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MS Varia 131 of the  
Biblioteca Reale di Torino  
and Decembrio's  
Translation  
of Curtius Rufus

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# MS Varia 131 of the Biblioteca Reale di Torino and Decembrio's Translation of Curtius Rufus

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**ABSTRACT:** This article offers a new insight on the manuscript Varia 131 of the Biblioteca Reale di Torino, the earliest known copy of Pier Candido Decembrio's vernacular translation of Curtius Rufus's *Historia Alexandri Magni*, which was transcribed in 1438 by the Milanese scribe Thomas Guarimbertus and was corrected by Decembrio himself. This manuscript is notable not only for its sumptuous illumination by the Master of the *Vitae imperatorum* (probably the finest illuminator in early fifteenth-century Lombardy) or its dedicatee (the Spanish knight Iñigo d'Avalos), but also for being one of the first examples of the use of the humanistic *littera antiqua* to copy a vernacular text. Because of these unique features, the Turin manuscript is an outstanding testimony of the reputation of the vernacular in the Visconti court.

**KEYWORDS:** Renaissance Humanism; Humanist Philology; Curtius Rufus; Pier Candido Decembrio; Iñigo d'Avalos; Filippo Maria Visconti.

**Q**uintus Curtius Rufus's *Historia* (or *Historiae*) *Alexandri Magni* was popular among late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Italian humanists—such as Coluccio Salutati, Poggio Bracciolini, and Guarino Veronese—who lamented that the first two books were missing as well as the two additional large *lacunae* found between the end of the fifth book and the beginning of the sixth, and shortly before the end of

the final book—between *trucidaret* (10.4) and *intuentibus* (10.5). In doing so, they followed in Petrarch’s footsteps, who as early as 1356 obtained a copy of Curtius Rufus’s *Historia* from Guglielmo da Pastrengo, currently Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 5720. Petrarch himself extensively annotated this manuscript, which was later incorporated in the Visconti library in Pavia.<sup>1</sup> In 1438 Pier Candido Decembrio completed his vernacular translation of Curtius Rufus for Filippo Maria Visconti, Duke of Milan, using extracts from Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander* to supply the two lacunae, translating directly from Greek, as evidenced by Pade (1998).

Gianvito Resta (1962: 33–34) speculated that Decembrio had used Petrarch’s manuscript for his translation, but evidence proves otherwise. In fact, in an undated letter to his friend Abbondio Solari Decembrio wrote: “I have a book of Curtius sufficiently emended and the same history excellently written in Greek characters [i.e., Plutarch’s *Life of Alexander*], so that I cannot be deceived even in a single word.”<sup>2</sup> As with his contemporary translation of Caesar’s *corpus*, for which, as illustrated in Ponzù Donato (2018), Decembrio used Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Dc 167, it is evident that the humanist used his own books rather than the duke’s. Moreover, a direct comparison between Decembrio’s translation and Petrarch’s copy of Curtius Rufus shows that the two texts have nothing in common. See for example 5.8.11, where Petrarch’s copy omits the verb *fugiam* “I will flee,” and he adds *patiar* “I will suffer,” while Decembrio translates *anderò* “I will go”; and 5.10.9, where Petrarch’s copy omits the verb *possint* “they may be able,” and he adds *auderent* “they

<sup>1</sup> Petrarch’s annotations in the Paris manuscript are extensively discussed in Fenzi 2003: 417–46.

<sup>2</sup> “Est apud me Curtii liber satis emendatus eademque historia Grecis litteris egregie conscripta, ita ut ne unico quidem verbo queam decipi.” I quote from fol. 29v of the manuscript, now Valladolid, Biblioteca de Santa Cruz, MS 325. This manuscript contains the second part of Decembrio’s collection of letters, still unpublished, and was owned by Decembrio’s brother, Angelo, who in regard to this passage noted: “Immo erravisti plerisque in locis transferendo Quintum Curtium in vulgarem sermonem.” This is due to the fact that in the early 1440s Pier Candido and Angelo broke off their relationship. See also Ferrer 2019.

would dare,” while Decembrio narrowly translates *potriano* “they may be able.”<sup>3</sup>

