





André Bouwman

Irene O'Daly

# WRITTEN TREASURES

*50 Manuscripts  
from Medieval Europe*



Universiteit  
Leiden

Lannoo



# Foreword

Were you to stroll today from the imposing Pieterskerk towards the Academy Building on the Rapenburg canal in Leiden, you may not be aware that this historic heart of the city was — already 450 years ago — the birthplace of the oldest university of the Netherlands. On 8 February 1575, Leiden University was established in the Pieterskerk — a ‘bulwark of freedom’ which would grow into an international centre of scholarship and study.

To fulfil her humanistic ambition, a library was indispensable. And while the University Library would predominantly acquire printed editions, studies and textbooks, manuscripts were also collected from the very start. That remained the case throughout the subsequent centuries and is still the case today. To underscore the significance of our medieval manuscripts, over the past few years we have worked hard on the digitization of the collection. Thanks to this comprehensive process, these unique manuscripts are now used in teaching and research, not only in Leiden but also worldwide.

*Written Treasures: 50 Manuscripts from Medieval Europe* presents an exceptional collection of medieval manuscripts, forming a rich reflection of the culture of medieval Europe. Without the painstaking work of industrious medieval scribes, many old texts would no longer survive. And without the work of our predecessors in the library, these handwritten treasures would not have been so well preserved nor studied.

*Written Treasures* introduces you to a research collection. Leiden’s treasure chamber contains not simply richly decorated and illuminated manuscripts, but rather a gamut of handwritten texts which have formed our image of the world, sometimes through the medium of a beautifully calligraphed codex, but sometimes messily scrawled on a humble scrap of parchment.

In the first place, I wish to express my great appreciation for the two principal authors: André Bouwman (Curator) and Irene O’Daly (Assistant Professor).

They wrote the introductory essays and a portion of the texts regarding the fifty manuscripts which are central in this book. Their collaboration reflects the strong relationship between our library and the Faculty of Humanities, that along with its department of Book Studies, shapes new generations of book historians and medievalists, for whom our medieval manuscripts are objects of study and sources of inspiration. Thanks are due too to the other contributing authors who provided essays about our manuscripts.

Frits van Oostrom (Professor Emeritus) — who has brought the Middle Ages to life in his books like no other — has written an introduction to this book, for which I heartily thank him. I’m also very grateful to Uitgeverij Lannoo. Following on from the book on our map holdings, we are again bringing an important collection to the attention of a broad public in a wonderful way.

This book is not only a milestone in terms of the centuries-long cataloguing and description of our collection of medieval manuscripts, but also marks the end of the career of André Bouwman as Curator of Western Manuscripts. André has served Leiden University Libraries in many ways and in different roles and functions, but his heart has always been with the medieval manuscripts. Here I wish to thank him for his contributions across many years and for the exemplary manner in which he has always protected ‘his’ manuscripts.

It remains for me to wish you a good journey through medieval Europe, alongside royal courts, monastic libraries, scriptoria and universities. It is a journey full of meetings with authors and scribes, collectors and scholars, librarians and curators, guided by fifty of our treasured manuscripts.

— Kurt De Belder  
*University Librarian*  
*Director of University Libraries*  
*& Leiden University Press*



# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> — Kurt De Belder	5
<b>The Middle Ages as an open book</b> — Frits van Oostrom	12
<b>Windows to the past</b> — Irene O'Daly	15
<b>Collected in Leiden</b> — André Bouwman	37
<b>Preface</b>	67

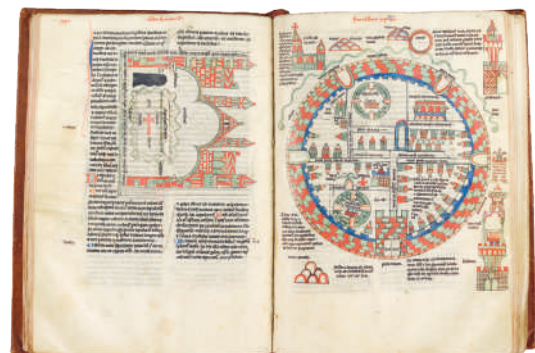


<b>The word of God</b>	69
<b>01 The other side of an illuminated page</b> 9th century, c. 875 — Gospel Book from Saint-Amand André Bouwman	70
<b>02 Escaping the maze: Understanding the medieval Bible</b> 12th century, 2nd half — Book of Job (Old Testament) Irene O'Daly	74
<b>03 A sacred book — used, cherished and passed down</b> 12th century, c. 1190 — Saint Louis Psalter Hanno Wijsman	78
<b>04 The Bible as a growing manuscript</b> 15th century, 2nd half — Southern Netherlands History Bible Mart van Duijn	82
<b>05 Restrained elegance for pious women</b> 15th century, c. 1470 — <i>Leven ons heren</i> Anne Korteweg	86



