

Analysis of a Page from a 14th-Century German Missal

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The manuscript under observation is titled “Noted Missal. Germany (Wartburg)” and subtitled “(John 21: 3-14, Acts 8: 26-32)”. It dates to the first half of the 14th century. The object is part of the University of Colorado Boulder’s Rare & Distinctive collection, and its call number is “ege022a”. The whole page measures ~361 x 250 mm in height and width.

The written portion consists of two columns, each 289 x 88 mm in height and width. The left column contains a combination of liturgical text, musical notation, and accompanying lyrics. The right column is purely lexical. Eight lines of text are present on the left column, and thirty-one lines are present on the right. The piece is lightly decorated and features no marginalia or decorated initials. Though this work lacks elaborate decoration, some ornaments are present. The highly serifed calligraphy is decorative in nature, and the minimal use of colors, though likely used to indicate liturgical instruction, add to the aesthetic pleasure of the work.

The work is composed on parchment, apparent by the presence of hair follicles on the page. These follicles are present throughout and are most clearly visible beneath the right column. Though only one leaf is under observation, the piece is certainly an excerpt of a larger work. Small incisions are present on the dextral border, indicating where the page was once sewn to the spine of a larger work. This information is also deducible simply by the term “missal”, which is universally defined as a book containing that which is said and sung at mass throughout the course of a year. This single leaf is obviously incapable of including the entire year’s liturgical content, so we can conclude, with certainty, that this was once part of a larger work.

The text is written in Latin, and the script, Textualis Precissa, is not easily readable to my modern eye. Many of the letters connect in a non-cursive manner, and, for many of the letters, the comprising shapes are similar. The letters are legible, but the effort required to correctly interpret the calligraphy is considerable for modern readers.

Three colors, black, red, and blue, are used. The text is almost entirely black, with red and blue used sparingly. Only two characters are blue, both being initials. One of the blue initials begins the textual interlude between the two brief musical sections. The other blue initial begins the text following the second musical section. Red is used for initials, annotations, and rubrications, it seems. A red initial begins the page's opening statement, "hanc igitur". Red initials also begin the lyrical portions of both musical sections, and one more is present in the right column's wall of text. Two black sentences appear to be crossed out by red ink, and seven small red annotations are present throughout the manuscript. These red additions are never complete statements, leading me to believe that they are not part of the core text. Some characters are split vertically by red lines. When present, these strokes only occupy the first character of sentences. This is likely to be the author's method of rubrication. Perhaps red dye was not readily available in mass at the time and place of conception, and this was the scribe's way of efficiently rubricating the page.

The minimalistic ornamentation and use of only three separate colors in this manuscript's decoration is consistent across other German missals held in the University of Colorado Boulder's Rare & Distinctive collection and dating within ~200 years. The other German manuscripts were found in Bavaria, and they use red ink more liberally. Full statements are written in red, and initials are more abundant. The Bavarian manuscripts use green ink instead of blue. The sections underneath these initials likely serve the same purpose.

The frame ruling is visible, and the columns generally fit within the sketched frames. Occasionally, the text extrudes from the frames due to a lack of space, but the most unapologetic extrusions occur in the initials. The exaggerated serifs of multiple initials intentionally escape the frame, and the body of one initial is even drawn in the hollow between the columns. This isolated initial is a long, red “J”, which extends down eight lines of text. This could be positioned outside the frame ruling to highlight the text it shadows. A large amount of red ornament is used in the area shadowed by this “J”, so it might serve as an indication of a section of rubric.

While two musical blocks appear in the work, three initials are present in these songs. Two of the initials are large and red, leading me to conclude that they begin unrelated musical sections. The third initial is similarly large, but black, with a vertical red stroke. This might, since it is different from the obvious beginnings the other initials indicate, mark a separation within the song – a “B” section to complement the previous “A” section. Alternatively, this might indicate a second voice to accompany the previous. This “B” section only has three lines as opposed to the “A” section’s five, but the rhythmic values differ. The notation is mensural, meaning that note values are related to each other.¹ This relation could indicate polyphony, as the mensural rhythmic values make it possible to be sung in the context of a duet.

This manuscript offers the viewer an intimate look into liturgical literature, both sermonically and musically. The still visible frame ruling gives the reader insight to the making of the manuscript and the intentional placement of the content. From the parchment used to the mensural style of musical notation, this single page combines numerous cultural elements of medieval Europe to create a cohesive visual story.

¹ DeFord, Ruth I. “Principles of Mensural Notation.” Chapter. In *Tactus, Mensuration and Rhythm in Renaissance Music*, 33–50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. doi:10.1017/CBO9781107587717.004.

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