Apart from Curtius Rufus’s *Historia Alexandri Magni*, Pier Candido Decembrio completed two vernacular translations for Filippo Maria Visconti: Caesar’s *De bello Gallico* and Polybius’s *De primo bello Punico* (from the Latin translation made by Leonardo Bruni in 1416). Decembrio also composed a *Comparation between Gaius Julius Caesar, the greatest emperor, and Alexander the Great, King of Macedon* (*Comparatione di Caio Iulio Cesare imperatore maximo e d’Alexandro Magno re di Macedonia*), following the style of Plutarch’s *synkrisis*, which precedes the version of Curtius Rufus and links it to the translation of Caesar’s commentaries. This extensive work was intended to provide Filippo Maria Visconti’s library with high-quality vernacular translations of ancient historians. Unfortunately, no dedication copy survives. However, we have two early copies of Curtius Rufus and Polybius executed for Iñigo d’Avalos (d. 1484), a Castilian-born knight who came to Italy with Alfonso of Aragon in 1435 and later became one of Filippo Maria Visconti’s favorites: Turin, Biblioteca Reale, MS Varia 131 and Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional de España, MS 10301.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the layout of the Madrid manuscript is relatively unadorned and simple, the Turin manuscript is to be regarded as one of the finest products of the Milanese *scriptorium*.<sup>5</sup>

In order to better understand the importance of the Turin manuscript—and due to the lack of a thorough description—it seems useful to describe it in detail:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For Petrarch’s additions to the text of Curtius Rufus, see fol. 30v<sup>b</sup> and 32r<sup>a</sup> of the Ms. Paris, BnF Lat. 5720.

<sup>4</sup> Iñigo d’Avalos remained in Milan from 1435 to 1440 and relocated to Naples shortly before the Aragonese conquest of the city in 1442. The Italian humanist and librarian Vespasiano da Bisticci (1421–1498) wrote a succinct biography of Iñigo included in his *Vite* (“Lives”), edited by Aulo Greco (1970, 2:127–30).

<sup>5</sup> Iñigo d’Avalos also owned a copy of Decembrio’s translation of Caesar: Florence, Biblioteca Riccardiana, MS 1569, which was executed in Naples between 1455 and 1460, see Decembrio 2017: CC–CCIV.

<sup>6</sup> See Giacobello Bernard (1990: 86; the manuscript is described by Maria Rosaria Manunta) and Zaggia (1993b: 46–47).

TURIN, BIBLIOTECA REALE, MS VARIA 131 (INVENTORY N. 14473 S. M.)

Parchment; fifteenth century (c. 1438), Milan; 245 x 195 mm; fol. I (paper), 218, I (paper). The leaves have been recently numbered in pencil on the upper right corner. The two unnumbered paper leaves have been added when the manuscript was rebound in the eighteenth century.

Collation: 28 quires (1–2<sup>8</sup>, 3a<sup>6</sup>, 3b<sup>2</sup>, 4–27<sup>8</sup>, 28<sup>10</sup>), with catchwords at the end of each quire. The third quire is actually split in two parts. The second part (3b) is the fourth bifolium of the original quire (3a), which was bound immediately after 3a. This is apparently due to a mistake on the part of the bookbinder.

Text on a single column (160 x 120 mm), 26 lines per page (fol. 25r), written below the top line. Light brown ink lining.

Humanistic handwriting (*littera antiqua*), with slightly rounded edges, by Thomas Guarimburtus. The main text, catchwords, and glosses are in light brown ink. Rubrics, running titles, and chapter numbers are in red. Subscription: “SCRIPTVS PER THOMAM GVARIMBERTVM” (fol. 218v). There are marginal notes written by two other hands; one, as first noted by Marianne Pade (1998: 111), belongs to Pier Candido Decembrio (see Figures 1–3 below). The other one belongs to an unknown sixteenth-century reader/owner (e.g., fol. 18v and 30v).

