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02, 16th-Century French-Spanish Book Trade

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Book of Hours: French-Spanish Book Trade
Henry Tallman

A Book of Hours now in the Portland State University Library Special Collection was printed in Paris by Thielman Kerver, and is dated June 23, 1507. At that time Paris had been a major center for manuscript production for 200 years, and with the introduction of the printing press in that city in 1470, production and trade continued to grow. Eventually Paris dominated French book production and became one of the biggest suppliers in Europe.¹ Parisian artisans produced many types of luxury goods c. 1500, but none more than Books of Hours. Between 1500 and 1520 it has been estimated that at least one hundred thousand copies were printed.² As it had been in manuscript form, the printed Book of Hours was the most common of all books. By 1600, nine out of ten Books of Hours were printed in Paris.³

The growing international trade in books at the dawn of the 16th century was largely the result of the invention and dissemination of the movable type printing press. Religious manuscripts had long been paramount in localized book production throughout Medieval Europe, and printing presses were initially widely dispersed in a similar matter. However, the larger scale of production required for efficient operation of printing presses led to massive consolidation from 1485 to 1520. Production in France, for example, was reduced from thirty locations to three. The presses that survived had access to investment capital as well as networks of transportation and exchange.⁴ While Paris did maintain a dominant position during the transition from manuscript to print from 1470 to 1520, the centers of production gradually shifted away

¹ Pettegree, *Centre and Periphery...*, 102-9.

² Baker, *Painting and the Luxury...*, 55.

³ Rouse and Rouse, *Manuscripts and their Makers*, 329.

⁴ Pettegree, *Centre and Periphery...*, 103-5.

from the close-knit neighborhood and family connections which had characterized the manuscript trade.⁵ However, it appears that Thielman Kerver's shop was to some extent still a family affair, as his wife was the daughter of a printer, and they were joined by their sons and nephews.⁶

Foreign origin was acceptable to the consumer because European religious texts at that time were primarily in Latin.⁷ Centralized production and wide distribution went hand in hand with a two thirds drop in book prices from 1454 onwards.⁸ International trade of all kinds was spurred by the advent of modern banking in 1407, which correlated with a drop in interest rates to between 5 and 10 percent.⁹

International trade in books was facilitated by growing networks of transportation and exchange, such as the biannual book fair in Frankfurt. One country that became an importer of Latin books was Spain. While Spain continued to produce books for the domestic market, it could not compete with the larger centers of production and had no book export industry.¹⁰ Spain's share of European production shrank from close to a third of manuscripts in the tenth century, to only two percent of books in 1600.¹¹ This drop in domestic manufacturing must have inevitably led to a market for imported religious texts. And while the trade between France and Spain was dominated by Spanish wool and French cloth, it also included French books.¹²

⁵ Rouse and Rouse, *Manuscripts and their Makers*, 332.

⁶ Selby, *Early Printed Book...*, 20-1.

⁷ Pettegree, *Centre and Periphery...*, 103-5.

⁸ Buringh, *Charting...*, 440.

⁹ Pirenne, *Economic and Social History...*, 215.

¹⁰ Pettegree, *Centre and Periphery...*, 105-6.

¹¹ Buringh, *Charting...*, 423.

¹² Saupin, *Le commerce atlantique franco-espagnol*, Introduction.

Trade routes between Paris and Barcelona had existed since at least the Middle-Ages.¹³ By the late 15th century Catalonia was the most economically developed region in the newly unified Spanish state.¹⁴ The hypothesis that the 1507 Kerver Book of Hours was produced for the Catalonian market is bolstered by the fact that Catalonian saints are included. The passage of the Apocalypse of Saint John is also in Spanish.¹⁵

While it is impossible to trace the specific journey of the 1507 Kerver Book of Hours, it is consistent with the historical record to conclude that it was produced for an international market, and quite plausibly, specifically for the Catalonian Spanish market.

¹³ See figure 1, Kollar, *Le Commerce médiéval Flandres-Espagne* 678.

¹⁴ Stein and Stein, p. 72.

¹⁵ See figure 2, Author, 2018.

