (Collins, 1976, p.13). English is now as near to a universal language as there has ever been, and its earliest history can be reconstructed almost exclusively from fragments and glosses. Almost all are in the great national collections in London, Oxford and Cambridge. In private hands, or outside Britain, pieces of the Anglo-Saxon language hardly exist.

Ker's monumental survey of manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon lists nine in private hands in 1957. One is now lost; all the others are now in institutional ownership.

Many other leaves from the present manuscript have no Anglo-Saxon glosses; the leaves here have seventeen glosses with twenty words in total. Ker's dating of these to the tenth century puts them among the earliest records of that language: only about a fifth of extant Old English manuscripts are older than the eleventh century. One word here is unique: clangetug (fol.2r, line 13), referring to the tumult of the Goths.

the decorated initial

The insular combined-initial clearly echoes the interlocking 'Li' initials opening 'Liber' in early English Gospel Books (cf. Alexander, Survey of MSS Illuminated in the British Isles, 1, Insular MSS., 1978, pls.52, 123 and 125), but closer parallels for the sweeping fishhook-like ascenders, enclosed within a series of coloured dots and terminating in sharp wedges can be found in an eighth-century Gospel Book fragment now in Leipzig (Survey, no.15, pl.67), an eighth-century commentary on Job in the Bodleian (Survey, no.40, pl.136) and perhaps also the eighth- or ninth-century Book of Nunnaminster, which belonged to the wife of King Alfred (Survey, no.41, pl.139).

Insular manuscripts with any decoration are exceedingly rare outside public libraries. The last to come to the market were the eighth-century bifolium from the 'Sacramentary of St. Boniface' with 4 initials, sold in our rooms, 4 December 2007, lot 44, for £250,000; and the fragment of a bifolium from Eusibius' Historia with a single small initial, sold in our rooms, 25 June 1985, lot 50 (now Wormsley library).

literature