

# William Linnard & John A. Robey

## Children of Mercury: an addendum

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# Children of Mercury: an addendum

William Linnard & John A. Robey

Our recent article on the images of three mediaeval clockmakers (children of Mercury) attending to clocks<sup>1</sup> attracted an unusually high number of responses from interested readers in several countries. Some of these drew our attention to three other images of clockmakers as children of Mercury, one Italian, the other two German. One is new to horology, while we had not appreciated that the other two were from children of Mercury manuscripts. As these other images are important and will be new to many readers, it seems appropriate to describe them in this addendum and compare them to the three images already described.

The Italian image is in the Biblioteca Estense library in Modena, in a manuscript catalogued as *'De Sphera'* [About the Globe]. It contains astrological diagrams and drawings of the seven planets and their children. This manuscript is thought to be of the late 1450s or early 1460s, and has been published in several places.<sup>2</sup> In this image of the children of Mercury the various artisans are shown separately within eight individual workshops (Fig. 1), a format quite different from the three illustrations described previously. On the left is the scribe, below him the clockmakers, and at the bottom the armourers; in the centre two cooks are preparing food for the meal taking place at the top; on the right is a painter working on a panel, below him a sculptor, and at the bottom an organ-maker.

The *'De Sphera'* image differs from those previously described by showing not one but two clockmakers and two clocks (Fig. 2); here the master and his apprentice are busy at their bench, the master hammering something on a bench-mounted anvil and the apprentice

working on a large iron wheel held in a vice, presumably rounding the coarse teeth with a file. Toothed wheels and various other unidentified items are visible on the bench, but for clarity these, together with the vice and the anvil, are shown rather inconveniently at the front of the bench, rather than the rear. On the left a fairly accurately depicted Gothic clock with two weights and two counterweights hangs on the wall. Above the brass dial is an openwork frieze and a bell frame with a Gothic-shaped bell. The hammer appears to be pivoted at the top and falling under gravity. Both this type of bell and hammer are usually associated with French clocks,<sup>3</sup> indicating that similar clocks were also present in Italy at this period. On the wall at the rear are a pump-drill and a rather squat weight-driven clock. Three iron wheels are visible, but there is no bell or bell frame and it is probably incomplete or under test, though there is no foliot or balance. Both clocks appear to have twelve-hour dials, whereas Italian clocks from the mid-fifteenth century usually indicated twenty-four hours. It is not surprising to find Italian clockmakers working on clocks from other parts of Europe, just as Brother Almanus did when repairing clocks in Rome about 1475.<sup>4</sup>

The two German images of the children of Mercury are in manuscript compilations that were known as a *Hausbuch* [house-book], an illustrated commonplace book of miscellaneous information, including astrology. In both cases the various artisans pictured as children of Mercury are similar to those already described (scribe, goldsmith, cook, organ-maker, artist, clockmaker, etc.), but the format of the page and the detail of the clockmaker is quite

1. W. Linnard & J. A. Robey 'Three medieval clockmakers: children of Mercury', *Antiquarian Horology* March 2019, 102–108.

2. Manuscript in Biblioteca Estense, Modena. Catalogue No. aX.2.14 *'De Sphera'*; the Mercury page is fol. 11. The image has been reproduced and described in J. J. G. Alexander, *Italian Renaissance Illuminations* (Chatto & Windus, 1977, 94–5 Plate 28) and in F. A. B. Ward, 'A 15th century Italian clockmakers workshop', *Antiquarian Horology* Summer 1980, 172–4.

3. Tardy, *French Clocks the World Over* (Paris, 5th edition 1981), Part 1, pp. 33–6.

4. J. H. Leopold, 'Almanus Re-Examined', *Antiquarian Horology* December 2003, 665–72.



Fig. 1. The Mercury page in the 'De Sphaera' manuscript.

different from those already described in our previous article. Both of these German *Hausbuch* images are readily accessible on the internet.

The Tübingen *Hausbuch* was compiled about 1450, but it is not known who commissioned it and the identity of the artist is also unknown.<sup>5</sup> It was in the possession of

5. Tübingen *Hausbuch*. Tübingen University Library, shelfmark Md 2; the Mercury page is fol. 271<sup>r</sup>.



Fig. 2. Detail of the clockmakers and clocks in the '*De Sphera*' manuscript.

