**The Parc Missal**


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This lavishly decorated Missal was commissioned by Ambrosius van Engelen, Abbot of Park 1515-1543. It was prepared by Franciscus (Montfordius a) Weert, a scribe active in Leuven in the first half of the sixteenth century. Weert must have been a prominent representative of his craft, to judge by his popularity among the higher echelons of the clergy in Brabant, including the abbots of several Premonstratensian houses. Weert’s first datable commission (1511) came from the abbot of Averbode, the well-known Premonstratensian abbey located at the border of Brabant and the County of Loon in Weert’s time (Masai, p. 86). Following work on the present manuscript for the abbot of Park, which Weert delivered in 1521, Weert completed a Latin psalter and antiphonary for Antonius Tsgroten (d. 1530), abbot of the Premonstratensian abbey of Tongerlo, in 1522 (British Library Add. MSS 15426-7). Around 1524, he copied four manuscripts for Marcus Cruyt, abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Hemiksem near Antwerp 1518-1536 and Ambassador of Charles V to Denmark, including a Gradual and a Missal now in Cambridge (Morgan and Panayotova, 240-43). Abbot Ambrosius van Engelen commissioned several more manuscripts from Francis Weert in the 1520s and 1530s. They are now kept at the KBR in Brussels: MS 11556, a psalter-hymnary dated 1527, and a Missal in 2 volumes dated 1539, MS II.2347.

Ambrosius van Engelen came from a well-to-do bourgeois or patrician (poorter) family in Leuven (Appelmans, pp. 360-61; Adriaenssen, pp. 268-73). Born there in 1481, he took his vows in 1504 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1506, at 25 years (below the canonical age of 30). He was parish priest in Celles in 1514, and became the 25th Abbot of Park in 1515, again at a rather youthful age (he was a mere 34 years old). This cursus is a very brisk career even by the standards of his age, suggesting that he and his family were favoured by the high and mighty. Margaret of Austria (r. 1507-1530) nominated Ambrosius van Engelen Ambassador to Denmark, a dignity which he did not accept. Under the rule of Margaret’s nephew, Emperor Charles V (r. 1515-1556), he was one of the leaders of the Brabant prelates who opposed both growing princely interference in the selection of abbots, and increases in the taxation of supplications, bequests and tithes in the Duchy; this conflict overshadowed Abbot van Engelen’s later years, starting in 1535 and unresolved until his death in 1543.

Van Engelen’s patronage of the arts was not limited to the four liturgical manuscripts mentioned above. A beautiful portrait of him, attributed to the Leuven painter Aelbrecht Bouts (c. 1452-1549) and his workshop, survives at The National Gallery, London. Dated to (probably) 1520, it shows a youthful Van Engelen in the modest white habit of his order. The young Praemonstratensian is marked out clearly as an abbot, however, by his bejewelled crozier leaning against his arm, and his equally bejewelled mitre placed discretely on a stool next to him. Ambrosius’ patron saint, Ambrosius of Milan, stands behind him in a protective gesture; he is dressed in magnificent liturgical vestments cast in the same style and design as Van Engelen’s mitre and crozier.

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In the course of his tenure as Abbot of Park, Van Engelen also financed a new organ for the church of his abbey which was built by the organ builder Jan Verrijt (Jan van Lier) from nearby Herentals. Abbot Van Engelen also paid for stained glass windows to be placed in the choir of Park Abbey church. In Leuven, he appears to have been involved with the architectural antecedents of the present-day chapel of Our Lady ter Koorts (OLV-ter-Koorts) in the Vlamingenstraat. He also donated stained glass windows to the church of Our Lady in Antwerp and to the Holy Ghost College in Leuven. This institution was part of the old University of Leuven and can still be seen, albeit in a later architectural incarnation, in the Naamsestraat in Leuven. The College was affiliated with the Faculty of Theology, and it would not be surprising to find that Van Engelen was closely involved with that Faculty and the University, although further research will need to confirm this.

In general terms, Van Engelen’s life coincided with a high-water mark in Leuven’s cultural, political, and economic history. The city was the capital of the Duchy of Brabant and the University of Leuven counted among Europe’s most distinguished centres of learning. Perhaps ironically, the present book was completed in the same year that the Duke of Brabant, more widely known as Emperor Charles V, condemned Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms (1521), unleashing a political and religious earthquake that fomented what we now call the Age of the Reformation. As a product of the year 1521, the Park Missal also is exactly 500 years old in 2021. As far as Ambrosius van Engelen is concerned, he cuts a worthy figure among the abbots of Park in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century. Collectively, they contributed greatly to theological learning and to the reputation of the University of Leuven, but also, as we have seen, to the arts.

The books commissioned by Van Engelen presumably were kept at the library of Park Abbey until the upheavals of the late 18th century. It is unclear through which routes Van Engelen’s Missal made its way to England, but the most likely scenario seems that it was sold on the antiquarian market. The manuscript was given to Wadham College in 1852 by one of its former students, the Rev. Henry Boucher (1798-1880). Boucher was a student at Wadham College from 1815 to 1821. In 1821, he assumed the rectorship of the village and civil parish of Hilton in Dorset, southern England, and in 1838 moved to Thornhill House in nearby Stalbridge (Gardiner, p. 269). His pastoral vocation might explain his interest in the Missal in combination with, perhaps, some antiquarian inclinations. Little more is known about him, or how exactly he came into possession of this valuable codex. According to his obituary in a local newspaper (now kept at the Dorset History Centre, Dorchester, shelf mark PE-STGIN81), he was a man of some means who exhibited remarkable generosity towards many charitable causes.

Ever since its arrival at Wadham College, the ‘Park Missal’ has been counted among the most treasured holdings of the College’s library. It is one of Wadham College’s oldest and most beautiful manuscripts.

Bibliography:


*Monasticon Belge*, t. 4 Province de Brabant, vol. 3, Liège, 1969, p. 809 ('Abbaye de Parc, à Heverlee: Ambroise van Engelen').


Short biography

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