



THE GORLESTON PSALTER



Fig.1 Psalm1 – Beatus Vir

A remarkable 14th Century manuscript is looked after by the British Library in London. It either originated from St Andrew's Church in Gorleston, or was commissioned here. It is a beautifully written book of Psalms and other texts with lavishly painted illustrations and decorations. It is also known for its strange, humorous and sometimes shocking illustrations in the margins.

What is also remarkable is that at least one other psalter, the Douai Psalter, was also commissioned by St Andrews Church in Gorleston. We know this because it records that it was given by Thomas the Vicar of Gorleston to an Abbot, John (possibly the Abbot of Hulme).

Furthermore, there are conceptual and artistic links to a number of other C14th manuscripts of the highest quality, including the Ormesby Psalter, the St Omer Psalter, the Escatorial Psalter, the Castle Acre Psalter, the Stowe Breviary and the more recently discovered Macclesfield Psalter.

What is a psalter?

A Psalter in medieval times was a book of unequalled importance in worship. The Book of Psalms was effectively the prayer book of the Christian Church from the time of St. Augustine of Hippo in the 5th Century AD. The liturgy of the Middle Ages was based around the singing of the psalms – a monk would recite all 150 psalms each week. Every cathedral and major church would have a psalter, usually kept by the altar.

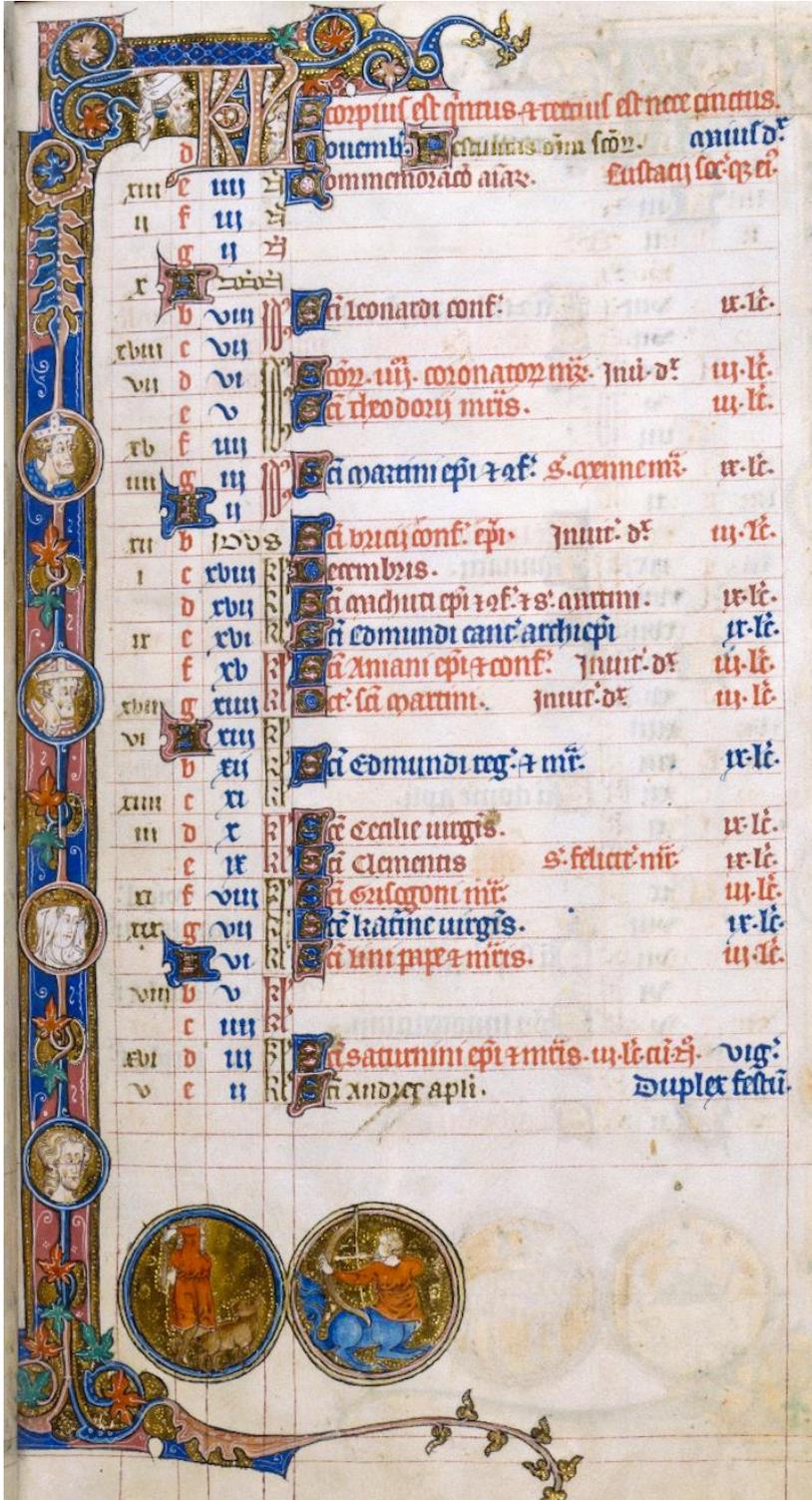


Fig. 2 The calendar for November showing St Andrew's feast day in gold at the bottom.

A psalter was also the main worship book for lay people (until the rise of the Book of Hours). Psalters were commissioned by wealthy aristocrats and clergy, and we can imagine them being used for private devotion or in chantry chapels.

What does it contain?

