

British Library unrolls Henry VIII's pious past

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The British Library has acquired a unique medieval prayer roll that once belonged to Henry VIII and contains one of only three surviving examples of his handwriting from before his accession in 1509. It is a rare example of a late medieval prayer roll, for, unlike medieval obituary rolls (of which there are hundreds), very few prayer rolls survived the Reformation.

Produced in England in the late fifteenth century, the prayer roll consists of four parchment strips sewn end to end and measures some four metres long when fully unrolled. The roll contains thirteen illuminations - images of Christ, focusing on the Passion, its Instruments and the Sacred Blood, as well as depictions of various saints and their martyrdoms.

Accompanying these is a two-column text, with prayers in Latin and rubrics (religious instructions) in English. The rubrics promise that the recital of certain of the prayers will offer safety from physical danger, sickness or disease; others will shorten, by specified amounts, the agony of Purgatory, while the placing of the roll on the belly of a woman in labour will ensure a safe childbirth.

The prayer roll was once owned and used by Prince Henry (later Henry VIII), as evidenced by the inclusion of Henry's royal badges at the head of the roll. These include two Tudor roses, the Prince of Wales crowned ostrich feather, as well as Katherine of Aragon's emblem of a sheaf of arrows. At some point prior to 1509 Henry presented the roll to William Thomas, a Gentleman of his Privy Chamber, and added an inscription at the top of the second membrane, under the central image of Christ's Passion: 'Wylliam thomas I pray yow pray for me your lovyng master Prynce Henry'.

The prayer roll provides unique evidence of Henry VIII's early religious beliefs. It demonstrates that, as a young man, Henry practised the devotions characteristic of the late medieval popular piety that just twenty-five years later he would destroy as the Reformation King.

Tudor historian, Dr. David Starkey commented:

"The prayer roll is the most important piece of evidence about Henry's deeply conservative religious practices as a young man. I am delighted that the British Library, custodian of Henry VIII's library, has acquired the roll".

Dr. Andrea Clarke, Curator of Early Modern Historical Manuscripts at the British Library, said:

"Henry VIII's prayer roll wasn't discovered until 1858 and it has yet to surrender all of its secrets. There are still many unanswered questions about its origin, commission, place of production and illumination. I hope that art historians and researchers with an interest in the history of pre-Reformation popular devotion and piety will be able to get to the bottom of this royal enigma at the British Library."

Prayer rolls are most commonly associated with pre-Reformation England. Almost all of them contain textual and visual imagery relating to the devotions of the Wounds of Christ. Prayer rolls can take the form of *Arma Christi* rolls, so called after a poem on the Arms of the Passion; rolls focusing on the Measurement of Christ, the length of the nails with which he was fastened to the cross and the size of his side wound; and rolls with various prayers to the Five Wounds of Christ and other related devotions. Henry VIII's prayer roll belongs to this last category.



The British Library purchased Henry VIII's prayer roll from Sotheby's for £485,000. This acquisition complements the British Library's existing collections of Henry VIII's library which forms a key part of the Library's Royal Collection. The prayer roll will be on display in the Sir John Ritblat Gallery: Treasures of the British Library from 4 June.

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Notes to editors

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