<b>Personal devotion</b>	91
<b>06 By and for the hands of a noble nun</b> 15th century, c. 1440 — Book of Hours belonging to 'ic Zaers' Anne Margreet As-Vijvers	92
<b>07 Book production as an international business</b> 15th century, c. 1420–1440 — Latin Book of Hours intended for the English market Saskia van Bergen	96
<b>08 Up to date</b> 15th century, 1498–1499 — Book of Hours with calendar and colophon André Bouwman	100





- 09 A manual for the higher spheres** 104  
15th century, last quarter — Collection of devotional and ascetic texts  
Geert Warnar
- 10 A printed manuscript?** 108  
16th century, 1st half — Compendium of spiritual texts  
Anna Dlabáčová

## Makers and materiality 113

- 11 The triumph of word spacing** 114  
9th century, last quarter & 7th century, 2nd half — Carolingian codex with flyleaves in uncial script  
André Bouwman
- 12 Reversed, repurposed and recovered** 118  
c. 800 & 12th or 13th century — Codex with Carolingian panels in a Romanesque binding structure  
Karin Scheper
- 13 Text and images: Two means to the same end** 122  
11th century, c. 1010–1034 — Schoolbooks by Ademar of Chabannes  
Ad van Els
- 14 Perfect to a fault** 126  
11th century — Dioscorides, *De materia medica*  
Erik Kwakkel
- 15 A unique edition of the *Liber floridus*** 130  
13th century, late — Lambert of Saint-Omer, *Liber floridus*  
Hanna Vorholt
- 16 The nature of a manuscript** 134  
14th century, c. 1317 — Lodewijk van Velthem, Fifth Part of the *Spiegel historiael*  
Jos Biemans
- 17 Continuation errors when copying a printed text** 138  
15th century, after 1484 — Otto van Passau, *Boeck des guldenen throens*  
André Bouwman



## Reading, correcting, annotating 143

- 18 A thousand years of textual editing** 144  
9th century, mid — Cicero, Philosophical works  
Irene O'Daly
- 19 Studying Lucretius at Charlemagne's court** 148  
9th century, 1st quarter — Lucretius, *De rerum natura*  
David Ganz
- 20 Erasing evil: The battle of the Virtues and the Vices** 152  
9th century, 2nd quarter — Prudentius, *Psychomachia* and other works  
Irene O'Daly

- 21 **A multicultural book** 156  
9th century, 838 — Priscian, *Institutiones grammaticae* and other texts  
Mariken Teeuwen
- 22 **Guided reading: An annotated classical text** 160  
11th century — Persius, *Satyrae*; Juvenal, *Satyrae*  
Irene O'Daly
- 23 **Canon law in Bologna** 164  
14th century, 1322–1334 — Manuscript containing the *Constitutiones Clementinae*  
Quintijn Mauer



## Words and languages 169

- 24 **Searching for words** 170  
8th century, late, or 9th century, early —  
Latin glossary and other texts  
Irene O'Daly

- 25 **In the classroom** 174  
9th century, 2nd & 3rd quarters — Glossary manuscript  
with the *Hermeneumata Pseudodositheana*  
Rolf H. Bremmer Jr

- 26 **A riddle that can be solved but cannot be read** 178  
9th century, 2nd quarter — Aldhelm and Symphosius, *Ænigmata*  
and the Old English 'Leiden Riddle'  
Thijs Porck

- 27 **Signed, sealed, delivered: A shorthand lexicon** 182  
9th century, late, or 10th century, early —  
*Commentarii notarum Tironianarum*  
Irene O'Daly

- 28 **How the Egmond Willeram became the Leiden Willeram** 186  
c. 1100 — West Low Franconian paraphrase of the Song of Solomon  
André Bouwman



## Counting and classifying 191

- 29 **Nature cures, miraculously or otherwise** 192  
6th century, 2nd half — The *Herbarium* of Pseudo-Apuleius  
Claudine A. Chavannes-Mazel

- 30 **A giant book** 196  
8th century, 2nd quarter — Pliny, *Naturalis historia*  
Mary Garrison

- 31 **A constellation of copies and innovations** 200  
9th century, 814–840 — Aratus / Germanicus, *Aratea*  
Suzette van Haaren

- 32 **Hand signals and medieval counting** 204  
12th century, 1st half — Rabanus Maurus, *De computo*  
Irene O'Daly