Illumination executed by the Master of the *Vitae imperatorum*:

fol. 1r, border: 1) upper margin: a red-draped putto and two white hounds chasing a hare, facing left, with a forest and rocks in the background; 2) right margin, from top to bottom: a) a brown pulley; b) two hares running to the left in a rocky background, chased by a red-draped putto blowing a black horn and two white hounds; c) three putti seating on the rocks over a bushy background, playing flutes; 3) left margin, from top to bottom: a brown pulley; b) a hare running to the right in a rocky background, chased by a red-draped

putto; c) three putti seating on the rocks over a bushy background, playing flutes, the first from right wearing a red and azure drape (in these two sections the painting is partially worn away); 4) lower margin: arms of the owner (see below).

fol. 1r, text: capital letter (“C”), ten lines deep, in the form of a tower, painted in purple and azure, over a gold background, illuminated with a miniature depicting Duke Filippo Maria Visconti wearing red headgear and a red mantle adorned with gold vipers (the arms of the Visconti family), and seated on the throne, receiving the dedication copy of the translation of Curtius Rufus by Pier Candido Decembrio. Decembrio is kneeling on the right of the duke. On each side of the throne there are three men standing, watching the scene, the second one on the right, younger in appearance and wearing an elaborate conic headgear, seems to be Iñigo d’Avalos (see Figure 4).

fol. 2r, right margin: 1) laureate portrait of Alexander the Great, long-haired and bearded, dressed in red and blue, standing frontal and holding a thin gold scepter in his right hand; underneath the portrait, the note “La figura d’Alexandro”; 2) laureate portrait of Julius Caesar, long-haired and bearded, dressed in red and blue with a purple cloak, standing left and holding a gold globe in his right hand and a thin gold scepter in his left hand; underneath the portrait, the note “La figura di Cesare”).

fol. 9r: capital letter (“A”), seven lines deep, with the form of a knotted ribbon painted in azure over a gold background, filigree in red and blue;

fol. 28v: capital letter (“D”), seven lines deep, in the form of a blue ribbon, with the motto “INNIGO SVVENAVVS” inscribed in white, over a gold background, filigree in red and blue.

fol. 45v, left margin: view of the city of Alexandria over the Nile river, painted in red and azure; above, the note “Come Alexandria fu edificata sopra el Nilo.”

fol. 53r: crowned head of Alexander the Great, frontal, long-haired and bearded, painted in light brown, pink, and yellow; above, the note “Magnanime parole di Alexan[dro]” (partially trimmed).

fol. 66v: capital letter (“Q”), seven lines deep, with the form of a purple ribbon, with the motto “INNIGO SVVENAVVS” inscribed in white, over a gold background, filigree in red and blue; inside the Q there is a brown pulley and a water-green scroll with the name “INNIGO” inscribed in white, painted over a blue background filigree with white dots.

fol. 69r, right margin: the fortress of Babylon, painted in red and light blue; underneath the fortress, the note “La Rocha de Babilonia de che si dice tanti miraculi.”

fol. 90r: capital letter (“Q”), five lines deep, painted in purple over a gold background, filigree in red, water-green, and blue.

fol. 114r: capital letter (“P”), eight lines deep, in the form of a dressed forearm holding a fish, painted in azure over a gold background, filigree in red and blue.

fol. 122r, right margin: view of the city of Alexandria in the Caucasus, painted in red and brown; above, the note “Alexandria ale radice del monte Caucaso.”

fol. 131r, right margin: view of the city of Alexandria on the Tanais river, painted in red, brown, and blue; above, the note “Alexandria sopra el fiume Thanay.”

fol. 139r, right margin: view of the city of Margania, painted in red and brown; underneath, the note “Citade Margania.”

fol. 141v: capital letter (“A”), nine lines deep, in the form of a brown pulley, a purple scroll with the name “INNIGO” entwined around it, over a gold background, filigree in red and blue.

fol. 158r, right margin: a crown, within which are a laurel branch and a myrtle branch, painted in yellow, green, brown, and red.

fol. 173v: capital letter (“A”), nine lines deep, painted in blue and azure over a gold background, filigree in red and blue.

fol. 174r, right margin: view of Alexandria Bucephala and Alexandria Nicaea on the opposite sides of the Hydaspes river, painted in red, brown, and blue; above, the note “Alexandrine urbes in utraque ripa fluminis Hidaspis.”

fol. 181r, right margin: view of Alexandria Bucephala and Alexandria Nicaea, painted in blue and red, respectively (both retouched



in brown and yellow); above, the notes “Nicea” and “Bucefala.”

