

Medieval Manuscripts: The Calendar in the Books of Hours of Charles of Angoulême

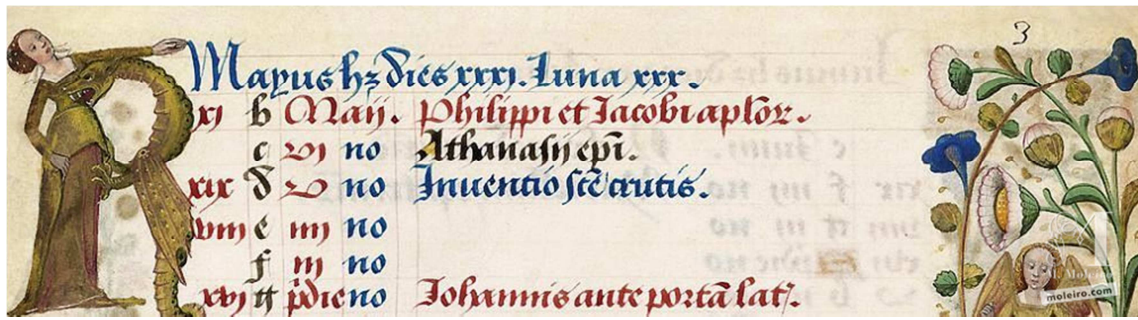
By *Maxence Hermant and Séverine Lepape*



The Hours of Charles of Angoulême (f. 41v)

The book of hours is undoubtedly a most invaluable aid to understanding how men and women viewed time in both the long term and the short term in the Middle Ages. It not only contains the main prayers to be said by the faithful, organised according to the liturgical structure of each day's monastic offices, but was also intended to be used throughout the year, so it is not surprising that the book of hours begins with a perpetual, twelve-month calendar, a sort of synopsis not unlike those found at the beginning of modern-day diaries. The main liturgical feast days celebrated in all Christendom and the feast days of local saints are indicated in each month – thereby providing clues to the name of the town, or at least the diocese, in which the manuscript's patron lived.

Each month in the *Hours of Charles of Angoulême* occupies a page decorated in the same way. The name of the month and the number of days and moons are written in red ink, and then, in accordance with the Julian calendar of Antiquity, the dates of the days appear as ides, nones and calends, opposite the respective feast days.



May, f. 3r (detail)

The decorative motifs appear mainly in the side and bottom margins of the folio. To the right and left of the text, foliate motifs, some inhabited by small naked figures or real or imaginary animals, surround a medallion showing the month's sign of the zodiac.



Zodiac signs in the Hours of Charles of Angoulême

In the strip across the bottom of the page, the artist depicts farm tasks or the work most typical of each month. In this instance, Robinet Testard borrowed from a well-established iconographic programme, as shown for example by the dinner portrayed in January, the pruning of grape vines in March, wheat harvest in June, wheat being threshed after the harvest in July, pannage in October and pig slaughter in November to provide meat for the entire winter. Certain themes are, however, quite surprising, such as the fight between two knights garbed in foliage in May, the man pushing a woman along in a wheelbarrow in August, and the ill-matched couple in September. These unusual images stem from Testard's use of prints featuring profane subjects as models for aesthetic reasons, which he adapted to make them consonant with the theme usually portrayed in a given month.

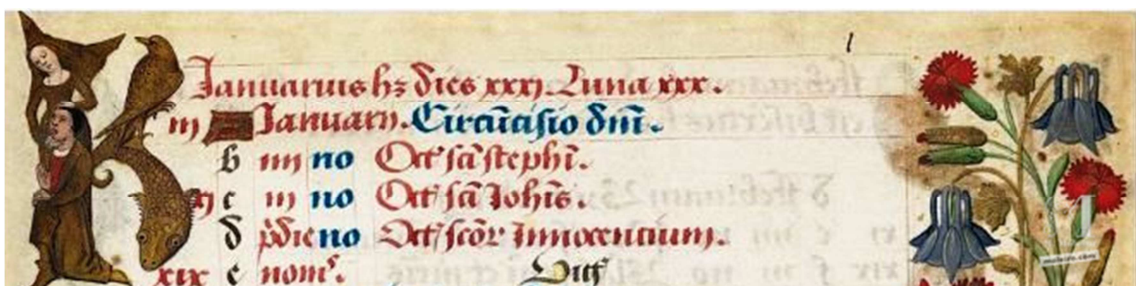


January, f. 1r (detail)