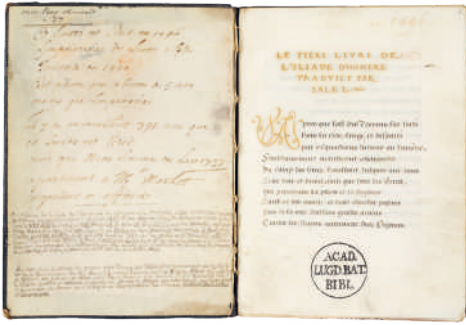
- 33 An impossible object** 208  
14th century — Euclid, *Elementa XI-XV*  
Tazuko van Berkel
- 34 The Creation glitters in gold** 212  
14th century, c. 1360 — Jacob van Maerlant, *Der naturen bloeme*  
Bram Caers
- 35 Travelling scholars, travelling texts** 216  
15th century, early — Adelard of Bath, *Regulae abaci*  
Irene O'Daly



- Fables and fiction** 221
- 36 For education and entertainment** 222  
14th century, c. 1325 — Composite manuscript with the fables of *Esopet*  
André Bouwman
- 37 Narrative pearls in a single volume** 226  
14th century, c. 1350 — *Roman van Limborch* and *Roman van Walewein*  
Bart Besamusca
- 38 The Holy Grail of German Arthuriana** 230  
14th century, 1372 — Leiden's *Wigalois* manuscript  
Jef Jacobs



- Presenting the past** 235
- 39 A Roman history of the papacy and its readers** 236  
8th century, late — *Liber pontificalis*  
Rosamond McKitterick
- 40 Liudger's treasure-trove of charters** 240  
9th century, 2nd half, or 10th century, early — *Liber cartarum*  
Kaj van Vliet
- 41 Additions to an abbot's work by his monks** 244  
11th century, 1027–1039 — Abbo of Fleury, *Excerptum de gestis Romanorum pontificum*  
Marco Mostert
- 42 Robert of Torigni's historical compendium** 248  
12th century, 2nd or 3rd quarter — Composite manuscript, including the *Gesta Normannorum ducum* by William of Jumièges  
Benjamin Pohl
- 43 The master's hand** 252  
14th century, mid or 3rd quarter — Composite manuscript from the private library of Filips van Leiden  
Ed van der Vlist
- 44 Liturgical or not?** 256  
15th century, mid — Middle Dutch martyrology  
Eef Overgaauw



## Old texts, new readers 261

### 45 'By God, he shall not pass!' 262

13th century, 2nd half — *Digestum vetus* with glosses and *additiones*  
Egbert Koops

### 46 Six plays for students and scholars 266

14th century — Greek tragedies by Aeschylus and Sophocles  
Casper de Jonge

### 47 A literary bestseller from the Renaissance 270

15th century, 2nd half — Cicero, *Epistulae ad familiares*  
Christoph Pieper

### 48 Frisia in Ferrara 274

15th century, 1478 — Pliny's letters, copied by Rudolph Agricola  
Adrie van der Laan

### 49 Ancient philosophers in Christian company 278

15th century & 16th century, 1st half —  
Collection of Greek writings from the Near East  
Gerard Boter

### 50 A French *Iliad* for the king 282

16th century, c. 1540 — Translation of Homer's *Iliad* by Hugues Salel  
Alisa van de Haar

## Literature 287

## Manuscript descriptions 297

## Glossary 307

## Index 311

## Photo credits 323

## About the authors 325



# The Middle Ages as an open book

Frits van Oostrom

Taking people back in time to the Middle Ages is no easy task. History soon loses out to the present in all its urgency, and the Middle Ages have the added disadvantage of a poor reputation — is calling something *medieval* ever a recommendation? All too often quite the opposite. There is one tried and tested method, though, for overcoming this indifference: show someone an original medieval manuscript. I have yet to meet anyone who didn't succumb immediately.

It doesn't even have to be an exceptional work: a simple everyday text, even if dog-eared or falling apart, will still have that effect. The fascination of being face to face with a text that someone wrote by hand centuries ago is irresistible. Figuring out the mechanisms behind this magic would be worthy of a psychological study in its own right. I suspect it has something to do with the fact that we see — in the most direct way — the link to someone in the distant past doing something we are still familiar with, namely writing by hand. Even though the keyboard is now mightier than the pen, we all still have memories of being taught to write; something that was often a struggle, with results that were far from aesthetically pleasing. You see a fellow human being, living perhaps a thousand years ago, effortlessly doing the same and you feel a sense of historical awareness.

The Middle Dutch encyclopaedia *Sidrac* calls writing the hardest profession in the world. After all, it requires the complete dedication of body and soul; at least bricklayers and plasterers can sing along while they work. The result, a manuscript — a book written by hand, as the word suggests — is so much more than a mere material object. It is a tangible link to history, infused with the spirit of the past.