fol. 188r, right margin: crowned head of Alexander the Great, facing right, long-haired and bearded, painted in light brown, pink, and yellow; on the right, the note: “Parole d’Alexan[dro] dignissim[e]” (partially trimmed).

fol. 191v, left margin: view of Alexandria on the Ganges river, painted in red and blue; above, the note “Alexandria apresso el Gange.”

fol. 196r, right margin: view of three unspecified cities founded by Alexander the Great, one painted in blue (above) and two in red (below); above, the note “Alexandrine urbes.”

fol. 196v, left margin: view of Alexandria (on the Indus river?), painted in red; above, the note: “Alexandria.”

fol. 198v: capital letter (“Q”), nine lines deep, in the form of an eight-petal flower, painted in purple, water-green, red, and blue over a gold background filigree in red and azure.

fol. 199v, left margin: King Erythrus’s burial monument, placed on a red column in the middle of a forest, painted in red, green, and brown; above, the note “Erithros Grece Rubeus Latine.”

fol. 206r: capital letter (“T”), seven lines deep, in the form of an obelisk, painted over a gold background, filigree in azure, blue, and red.

fol. 217r, right margin: a crown, painted in gold and pink; underneath, the note “Qui si può uedere la potentia e lo stato lassato d’Alexandro ordinatamente, che se diuise in Regione xxii. excepta l’India, in che sono molti potenti Regni, e lo Regno di Persia, di Macedonia e di Grecia, cherano li principali.”

Content:

PIER CANDIDO DECEMBRIO, *Comparatione di Caio Iulio Cesare imperatore maximo e d’Alexandro Magno re di Macedonia* (fol. 1r–9r):

*inc.*: “Al Serenissimo Principe [sic] et Excellentissimo Signore Filippo maria Ducha di Milano, di Pauia, e Angera Conte, e di Genoua Signore. Incomincia la comparatione di Caio Iulio Ce-

sare Imperatore maximo e d'Alexandro magno Re di Macedonia da P. Candido ordinata, con lo giudicio suo in seme felicemente" (fol. 1r);

*expl.*: "Finisse la Comparatione di Caio Iulio Cesare Imperatore maximo e de Alexandro magno re di Macedonia ordinata da P. Candido conl suo Iudicio in seme felicemente" (fol. 9r).

PIER CANDIDO DECEMBRIO, *Istoria de Alexandro Magno* [translation of Q. CURTIUS RUFUS, *Historia Alexandri Magni*] (fol. 9r–218v):

*inc.*: "Incommincia l'istoria de Alexandro magno figlio di philippo Re di Macedonia, scripta da Quinto Curcio Ruffo historico eloquentissimo e traduta in uulgare fidelmente da P. Candido, dela quale questo è el tercio libro, manca el primo el secundo, che ala nostra etate non si ritrouano" (fol. 9r);

*expl.*: "Al nome de dio omnipotente finisse el duodecimo e l'ultimo libro de l'istoria d'Alexandro magno figlio di Philippo Re di Macedonia. Scripta da Quinto Cursio [*sic*] Ruffo eruditissimo, e facundissimo auctore e traducta in uulgare al Serenissimo Principo [*sic*] Filippo Maria Tercio Duchca de Milano, di Pauia e Angiera conte e di Genoua signore per P. Candido decembre suo seruo. M cccc xxxviii a die xxi del mese d'Aprile in Milano" (fol. 218v).

Arms: fol. 1r: *Azure, a castle of three towers argent, doors and windows gules, within a bordure argent and gules,*<sup>7</sup> placed under a helmet surmounted by a wreath of wheat, between the letters "IÑI" and "GO," i.e., Iñigo d'Avalos.

Provenance: The manuscript was executed for Iñigo d'Avalos, who inscribed the following ownership note on fol. 218v: "QVINTI CVRCI RVFI LIBER EST MEI D.YNICI DE DAVALOS." It is likely that the manuscript remained in Iñigo's library until his death in 1484, and then

<sup>7</sup> "D'azzurro, al castello d'oro; colla bordura composta di rosso e d'argento," see Crollalanza 1886: 71.

