

Bibliotheca

Amploniana

The 'Bibliotheca Amploniana', founded by the Rhenanian bibliophile Amplonius Rating de Berka († 1435), contains the worldwide largest private collection of mediaeval manuscripts compiled by a single late mediaeval scholar and still preserved almost in its entirety. It is therefore regarded as one of the most important manuscript collections on German soil.

The physician and scholar Amplonius Rating de Berka was born in 1363/65 at Rheinberg on the Niederrhine River (near Duesseldorf). Primarily educated at the school of the canons at St. Patroclus in Soest, he pursued his studies at Osnabrück and gained his Master of Arts in 1387 at Prague. Afterwards he studied medicine at Prague and Cologne.

1393 Amplonius graduated at Erfurt and became the first Doctor of Medicine at the newly founded University as well as its second rector in 1394/95. He left Erfurt in February 1395.

1399 he pursued his academic career as a professor of medicine at Cologne University and twice was university rector in the same year. Around this time he achieved a canonry at the Holy Apostels in Cologne and became a confidant and personal physician of Archbishop Frederick III († 1414) in 1401.

1416 he left Cologne, became dean of the canons' monastery St. Victor at Mainz and simultaneously was the personal physician of Archbishop John II of Mainz († 1419).

For some years he stayed at Mainz but returned to Cologne in 1422/23, where he lived until his death in April 1435 as a canon of the Holy Apostels and as the personal physician of Archbishop Dietrich II (Frederick's successor).

Around 1410 Amplonius started registering the books of his fine library. This self-written catalogue still exists and today is kept in safe custody together with the manuscript collection.

On May 1st, 1412 (still living in Cologne) Amplonius founded a college for students at the University of Erfurt. He provided the capital to support 13 persons holding a master's degree und 4 students. The city of Erfurt provided Amplonius with a house in the university quarter (later known as the 'Porta Coeli' or 'Himmelsforte' i. e. 'Heaven's Gate'). Amplonius made his foundation especially significant by donating the students of the college his library encompassing 633 volumes of books. The Amplonius' college then harboured one of the most important private book collections of its time, which also clearly exceeded the holdings of the contemporary university libraries.

The 'Collegium Amplonianum' remained Catholic even after the Reformation, in the course of which the city of Erfurt became Protestant. The college was considered an integral part of the university and in the city as a stronghold of Catholicism. In the 17th century, however, it was headed by a Protestant dean due to the lack of other qualified candidates.

Amplonius' library is the result of lifelong systematic collecting. He bought manuscripts, had texts copied or copied them himself. He acquired book collections of others and also received numerous books as gifts. Amplonius must have been a manic collector with nearly inexhaustable funds as well as a refined connoisseur of texts - apparently he was not very interested in delicately illuminated books, of which he possessed only a few. He too seems to have been keenly interested in scholarly debates, especially in the field of medicine and natural philosophy and possessed an extraordinary abundance of mathematical works. They span from Greek and Roman Antiquity to Arabic and Western European writings.

The 979 currently existing manuscripts of the 'Bibliotheca Amploniana' contain at least 6,000 works and reflect the cosmos of late mediaeval knowledge and learning. All subjects of the mediaeval university are represented.

The oldest manuscripts of the collection reach back well into the first millennium. In the field of Aristotelian philosophy the 'Bibliotheca Amploniana' contains exquisite and unique manuscripts from the period of the 12th to 15th century and gives insight into late mediaeval teaching.

The history of the 'Amploniana' is characterized from the very beginning by expansion and loss. In statutes, Amplonius regulated life and study in the college, including the use of the books. Beginning students were not allowed to enter the room in which the books were held. Amplonius issued the strict regulations not in the least to prevent book theft. Every newly accepted collegiate member was expected to donate a book. In this way the collection grew in the first 100 years of its existence to at least 1,200 volumes.

After the invention of moveable type, printed works were also added to the collection. Approximately 1,600 of these volumes still exist today.

The college managed to keep the collection together to a great extent over the centuries. It was, however, in the course of the dissolution of the University of Erfurt in 1816 also dissolved.

After years of debate over the continued existence of the collection the citizens of Erfurt secured the 'Amploniana' for the city. It was integrated into the newly founded 'Royal Prussian Library' in Erfurt together with the numerous libraries that in the course of the secularization (after 1803) were dissolved.

The city of Erfurt bought the Amploniana in 1908 with the other collections from the Prussian state and since then it has been the owner of the library and has preserved the collection in the municipal library.

In the course of the refounding of the University of Erfurt (1994), the city of Erfurt in 2001 gave the Amploniana together with the existing early modern prints of the dissolved monasteries in Erfurt to the university as a permanent loan.