With any luck, there will be someone at hand who can tell you the tale of any such medieval book. The story of the goose quill, how it was cut, then dipped in ink that had been patiently prepared from oak gall apples, gum arabic and water. Of the actual writing, often by

candlelight with cold hands. Of the parchment made from animal skins that were first soaked in lime for days on end, then stretched on a frame to make them flat, and scraped smooth, after which any holes were sewn up and the parchment cut to size. This was an exceptionally costly and time-consuming process that had to be repeated dozens of times just for a single book, although you did end up with a carrier for texts that could survive centuries. It was far more durable than the paper that followed, not to mention our modern web texts. They can tell you the the story of amazing miniatures and surprise additions in the margins, whether scholarly glosses or jokes. Or something in between, like the anecdote in a Leiden manuscript about a thirteenth-century student in Bologna who blundered in an exam and when told he would fail, chose the monastery instead (see no. 45).

Experts can tell us about the techniques that underpin the medieval bindings with their wood and leather and glue, and about modern restorers such as Sister Lucie Gimbrère, a Benedictine nun in Oosterhout, who spent five months in 1987 working on a Leiden volume from 800 AD (see no. 12). Or they may point out an amusing note in the back of a manuscript in a tenth-century hand: 'If anyone takes it from this place with the evil intent of not returning it, may he be cursed along with the traitor Judas' (see no. 11). And we can listen to the story of the books' lives: the scribes in the monasteries and towns, their readers and owners through the centuries, and their peregrinations before ending up purchased by or bequeathed to Leiden University Library, where they would normally expect to be safe for eternity.

And, as in any self-respecting history, that examination of a distant past also enhances our awareness of our own time. Experts might tell the story of the handwritten book as a customised product before the printing press introduced the manufacture of ready-made books. Linked to that is the freedom the medieval book as a

unique object offered the maker; according to medieval etymology, the word *liber* (book) was derived from *libertas* (freedom). From a linguistic point of view they were wrong, but this misguided etymology perfectly encapsulates the spirit of the manuscript. After all, it was the printed book that made the large-scale controls possible that are required for effective censorship.

They will tell the story of the book as the perfect form; like the spoon, according to Umberto Eco, it is something that cannot be improved once invented. And of our responsibility for all this heritage. Medieval books in Leiden and other university libraries are not only stored and made available in accordance with the highest standards and most recent expertise, but have been studied for centuries by scholars from all over the world, bringing history to life. Incidentally, what about all those scribes? Might some of them have been women? Academics nowadays are more alert to this possibility, after having long assumed far too automatically that sophisticated writing would have had to have been a male occupation. This illustrates how an acquaintance with medieval manuscripts not only reveals a distant past but also holds up a mirror to our world today.

Recently, while in the Leiden Special Collections reading room, I had a daydream. You would ideally want everyone to be able to enjoy these medieval handwritten books — including, and perhaps above all, people who come to Leiden to study a completely different subject. Well, Leiden University has roughly thirty thousand students who generally spend about five years on their degree. If we were to divide them into groups of ten at most and give each group a one hour-long session perusing medieval books in the Leiden Special Collections reading room, then two groups a day would be sufficient to accommodate them all. What would that cost? Perhaps the equivalent of one full-time post per year? Would that be such a mad investment, giving each and every Leiden student a unique university experience that will last them a lifetime? Perhaps this would be an appropriate gift to the academic community to celebrate the University's 450th anniversary.

I realise it won't happen, and perhaps my daydream is more of a pipe dream. But fortunately there is also good news for realists. Because medieval books evoke not only a sense of awe and nostalgia but also awareness of and gratitude for progress in the production of books. The book you are currently reading demonstrates that

in full. Photographic technology, design and layout options, printing techniques and typography have all brought huge benefits since the Middle Ages and made books so much cheaper that they are now within reach for far greater groups of readers. And let us not forget all those experts who introduce us to Leiden's medieval manuscripts in this book, with their stirring stories about world-famous books such as the *Aratea*, one of Leiden's foremost treasures, for which a dedicated climate-controlled, impact-resistant crate was designed to transport the book safely to an exhibition in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2024 (see no. 31). But they also have an eye for the smallest details, such as the barely perceptible red circle at the top right in a miniature of Christ on the Cross, serving as a quality mark showing that this gem really did come from the illumination mecca of Bruges (see no. 7). And if this leaves you hankering for more, there is a website containing all fifty manuscripts, fully digitised and available for browsing around the clock.

There is nothing quite like being able to see these medieval volumes with your own eyes, but this superb book brings us closer than ever to Leiden's treasure trove of manuscripts.

So, to quote the first line of the Leiden *Wigalois* manuscript, "What excellent person has opened me?"

Detail from the concluding miniature of the *Wigalois* manuscript, depicting a Cistercian monk writing. LTK 537, fol. 95r.