Johann Jacob Schmid, pastor of Ebingen, and on his death in 1752 it passed to Tübingen University Library. It is a lengthy calendrical, medicinal and astrological manuscript with numerous coloured drawings. It probably originated in the Ulm/Urach region of Württemberg, and is similar in date to the '*De Sphera*' manuscript, but although the occupations of the artisans are the same, the format of the children of Mercury page is very different (Fig. 3). Here the clockmaker is seated and is cradling on his knee a tall clock (Fig. 4). While purporting to be a Gothic clock (complete with 'noses' on the corner pillars) it owes more to the artist's imagination or misremembering of what he had seen, than being an accurate depiction of an actual clock. The

tall pillars extend upwards to a red-tiled roof structure surmounted by a cross. Below is a brass fret and a Gothic-shaped bell, both sitting between the pillars without any bell frame or movement top plate or sub-frame. Below these are a large wheel with crossings but no teeth, a disc with pins and a circular brass nine-hour dial. The disc is clearly a misrepresentation of a dial wheel with holes for an alarm let-off pin and would be concentric with the dial and visible through a central aperture. The top wheel is shown overlapping the dial wheel, whereas it should be smaller and behind it. This image gives only a general impression of a clock, and one that is very inaccurate and technically impractical.





Fig. 4. Detail of the clockmaker and clock in the Tübingen *Hausbuch*.

The Waldburg-Wolfegg *Hausbuch* was owned for centuries by the princes of Waldburg-Wolfegg in Wolfegg Castle, Upper Swabia. It was compiled about 1480, and thus is slightly later

than the Italian *De Sphera* manuscript, the Tübingen *Hausbuch*, and the three illustrations previously described.<sup>6</sup> The book originally contained ninety-eight parchment leaves of which sixty-three survive with forty-seven part-coloured drawings, showing coats of arms, a bath house, hunting scenes, recipes, scenes of mining and metallurgy, warfare, and the seven planets and their children. It is not known who originally commissioned this *Hausbuch*, and the identity of the artist(s) is also unknown. Several facsimiles of the *Hausbuch* have been published. In 2008 the *Hausbuch* was sold to an anonymous private buyer for an undisclosed sum and its present whereabouts are unknown. The detail of the clockmaker and the clock have been published in the horological literature, but with little technical comment.<sup>7</sup>

Again the general format of the image and the occupations of the children of Mercury in the Waldburg-Wolfegg *Hausbuch* are all similar to those illustrated in our previous article (Fig. 5), but this German version is an original creation and not a copy, and the clockmaker and the clock (Fig. 6) are quite distinctly different from the clocks in the *De Sphera* manuscript and the others previously described. Here the clockmaker is on the left of the page, and is actually standing with his back to the clock and engaged in sighting with a solar quadrant. The clock has a 12-hour ring dial, a relatively tall frame with ball finials, a bell frame with decorative ironwork and much of the wheel-work is visible. A domed bell is struck from the side by an external hammer and while as depicted it would miss the bell, this is artistic license to make the hammer head visible. It is standing on a bench alongside a 15-toothed crownwheel, a rope and weight, a hammer and what might be a file. It is a fairly accurate representation of a typical Germanic Gothic clock, and while it is the earliest known illustration of a German clock, French examples predate it by about a century.<sup>8</sup> It makes an interesting comparison with the squatter Gothic clocks (probably French) in the *De Sphera* manuscript, and is

6. Waldburg-Wolfegg *Hausbuch*; the Mercury page is fol. 16r.

7. Lothar Crombholz, *Frühe Hausuhren mit Gewichtsantrieb* (Munich, 1984), p. 119.

8. Tardy, *French Clocks*, Part 1, pp. 33–6.





Fig. 6. Detail of the clockmaker and clock in the Waldburg-Wolfegg *Hausbuch*.

Left: Fig. 5. The Mercury page in the Waldburg-Wolfegg *Hausbuch*.

quite different from the three box-like clocks previously described.

These six illustrations of the children of Mercury (two from Italy, two from Germany, and one each from the Netherlands and England) were all created in the second half of the fifteenth century by different artists and with varying degrees of technical accuracy. When considered together they form a uniquely valuable and informative set of images of late-medieval clockmakers with their clocks. They show clearly that by this period clockmaking was a well-known and accepted craft, that weight-driven domestic wall clocks were in widespread use so as to be accepted as an every-day item, and that different types of clock had been developed in different regions of Europe.

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