passed to the library of his daughter Costanza d'Avalos (1460–1541), as the inventory of her collection records (n. 24 of the second chest) “un altro libro in pergamena di Paulo [*sic*] Candido al Serenissimo Principe Filippo Maria Duca di Milano della coronazione [*sic*] di Cesare e di Alessandro Magno,” which could match with the manuscript now in Turin.<sup>8</sup> The manuscript was later incorporated into the collection of the Dukes of Cassano in Naples, and in 1828 it was sold in London to Samuel Weller Singer (1783–1858). It was eventually purchased by Bernard Quaritch (1819–1899) at an auction of Singer's estate. In an unknown date, but likely in early 1860,<sup>9</sup> Quaritch sold the manuscript to Vittorio Emanuele Taparelli d'Azeglio (1816–1890).<sup>10</sup> In 1863, Taparelli d'Azeglio sold it to the Library of Vittorio Emanuele II, King of Italy, for 500 francs, according to Cristina Maritano (2011: 51).

An oval stamp with the manuscript's inventory number and an engraving depicting the *recto* and *verso* of Pisanello's medal of Iñigo d'Avalos (see Figure 5) are respectively pasted on the upper left corner and on the center of the inside front cover. Printed ex-libris pasted on the *recto* of the first flyleaf and on the inside back cover, with the arms of the House of Savoy above the inscription “EX BIBLIOTHECA REGIS VICTORII EMMANVELIS.” On the upper left corner of the first ex-libris, the shelf-mark “Ms Vari – 131,” written in pencil, and below the ex-libris, the circular rubber stamp of the Royal Library of Turin, with the inscription “BIBLIOTECA REALE” and the arms of the House of Savoy. On the last flyleaf, the note “fol. 217 [*sic*] n. n.” The manuscript contains a six-page note, written in English and Latin, on the manuscript's content and provenance and a three-page note, written in Spanish, on the d'Avalos family, both unbound and dating to the early nineteenth century.

<sup>8</sup> See De Vivo 1996: 300–01.

<sup>9</sup> The manuscript is mentioned in the Quaritch's catalogues of 1859 and 1860, listed at the price of 20 and 18 pounds respectively, see Quaritch 1859: 136 n. 2534 and 1860: 139 n. 2312.

<sup>10</sup> Taparelli d'Azeglio undertook extensive research on the content and ownership of the manuscript, see Taparelli d'Azeglio 1861.

Binding: vellum binding over paper boards, dating to the eighteenth century.

Corrections and marginalia: As suggested by Marianne Pade (1998), the Turin manuscript was occasionally corrected and annotated by Pier Candido Decembrio. However, even after careful examination, it is not easy to identify Decembrio's hand. See, for example:

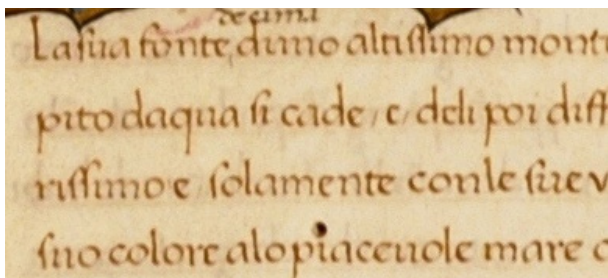


Fig. 1: Turin, BR, Varia 131, fol. 1v.

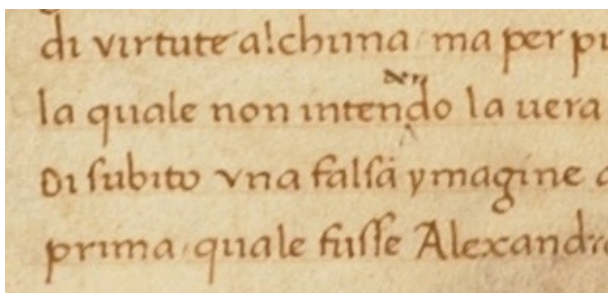


Fig. 2: Turin, BR, Varia 131, fol. 9r.

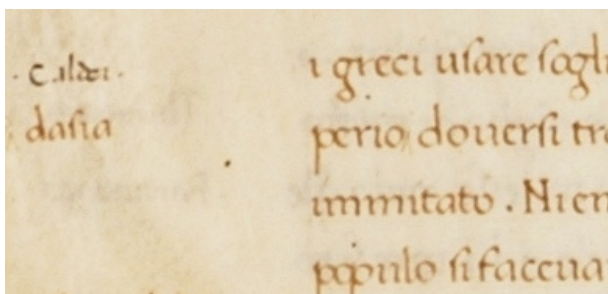


Fig. 3: Turin, BR, Varia 131, fol. 12v.