**M**erito salutaris auctor. q̄  
 nū quondā corporis: ex il  
 libatā virgīe. nascendo formā  
 sūpleris. **M**aria mater grane  
 mater mī: tu nos ab hoste pro  
 tege. in hora mortis suscipe. **O**ia  
 tibi dñe. qui natus es de virgine.  
 aī p̄e et scō spū. in sc̄ptura sc̄da. x̄m  
 epe expugnauerūt me. **P**s  
 a uiuentur mea: dicat nū  
 isrl. **E**pe expugnauerūt me a  
 uiuentur mea: et̄n non potue  
 rūt michi. **S**upra dorsū meū sa  
 bucauerūt pedes: plongauerūt

# By and for the hands of a noble nun

## 06 | Book of Hours belonging to 'ic Zaers' Fifteenth century, c. 1440 — BPL 224

We know quite a lot about 'ic Zaers', the first owner of this Book of Hours, thanks to the dozen or so notes in the calendar. She copied the text herself with great dedication, and the pen-flourishes enhancing the larger initials may be by her hand too. The manuscript contains no fewer than 21 full-page illustrations, both monochrome and coloured, painted by the best book illuminators of her day.

**L**ijsbeth van Zaers, a nun in the convent of Mariënpoel, transcribed a book of hours for her personal use in around 1440. It consists of almost six hundred leaves of text in Latin and Dutch in a professional book script. In the calendar at the front, she wrote down the dates of death of family members and acquaintances (someone else subsequently recorded Lijsbeth's own date of death: 5 February 14[72]). Lijsbeth came from the noble Hainault family of 'De Sars' or 'Van Zaers', who had occupied leading positions in the government of the counties of Holland, Zeeland and Hainault since the fourteenth century. From his home in Sars (near Mons in Hainault, modern Belgium), her father Willem van Zaers used to travel on business to Leiden, Schoonhoven, Oudewater (where he may have had a property) and IJsselstein Castle. There were also personal connections between the noble families of Holland and Hainault: Lijsbeth's great-grandmother Beerte was from the IJsselstein family and her mother Johanna came from the manorial domain of Liesveld near Schoonhoven.

Those family connections may have played a role in Lijsbeth's choice of convent. According to the calendar, 'ic Zaers' took her eternal monastic vows on 19 May 1425. However, Mariënpoel did not yet exist. The nuns lived in the Elfdruizend Maagden convent in Oudewater, which had adopted a stricter regime (the Rule of St Augustine) in 1422. Lijsbeth would have entered the convent not long afterwards as a novice, to profess her vows after a probationary year. The convent in Oudewater had a library and we know that the nuns themselves copied books. But then came years of political unrest and war, with the nuns therefore moving to Leiden in March 1428, followed one month later by their livestock and other

possessions. After several years, they found a new home in Mariënpoel in Oegstgeest, near Leiden. The Van Zaers family was the main benefactor of the new convent after the Van Swieten family, who took the lead in its foundation. In 1436, Willem van Zaers was buried there so that the nuns could pray for his soul.

< Fig. 1  
Opening leaves of  
None in the Hours  
of the Virgin, in Latin,  
illustrated with  
a grisaille of the  
Adoration of the Magi.  
BPL 224, fols 82v-83r.



Fig. 2  
Illuminated initial with  
pen-flourishes for the  
Mass of Christmas  
Eve in the Missal of  
Loenersloot Castle.  
BPL 2879, fol. 7r, detail.

The decoration of the Book of Hours reflects the dual nature of the roots of the Mariënpoel convent and its residents. That is evident first of all from the penwork initials decorated with pen flourishing. These initial letters taking up three to four rows of text are embellished with flourishes consisting of red and blue pen lines, with attractive patterns continuing into the margins. The penwork has been created according to a specific pattern, with two motifs standing out. Next to the red letter 'M' on lines 7–8 in Figure 1, we see what is termed a 'mouchette': a bent droplet shape created from a line curving twice that ends with a small tail. Underneath is a sharp-angled line that first forms a triangle and then continues in stacked lines with a small garland on top. This last motif is then repeated in the opposite direction inside the triangle. The strict sequence in which these motifs are found in this Book of Hours does not have an exact equivalent in other manuscripts. The stacked lines ending in a garland were characteristic of manuscripts from the province of South Holland and Leiden in par-

Fig. 3  
The Flagellation of  
Christ, by the Master of  
Catherine of Cleves,  
to illustrate a Passion  
devotion in Dutch.  
BPL 224, fols 128v–129r  
(terce).

ticular until long into the fifteenth century. The mouchettes are less common. They occur in penwork from Gouda and the surrounding area, where the pointed triangular motif is also seen. When such triangles appear in manuscripts from places further to the west, they often have a very small circle or 'eye' inside. An example is seen in a missal copied in 1438 by another Mariënpoel nun, Elizabeth van Gorinchem, for the chapel of Loenersloot Castle, which belonged to the Van Swieten family (Leiden University Library, BPL 2879, fol. 7r). Underneath the triangle with its eye, we see a simpler version of the characteristic triangle motif in Lijsbeth's manuscript. The Zaers Hours, moreover, contains simpler versions of the geometric fill of the gold initial letter of the Missal. Along with the fact that the leaves with text do not have any painted decoration at all, it could mean that both the copying and the penwork took place within the walls of the Mariënpoel convent. At any rate, the pen flourishing was executed by someone with just as steady a hand as Lijsbeth had in transcribing the text.