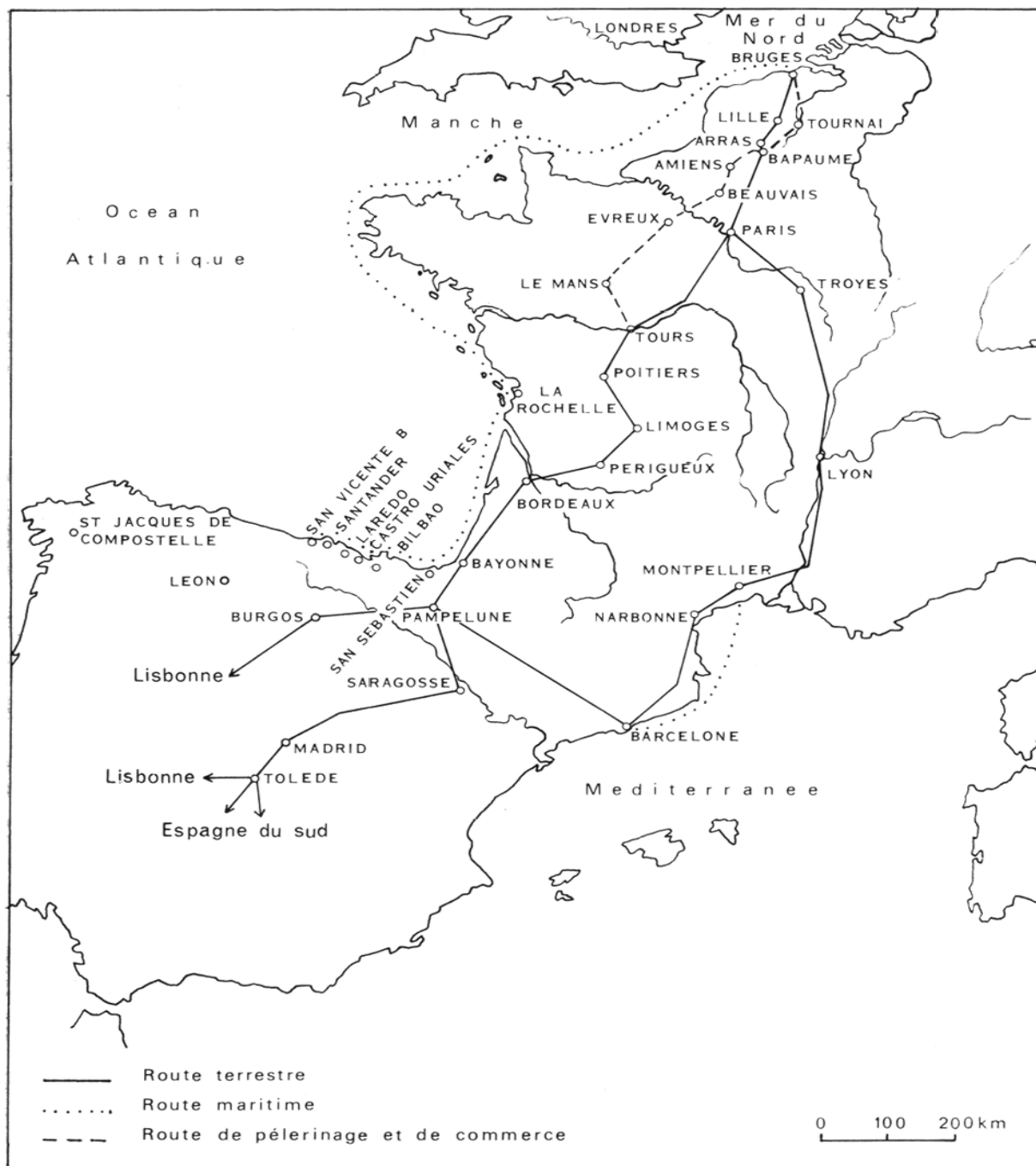


Figure 1. Map showing Middle-Ages trade route linking Paris and Barcelona. Kollar, *Le Commerce médiéval Flandres-Espagne*, 678.