The first two cases are interlinear corrections/insertions: “intendendo,” “fonte *de cima*” (this one seems more doubtful); while the third one is actually a catchword: “Caldei.” These interventions by the corrector are in a darker ink, whereas the scribe’s is light brown.

Among the many marginal notes copied by Thomas Guarimbertus—and derived from the lost archetype—are many historical and geographical observations, e.g.: “Terreno simile aquelo di Lombardia” (fol. 67v, “Land similar to that of Lombardy”), referring to the similarities between Lombardy and Mesopotamia, both placed between two rivers, the Ticino and Adda and the Tigris and Euphrates, respectively. There are even political remarks, e.g.: “Nota l’origine di Veneciani da schiaui esser havuta” (fol. 10v, i.e. “Note that the Venetians descend from slaves”), with a hint of contempt for the Republic of Venice, then enemy of the Duchy of Milan. None of these glosses, evidently due to Decembrio himself, have been published in the printed editions of Decembrio’s translation of Curtius Rufus. The *princeps* was printed in Florence, 1478, “apud Sanctum Iacobum de Ripoli” (Hain 5888) and the last edition was printed in Venice, 1535, “per Vettor .q. Piero Rauano della Serena et Compagni.”

Apart from the Turin manuscript, two other manuscripts are known to have been written by Thomas Guarimbertus: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Lat. 8528, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS D’Orville 536. Both manuscripts are executed in *littera antiqua* and both are linked to the Milanese humanistic milieu. The Paris manuscript contains Cicero’s *Epistulae ad familiares*, and the corrections of humanist Guiniforte Barzizza. It was illuminated by the Master of the *Vitae imperatorum* and was owned by King Alfonso of Aragon (1396-1458). The Oxford manuscript is a copy and Pier Candido Decembrio’s *Peregrina historia* and *Grammaticon*.<sup>11</sup> The Turin manuscript is the only known manuscript written by Thomas Guarimbertus in the vernacular, and, as noted by Massimo Zaggia, one of the first examples of the use of the humanistic *littera antiqua* to copy a vernacular work (a translation, nonetheless, of a Latin text).

<sup>11</sup> See Zaggia 1993a: 212–14 and 1993c: 43–48.

In the Turin manuscript, the Master of the *Vitae imperatorum* uses an impressive iconographic apparatus that is peculiar to the Visconti court, and, more specifically, to Ìnigo d'Avalos. Hunting, for example, was one of the favorite pastimes of Filippo Maria Visconti and Ìnigo d'Avalos—d'Avalos would later on write a treatise on falconry—while the capital letter of fol. 9r recalls the emblem of the “knot” that, according to Zaggia (1993b: 46–47), was typical of Filippo Maria Visconti’s court. The motto “SVVENAVVS,” i.e., *souvent à vous* (in French, literally, “often to you,”) was found by Gianvito Resta (1962: 53–54) as well as in Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS Vat. Lat. 10669, a manuscript that contains a copy of Pier Candido Decembrio’s translation of Plato’s *Republic* made for Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester. Zaggia (1993c: 38–55) suggested that this motto could belong to Ìnigo d'Avalos, and I also think that so would the pulleys depicted on fol. 1r (twice), 66v, and 141v. Zaggia claims that the handsome young man standing to the left of Filippo Maria Visconti in the miniature of the fol. 1r is Simonino Ghilini, secretary of Filippo Maria Visconti, who was entrusted with the task of offering Decembrio’s translation of Curtius Rufus to the Duke of Milan. However, I think that this figure rather evidently represents Ìnigo himself, given its clear resemblance to Pisanello’s medal, see Figures 4 and 5.



Fig. 4: Turin, BR, Varia 131, fol. 1r



Fig. 5: Turin, BR, Varia 131, inside front cover.

The unique features of the Turin manuscript—its handwriting and illuminations, as well as its marginal notes and the corrections by Decem-

brio—make it a humanistic product in the strictest sense and evince the reputation attained by the vernacular at Filippo Maria Visconti's court.

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