The miniatures, however, were done elsewhere: the coloured images came from Utrecht and the monochrome ones from Delft. The latter are called *grisailles* because the illustrations are built up from shades of grey with just an occasional touch of gold or colour. The *grisailles* accompany the Latin texts of the Hours of the Virgin. They show the life of Mary and Christ's childhood in seven key events, such as the visit of the Three Wise Men who came bearing gifts for the infant Jesus. This series was probably bought as finished work, as the pictures are significantly smaller than the blocks of text on the facing pages. *Grisailles* from Delft were quite often delivered on loose leaves. However, it seems some of the other *grisailles* were made specifically for this Book of Hours as they do have the appropriate dimensions. That applies for example to the depictions of the Virgin and Child, the patroness of Mariënpoel, and of St John the Evangelist, St Jerome and St Augustine, to whom altars were dedicated in the convent chapel. The colour miniatures, which include the Flagellation of Christ, illustrate a devotion on the Passion of Christ in Dutch. This series does not seem to have been made specifically for the Zaers Hours either. The lively illustrations have been allocated appropriately to the various sections of text.

Like the penwork, the miniatures also bear witness to Mariënpoel's network, which extended across all of South Holland and into Utrecht. The Passion series is by the Master of Catherine of Cleves, who was active in Utrecht. For Oudewater and surroundings, that was the most obvious place from which to order miniatures. The *grisailles* are the work of a book illuminator who is known as the Master of the Delft *Grisailles* after the town where his workshop was situated. This was the closest centre to Leiden for miniatures. Lijsbeth's Book of Hours thus combines the world of the convent with the wider world outside. The miniatures were among the best available in 1440 and worthy of a noble nun. At the same time, copying books with religious content was seen as spiritual work. Lijsbeth may also have executed the penwork herself, using models she had become familiar with in Oudewater. The subdued tints of the *grisailles* did not distract too much during the communal prayers in the convent chapel, where the



other nuns were also present. When alone in personal prayer, Lijsbeth would be able to lose herself in the splendid details and the dramatic events depicted in the colour illustrations.

— Anne Margreet As-Vijvers

Fig. 4  
St John the Evangelist, the patron saint of the middle altar in front of the choir screen in the convent chapel of Mariënpoel, blessing the poisoned chalice; John the Baptist pointing to the Lamb of God (i.e. Christ). BPL 224, fol. 204v.



**A**rob uā maerlāt die dit dichte  
 Omme tefedene terer gichte  
 Wille datmē dit boec noeme  
 In dietsche der nature blāme.  
 Wāt noch noyt ē dietsche toekē  
 Ne ghene dichtere wilcē roeken  
 Iet te dichtene uan naturen  
 Van so menighen creaturen  
 Als in desen toekē staen

Hiemen en hebte dies waen.  
 Dat ic die materie vensede  
 Els dan ic die ryme pensede  
 Die materie uergaderde rechte  
 Van coelne broeder alebrecht  
 Yte desen meesters die hier na comen  
 Die ic in sal bi namen noemen.

**D**ie eerste die es aristotiles.  
 Die te rechte eerste wel es  
 Want hi uan alre philosophien  
 Van alre natuerliker derghien  
 Souen allen heidene die noyt waren  
 Draghet hi wone in der scaren  
 Waer dat mē dit teyken siet. **Az**  
 Dats dat hi te segghen plicet

**D**linius die coemt daer naer  
 Wies toekē mē hout ouwaer  
 Solinus daerna uan naturen  
 Schone spreect in siere scrifturen  
 In enen toekē die men weet.  
 Die uā der werelt wonder heet.  
 Sinte Ambrosius uā milane  
 Die uan naturen doet teuerstane  
 In sinen toekē examiroen  
 Dien noemt mē dicke in dit doen  
 Sinte baselius sekerlike.  
 Dien god sende uan hemelrike  
 Enen toec uan besten nature

Staet dicke oec in dese scrifture.

Sente ysidorus oec mede

Die dicke grote nuttelichede

Gheseyt heuet in sinen toeken

Dien meerten dicke hier soeken

Oec meester iacob uan uetri.

Bisscop uan akers so was hi.

Seder cardenacl uan rome

Syns est recht dat ic hier nome

Een toec oec waer mene weet.