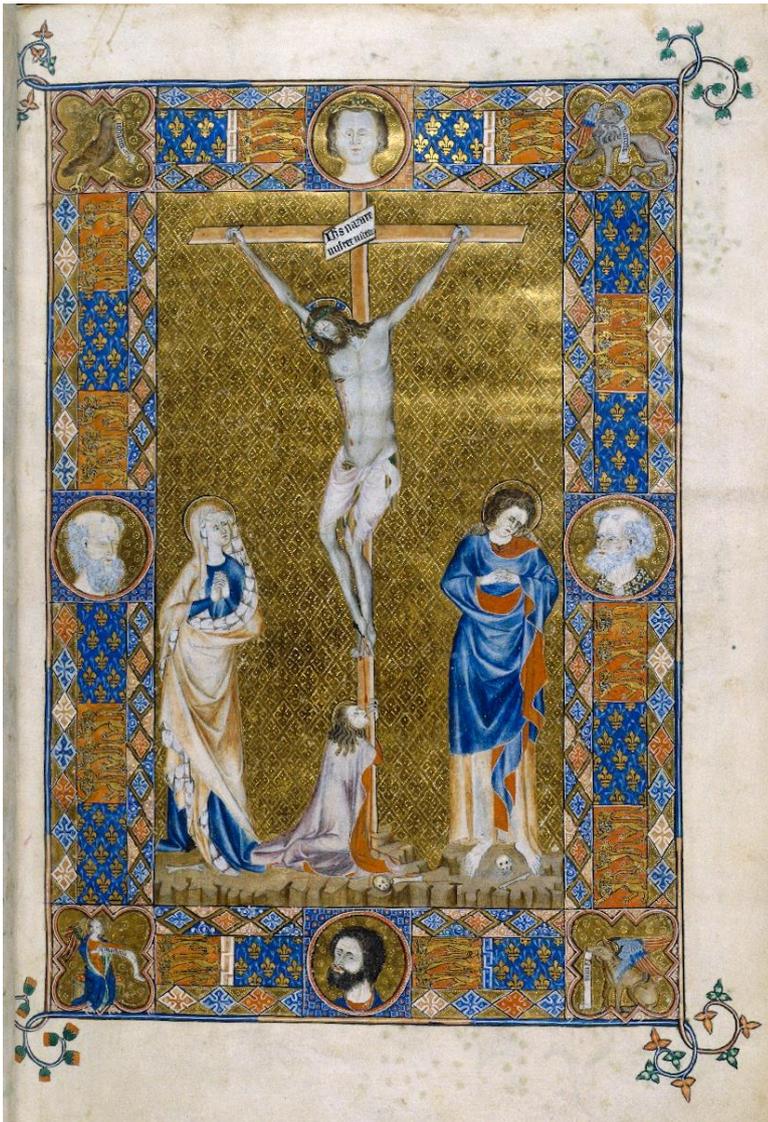
The Gorleston Psalter is written in Latin.

First comes a Calendar, with the dates of important feast and saint days as well as historical anniversaries.

Then after a prayer comes the 150 psalms. A group of psalms were sung for each day at Matins. So, as the Psalms are not numbered in the book, the first psalm for the day is illustrated with a large pictorial letter called an historiated initial. We see these for Psalm I (Beatus Vir see Fig. 1) and psalms 26, 38, 52, 68, 80 and 97. Other collections of psalms were given historiated initials for other services (Psalm 109 was the first psalm for Sunday Vespers).

After the psalms there follow canticles, the Creed, litany, collects, Office of the Dead, prayers and a hymn.

Who made it?



Specialists have identified that the Gorleston Psalter was copied by one scribe as a single project. The scribe could well have been a monk. The illustrations and artwork were done separately. It has been identified that the calendar, the major initial opening of the Office of the Dead and the figure of St Peter in Psalm 9 were painted by one artist, while the rest was the work of the main designer. They were assisted by two or three decorators.

The magnificent painting of the Crucifixion was added as a separate leaf later, and is done in an Italian influenced style that has much in common with the later and more lavishly produced psalters.

Fig 3. The Crucifixion – a page added a decade later, showing Italian style influences.

Who was it made for?



Is this a picture of the man for whom the book was commissioned? This man is pictured in several places including with a monk next to a prominent picture of St Andrew. Here he is on a cushion, reading from a lectern. The coat of arms is that of Roger le Bigod, Earl of Norfolk (died 1306). A monk who is featured in other illustrations with a layman could be Thomas le Bigod who became Prior of the Cluniac Monastery in Thetford in 1304.

More recently scholars have argued that it is most likely to be commissioned by John de Warenne, Earl of Surrey and Sussex, whose coat of arms features prominently at major text divisions. Perhaps

the warren of numerous rabbits illustrated in the margins are a medieval pun on his surname! If so, it places the date of the Psalter to c. 1316.

Significance



Fig. 4 Part of Psalm 150 – Laudate eum in sono tube

St Andrew's Church in Gorleston appears to have had a central role in a remarkable flourishing of art and Christian culture in East Anglia in the 14th Century. It had wealthy and powerful patrons who could commission expensive and greatly treasured books.

A group of highly skilled artists had been attracted to work on the designs and went on with others to create other brilliantly illustrated manuscripts in and around the Diocese of Norwich.

Examples of illustrations in the margins (marginalia)



Detail of a man ploughing with oxen, with a butterfly above



Detail of a man working on a forge



Detail of a creature pulling a face



A scene of rabbits conducting a funeral procession



A grotesque hybrid examines another's hindquarters



A monk offers money to a woman

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