

## AN ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN KNOWLEDGE

Successively in the Hermitage Museum St Petersburg and the Library of Marcel Jeanson To be auctioned at Sotheby's in London



A MEDIEVAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA of scientific and other knowledge, written and illuminated in northern France in the early fourteenth century, is to be included in Sotheby's sale of Western Manuscripts and Miniatures in London on December 5, 2000. Estimated to fetch £500,000/700,000, this important text was one of the most popular works of its day.

At a time when most books throughout western Europe were still written in Latin, its immediate popularity was partly due to the fact that it was written in French, making it more accessible to the ordinary man, and this also encouraged its subsequent translation into Provençal, Italian, Catalan, Flemish, Dutch, German, and English.

The encyclopaedia, called Sydrach and Boctus, or La Fontaine de Toutes Sciences, is a summary of scientific knowledge of its period, encompassing a wide range of human experience as well as matters divine.

It is not known exactly when the original Sydrach text was written, but the theory is that it was originally composed at the very end of the 13th century by a certain Jean-Pierre of Lyons. Historical events referred to in the text, such as the capture of Antioch in 1268 and a probable reference to the fall of St Jean d'Acre in 1291, suggest that it was composed shortly after this date. From about 1300, the approximate date of the earliest surviving copies, the text quickly became one of the most popular medieval vernacular works: about sixty copies are known to survive from the 14th and 15th centuries.

Peter Kidd, head of the Western Manuscripts Department of Sotheby's and the specialist in charge of the sale, said: "Nearly every other known manuscript of Sydrach is in one of the great national libraries of Europe, such as the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the British Library, and the Vatican Library. The manuscript in Sotheby's sale is very probably the most important copy of the text in existence, and is surely the most important of those still in private hands. It is not only one of the earliest known copies, making it textually very important, it is also the most extensively illuminated, making it of the greatest interest to art historians. But despite this, it has been until now out of sight, and is completely unknown to modern scholars."

Although the text clearly appealed to the "ordinary" reader, copies of the book are recorded in all the major royal and princely libraries of medieval Europe, including those of the dukes of Burgundy and the kings of France. "The extraordinarily lavish illumination of the present manuscript suggests it must have been commissioned by someone

of equal wealth and stature”, said Peter Kidd.

This copy was still in France in the 18th century, when it was rebound, but by the 19th century it had made its way into the imperial library of the Russian Tsars, probably having been acquired by Tsar Alexander I from the spoils of the French Revolution. It was subsequently sold in the early 1930s, along with a number of other enormously important manuscripts and a Gutenberg Bible from Russian imperial libraries, by the Soviet Government who were then desperately in need of foreign currency. It was bought by Marcel Jeanson, one of the 20th century’s greatest French book-collectors, who died in 1945, and has remained in his family ever since.

The prologue of the text relates that it contains divine knowledge that was dictated by an angel to Noah, on instructions from God. After this prologue comes a sort of table of contents, followed by a second prologue, and finally the main text, which takes the form of a dialogue between the philosopher Sydrach and King Boctus, King of a great province between India and Persia, fictional characters who are said to have lived about 1200 years before Christ.

Boctus asks Sydrach a long series of questions on a variety of day-to-day subjects such as relationships between men and women, the weather, and other natural phenomena and Sydrach provides the answers – thus providing us with precise insights into the beliefs and opinions of ordinary medieval men and women. Although the questions sometimes progress in a logical sequence, they also frequently seem to move randomly from subject to subject, evoking the meandering nature of the spoken dialogue between Boctus and Sydrach.

Contrary to modern popular belief, medieval man did not think that the world was flat. The author of Sydrach knew that the earth is round: one of the answers to Boctus’s questions explains how the world is a globe and how the people on the other side of the world are upside-down and thus have their feet pointing towards our feet (hence the word ‘antipodes’). The illumination illustrating this depicts King Boctus and Sydrach standing either side of a globe representing the earth, with an upright man standing at the top of the northern hemisphere and an upside-down man standing in the southern hemisphere.



The text also describes how the rising of the sun on one side of the world corresponds to the setting on the other side.

The following examples give a further impression of the other varying subjects addressed:

- Which came first: the body or the soul?
- Where does fire go when it is extinguished?
- Do birds, animals and fish have a soul?
- How do birds fly?
- Why is the sea salty?
- Where does the wind come from?
- Where does lightning come from and how is it made?
- How many stars are there in the sky?
- Why is the sun hot and the moon cold?

- How are the sun, moon and stars held up in the sky? And so on.....

The original 'short' version of the French text, such as the copy in Sotheby's sale, was soon expanded to create a version twice as long. After the invention of printing, the text appeared in at least 11 different editions between 1486 and 1533.

The principal artist is securely identifiable as the Master of the BNF. Lat. 1328 (named after the shelfmark of a Latin manuscript now in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France), who has been identified as the illuminator of about a dozen other manuscripts. The artist worked at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th centuries, probably at Arras in northern France. His work is characterised by tall slim figures and a distinctive palette in which the predominant colours are pale salmon-pink, blue-grey, reddish-brown, deep dark blue offset by a bright vibrant orange and with a more sparing use of green and mauve.

Records suggest that no more than seven Sydrach manuscripts have been sold at auction in the past 100 years. Of these none contains the early 'short' version of the text as in the Sotheby's copy, one is only a short extract from the text, two of them are not in the original French, and most of them are not illuminated.

With 27 large illuminations on brilliant highly burnished gold grounds, this is thought to be the most lavishly and extensively illuminated Sydrach manuscript in existence.

Illustrations are available on request by ISDN or post All press releases are printed on Sotheby's website  
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**Press Office contact:**

Amanda Stücklin

Tel: 020 7 293 5169

Fax: 020 7 293 5947

Email: [amanda.stucklin@sothebys.com](mailto:amanda.stucklin@sothebys.com)