Wiene makede gherret

Es ghetelt onder hem comen

Experimentator hore wme nomen

Sine worde sette wi hier mede

Alst noet es te men gher stede

**C**alienus tellidius

Platarius en philologus

Luallus physio theofrastus

Ende die keyser dauidius

En dyogenes demotritus uā athene

En dyogenes apollodum ghemene

Die uā den besten die draghe tenun

Die noch heden ē der werelt sijn

In sinen toeken laet tesien

Dyonisius ende sinicien

Catoen uaro ende marthus

Eradias en orpheus

Pitagoras en menander

Homerus ende nicander

Mulianus dyagoras

Virgilius ende andreas

Coninc iuba patronius

Coninc philometor metellus

Coninc ptolomeus umbricus

Coninc antagonus alphicus

Coninc archelaus flamicius

Philemon ende nigridius.

# The Creation glitters in gold

34 | Jacob van Maerlant, *Der naturen bloeme*  
Fourteenth century, c. 1360 — BPL 14 A

In distant lands, there are people with dogs' heads, cyclops, savages covered in hair and with six fingers, and people with only one foot that is so large it serves as a parasol when they lie on their backs to sleep. These details and many more about the natural world are found in *Der naturen bloeme*, a late thirteenth-century encyclopaedia of the natural world of some 17,000 verses written by the Flemish sexton Jacob van Maerlant (c. 1235–c. 1290).

<< Fig. 1  
Opening of *Der naturen bloeme*. Miniature with the patron praying to Saint Christopher (fol. 25v), and the prologue with the references to Maerlant's sources (fol. 26r).  
BPL 14 A, fols 25v–26r (image 86%).

Working in the second half of the thirteenth century, Jacob van Maerlant produced an impressive oeuvre in Middle Dutch of more than 230,000 verses in total. That makes him one of the most productive authors in any European language. However, his significance lies in the quality of what he wrote even more than in the quantity. His position as a sexton of a small church in Brielle in the south of the county of Holland was a modest clerical post and seems to have given him the opportunity to devote his life to literature. His texts were commissioned by affluent patrons in the upper ranks of the nobility and clergy. But he must have had a choice in what texts he wrote because the subject matter of his work is remarkably cohesive and clearly shows the signs of a life's mission. Maerlant wanted to translate the knowledge contained in Latin books into Dutch and make this information accessible to a lay readership. In this respect too, he was a pioneer from a European perspective.

Fig. 2  
Miniatures based on Maerlant's description of strange peoples.  
BPL 14 A, fol. 29r, details.



*Der naturen bloeme*, which was completed shortly after 1270, is an encyclopaedia of the natural world in which Maerlant drew from the Latin reference work *De natura rerum* by the Brabant clergyman Thomas of Cantimpré (1201–c. 1272). In his prologue, Maerlant erroneously attributes his main source to Albertus Magnus (c. 1200–1280). He also mentions numerous other authorities, the most important of whom is Aristotle (fol. 26ra, capital 'D': *Die eerste die es aristotiles*). Maerlant's text can be considered a reliable record of the state of knowledge about the natural world in the late thirteenth century, even if that knowledge was mainly derived from books by earlier authors. For instance, the above-mentioned passage about the human races, which sounds strange to us, can be traced back via numerous intermediaries to Pliny the Elder (23/24–79 AD); he too is mentioned by Maerlant in his prologue (fol. 26ra, capital 'P': *Plinius die coemt daer naer*).

Maerlant abridged the Latin source text for his lay readership and simplified it as he deemed necessary. Whereas *De natura rerum* consisted of twenty 'books', or long chapters, Maerlant has only thirteen, each of which is dedicated to specific beings, plants or aspects of the natural world. Ordered alphabetically according to their Latin names, entries provide information about types or races of humans, four-footed animals, fish, birds, trees, rocks and metals, for example. That made *Der naturen bloeme* a standard reference work for looking up information, but it could equally serve as a text for a lay audience to read (or have it read aloud) as a pleasant way of sharing all kinds of facts about the Creation.

Like many medieval codices, this Leiden manuscript contains other texts in addition to *Der naturen bloeme*. The book opens with a calendar and a brief introduction to cosmology, known to scholars as *De natuurkunde van het geheelal*. These texts actually function as a lead-in to Maerlant's encyclopaedia, which is why it is generally thought that the book was deliberately compiled to centre on that text. There are nineteen known manuscripts of the encyclopaedia in the world, of which only eleven are more or less complete. Seven have illustrations, but the one in Leiden is the only manuscript to have illustrations throughout. While the other manuscripts only have illustrations for the 'human races' and various species of animals, the Leiden manuscript also has miniatures illustrating the chapters on trees and gemstones. That makes this book exceptionally significant, not just within Leiden's collections but also for our knowledge of *Der naturen bloeme* and of the manuscripts of Maerlant's work more broadly.