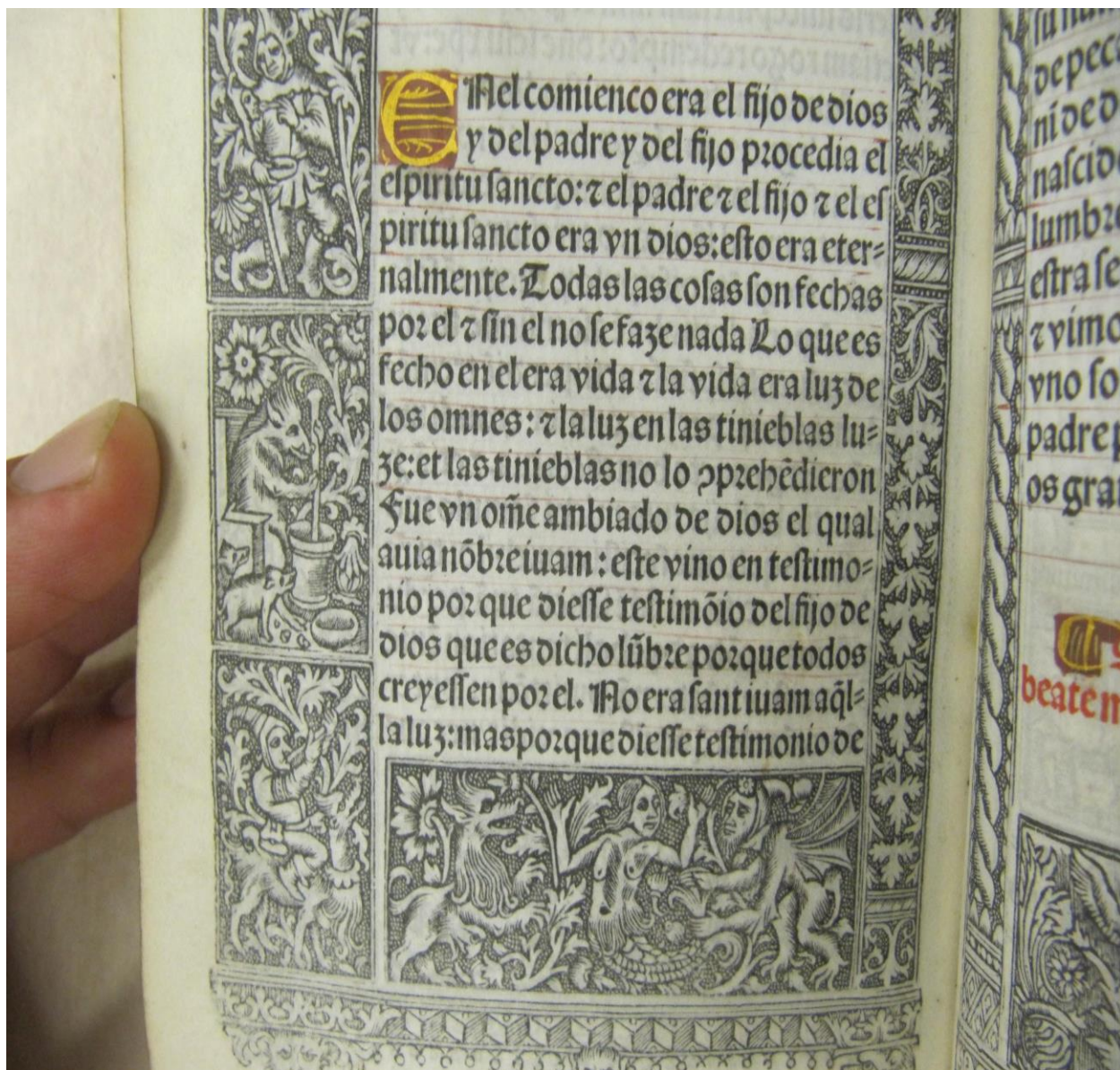


Figure 2. 1507 Kerver Book of Hours (folio # T3V, prayer in Spanish. Photo by author, 2018.)

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