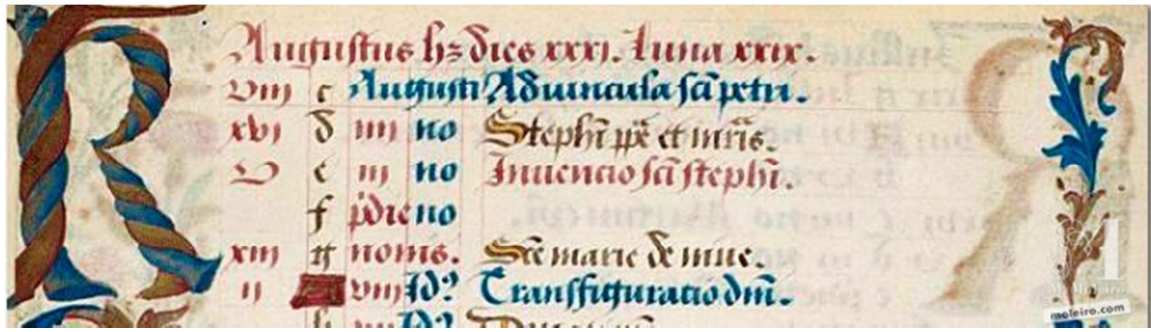


May, f. 3 (detail)

Finally, in a desire to give the manuscript a personal touch, Testard painted a large capital K (ff. 1 and 1v) or R (ff. 2v, 3, 4, 4v, 5 and 6) in the top left-hand corner, sometimes where the initials KL (short for kalendarium) often embellished the pages of the calendar. The letter K might be an even shorter form of the word kalendarium, but it is not clear what the letter R means. In all likelihood, these two letters refer rather to the identity of the patron, Karolus, i.e. the Latinised version of Charles of Angoulême's first name. Once again, Testard's anthropomorphic letters were inspired by a printed source, a Flemish woodcut dating from 1464 (cf. the commentary about the Ave Maria illumination on f. 52), albeit with some license in order to make the figures in these lively letters as varied as possible. (Séverine Lepape)



Initials on the month of January (f. 1r)



Initial on the month of August (f.4v)

The Julian calendar was introduced by Julius Caesar in 46 BC and continued to be used in the Middle Ages. It begins with the month of January (associated with the sign of the zodiac Aquarius), unlike the liturgical calendar which could begin on different dates, usually Easter. The word January comes from *januarius*, the Latin month named after Janus, the two-headed Roman god, the guardian of passages and crossings, the god of change and, therefore, of the new year. In calendars in books of hours, Janus is usually depicted at the table, eating and drinking to keep warm and combat the cold weather outside.



Month of January. The dinner (f. 1r)

The decision to have an oblong image at the bottom of the page led Robinet Testard to enlarge the dinner scene. Janus is depicted as an old man sitting and drinking from a bowl with several people bustling around him: two women, one in lavish garments, talk at the table, as do two servants on the left, one with a cloth on his shoulder and the other about to fill a ewer. Through a doorway drawn clumsily in the wall a servant can be seen heating a pot of water on the fire. The garments, crockery (particularly the saltcellar on the table) and the presence of a dog and servants suggest quite a well-to-do lifestyle. (Maxence Hermant)

This was an excerpt from the Hours of Charles of Angoulême commentary volume by Séverine Lepape (curator at the Musée du Louvre) and Maxence Hermant (curator at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France). Our thanks to Moleiro Editor for this text and images. You can learn more about The Hours of Charles of Angoulême by visiting their website: www.moleiro.com