Jacob van Maerlant opens the prologue (fol. 26ra) confidently by citing his own name: *Jacob va(n) maerla(n)t die dit dichte / omme te se(n)dene terer gichte* ('Jacob van Maerlant, who wrote this with the intention of making it a gift'). This is followed by an explanation of what the work involved, with the author again striking a proud tone: *Wa(n)t noch noyt i(n) dietsche(n) boeke(n) / Ne ghene dichtere wilde(n) roeken / Iet te dichtene van naturen / Van so menighen creaturen / Als in desen boeke staen* ('Because never before have writers of books attempted to relate something in our language of the countless different creatures of Nature that have now found a place in this book'). In other words, the proud author introduces himself and pats himself on the back for being the first person willing to take the step of making knowledge about the natural world available in the vernacular.

Maerlant completed *Der naturen bloeme* shortly after 1270. The book was commissioned by the Zeeland nobleman Nicolaas van Kats († before 1293). This richly decorated manuscript is a copy made nearly a century later, in around 1360. It may have been made for Jan van IJsselstein (1304–1365), a canon and keeper of the treasury of the Mariakerk church in Utrecht, as his coat of arms appears four times in the margins of the opening miniature and the prologue. He was the third or fourth son of the lord holding the title of IJsselstein (a castle in Utrecht province) and therefore may always have been destined for a career in the

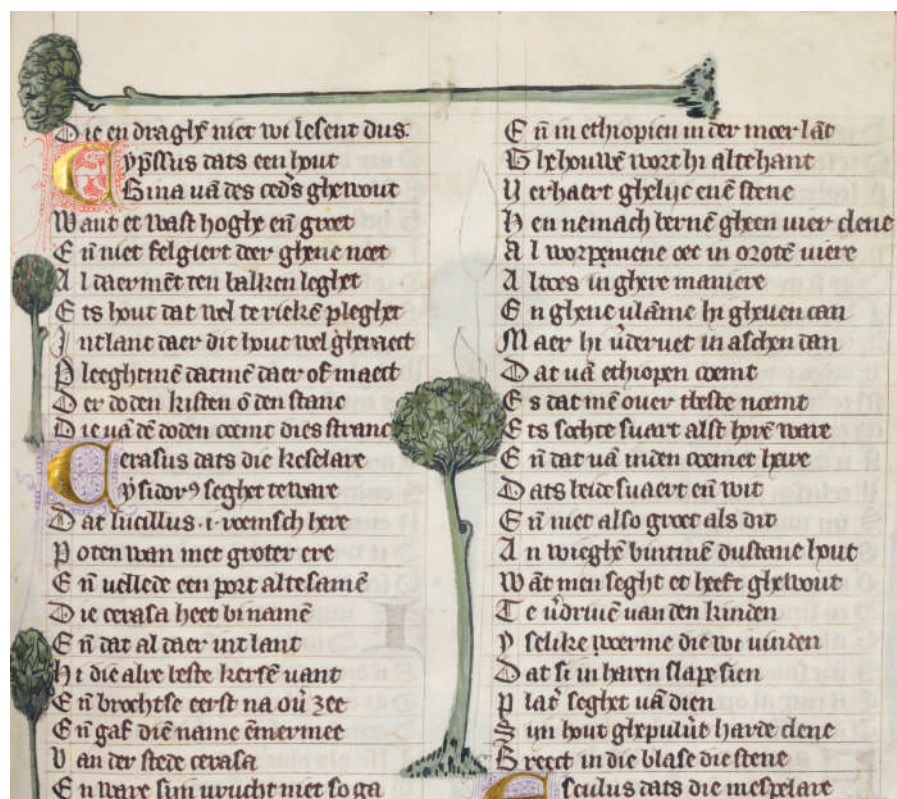


Fig. 3  
The Leiden manuscript of *Der naturen bloeme* is the only one that contains illuminations for trees and precious stones. BPL 14 A, fol. 115r, detail.

Church. In the full-page opening miniature (fol. 25v), Saint Christopher is carrying Christ on his shoulders across a river. The background is bright red, with a subtle flower motif and gold dots. There is also a figure shown praying to the saint, which can be seen as a 'portrait' of the patron who ordered the copy.

As a secular clergyman from the ranks of the nobility, Jan van IJsselstein would fit well with what is known about the readership for the texts of Jacob van Maerlant. His patrons were high-ranking noblemen or clergymen in Holland and Zeeland. The connection with Utrecht is not unexpected either: Maerlant wrote a *Sinte franciscus leven* for the Utrecht Franciscans, and there were close connections between the nobility of Holland, Zeeland and the Prince-Bishopric of Utrecht. Later copies of Maerlant's work are found in noble, urban and church circles, depending on the nature of the texts. Little is known of what happened to the Leiden manuscript after Jan van IJsselstein's death. It is tempting to assume the manuscript became part of the impressive chapter library of the Mariakapittel church in Utrecht, but we cannot be certain of that.

— Bram Caers