

*The Prayer Book of Ursula Begerin*. Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Nigel F. Palmer. 2 vols. Dietikon: Urs Graf Verlag, 2015. 880 pp. €165.

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A hand-sized illustrated prayer book, known primarily to scholars through its brief description in a standard German reference tool, may seem an unlikely object for a two-volume, 875-page study. Yet in their reproduction, transcription, description, and analysis of *The Prayer Book of Ursula Begerin*, Jeffrey F. Hamburger and Nigel F. Palmer demonstrate not only the extraordinary importance of this small, if thick, manuscript, but also provide an unrivaled model of scholarly thoroughness, perspicuity, and judgment. One learns not only about the book, but also about how to study books, particularly those produced within a manuscript culture. The generosity of Hamburger and Palmer's fifteen-year labor and that of the funding agencies that enabled them to study the book with such care are a testament to the high caliber of historical work that can be done when extraordinarily skilled and intelligent scholars are given the proper resources with which to conduct their work—and to work together on an object that demands interdisciplinary analysis. Hamburger and Palmer's study of this multilayered manuscript, moreover, shows the richness of religious culture in Germany during the later Middle Ages; the study of a single manuscript, in all of its complexity, disrupts easy narratives about Christianity and its putative decline just before the Protestant Reformation.

The two oversized volumes of *The Prayer Book of Ursula Begerin* defy the confines of a short review. The first volume contains 675 pages of codicological, historical, textual, and visual description and analysis; a comprehensive description of the book itself and its transmission history; and a thorough presentation of possible sources for the book's visual and textual programs. The second volume provides high-quality color reproductions of the prayer book in its entirety, with transcriptions of all textual components. Students of the book, then, are provided every resource short of a trip to Bern with which to engage in their own interpretative analysis of this extraordinary document.

The Swiss historian Peter Ochsenein described the manuscript in 1980 as a German prayer book from the second half of the fifteenth century, owned in the early sixteenth century by a Penitent nun, Ursula Begerin, living in Strasbourg. He went on to note that it contained 136 miniatures illustrating salvation history from the Fall through the life of Christ, with at least 100 of the images focused on Christ's life and death. Hamburger and Palmer show that the manuscript is, in fact, a composite. It contains more than 200 images: a large number of late fourteenth-century colored pen drawings, a late fifteenth-century pen drawing, a woodcut, and an engraving. In addition, the book includes

abundant textual elements, including inscriptions in Latin and German, a cycle of German prayers that appear interspersed among the images, and additional German prayers at the beginning and end of the book.

Hamburger and Palmer argue for the importance of recognizing two distinct moments of production. First is what they call the “Picture Book,” likely produced between 1380 and 1410, perhaps for a female lay patron deeply versed in the Bible and biblical culture. This book is primarily visual, with some inscriptions that were planned from the start of production. The second is what has come to be known as the “Prayer Book of Ursula Begerin.” The original picture book was unbound and reordered, with German prayers added to the visual cycle, together with prayers at the opening and close of the manuscript. Hamburger and Palmer argue that these additions to and modifications of the manuscript were most likely “designed for the use of an individual but anonymous nun of the Strasbourg convent of St. Magdalena in the 1470s and 1480s” (11). The book was later owned by Ursula Begerin (d. 1531) of the same convent and it is from her that its name is drawn.

Even this twofold distinction, vital as it is to understanding the book, is inadequate to its complexities: the cycle of images that make up the picture book already shows the evidence of two distinct artists, for example, and even after the images were restructured and German prayers inserted, the manuscript continued to be expanded. As Hamburger and Palmer note, moreover, this is not uncommon within manuscript culture; instead, the prayer book, with its changing ownership, authorship, agenda, order, and form is exemplary of the fluidity of such objects—and the deftness demanded of those interpreting manuscripts in their multiple layers. Hamburger and Palmer use the careful study of one exemplary manuscript to demonstrate the nature of the larger manuscript culture of which its production was a part. Moreover, the book itself is extraordinary, both in the range and quality of its imagery and the glimpse it provides into the vernacular theologies of late medieval Germany. Hamburger and Palmer have done a great service to the field in making the book available in all of its richness and historical specificity to a new generation of scholars.

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