Publius Vergilius Maro, otherwise known as Virgil, was born in Northern Italy to a father who was a prosperous landowner. Virgil completed his studies in Naples and wrote a collection of pastoral poems named the *Eclogues* before starting the *Georgica*, an educational work on farming and his view of the country. His *Georgics* is thought to have been published in 29BC, and is in four parts. The first two books concern the cultivation of the soil and the raising of crops, the third book deals with the breeding of horses and cattle, and the last book is about the habits of bees.

Virgil lived between many cities, such as Campania, Sicily, and Rome. His *Eclogues* and *Georgics* gained him enough recognition for Augustus to commission him to write a poem glorifying the Empire of Rome, a long effort which resulted in his epic *The Aeneid*, a poem based on the styles of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. While travelling to Greece to apparently edit his *Aeneid*, Virgil met up with the Emperor Augustus in Athens and they journeyed home together, during which time Virgil contracted a fever in a town near Megara. He died on 21st September 19 BC. Before his death, Virgil requested that his poem be burned and never published, but Augustus overruled his dying wish and ordered the poem to be published with minimal edits.

This leaf of the Georgics is from Book Three, and therefore is concerned with the breeding of horses and cattle. The leaf was printed by Johann Prüss, a printer of great prevalence but relatively unknown. He was born in Germany in 1447 and worked as a printer from 1480 until 1510 and he probably died very soon after he stopped printing. The obverse side of this leaf has a coloured woodcut as well as the text depicting two men ploughing a field
while another plays a brass instrument, and a horse prances where it is tied to a tree.

Woodcutting is an art process that requires much precision and skill, an image is carved onto a piece of wood by the printer, removing the parts that will create the pattern. The pattern left in high relief will be covered in ink and make the final image on the page. Although the information on a handwritten note found with the page says that the leaf was made in 1502, there is some discrepancy there due to the fact that coloured woodcuts were not invented in Germany until 1509.¹

The image on this leaf is therefore not a medieval one but is printed on a leaf which reproduces the commentary of a medieval monk. When originally written the author inserted various medieval notations, such as abbreviations and ligatures that would be characteristic of handwriting and the fact that they are here represented still even in a printed document emphasises the anachronistic nature of the leaf. There is an inconsistency with the notations, the original text, and the image as they all hail from different time periods. Virgil’s original text is from circa 29 BCE, this is the text that is in the middle of the page and the commentary on the text which take up most of the leaf were most likely recorded during the medieval period.

The physical leaf itself was printed at the beginning of the 16th Century by Johann Prüss and it was he who made the image and printed the words, but he did not write any of them originally. This information comes from the aforementioned hand-written notes tucked into the folding mats which accompanied the leaves into the Tisch Miscellany Collection. These notes could have been the work of a bookseller or a collector, it is difficult to place the origin exactly but it is these that give us the information regarding the printer and the source.

¹ [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wdct/hd_wdct.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/wdct/hd_wdct.htm)
The woodcut is also interestingly anachronistic, since although it is supposed to be describing the text, the image itself was carved and printed around 1509 and therefore portrays how farming was undertaken at that time. It is hard to tell from the depiction itself, as it is not sufficiently detailed to warrant a full investigation into what time period it is supposed to portray, but the style of the drawing and the apparatus used do not reflect the Roman style of portraying figures or the methods of farming. They reflect what Johann Prüss knew to be the method of farming at the time when he printed this leaf, and only what he was familiar with, not the method Virgil would have been familiar with when he authored the *Georgics*.

The part of the text itself that is present on the reverse side of the leaf is the part of Book 3 which is describing how to train cattle from a young age to pull carts and be accustomed to servitude. In essence it is a guide on how to condition the young animals to do the work they will be made to do when they are older. Virgil goes on to clarify that if the purpose of breeding these horses and cattle was for war, then they should look upon weapons and warriors, and become used to the sound of trumpets rather than become familiarized with pulling carts and being yoked to ploughs.

The commentary on the text was written by an anonymous author in his attempt to clarify Virgil’s meaning in his poem; whoever made the notations expands on Virgil’s explanation of when to put the horses and cattle to pasture. In the notations the main point at the beginning is about the meanings of the different months. The author states that January is the month in which the lambs mature fully and the offspring of the sheep are slaughtered, this is also when the bigger four-legged animals such as the horses and the cattle, must be marked to show ownership. The author references Columella, more formally known as Lucius Junius
Moderatus Columella, a Roman author whose twelve-volume magnum opus *De Re Rustica* forms an important source for our knowledge of Roman agriculture. Along with this work, he also wrote a shorter book on trees, *De Arboribus*.

The author once more references a large portion of Columella's writing a few sentences later, concerning the habits of bulls at different ages and to be wary of guarding them at all times when they are not yoked, as they can easily overpower a man. The anonymous author then references Varro, who Virgil used as a source for his *Georgics* as well. He says of Varro that he confirms a fact that cattle are led to favourable woods and spend the winter by the sea. Varro was another Roman scholar who also wrote a book on agriculture, *Rerum Rusticarum libri III, or Agricultural Topics in Three Books*. Whoever the author of the commentary was, the fact that he references other Classical authors who wrote extensively on the subject of agriculture shows a wide knowledge of what he was commenting on. Not only would he have been familiar with the Roman style of agriculture from several important sources but he probably would have been quite knowledgeable on his contemporary styles of agriculture, and would have been able to compare them.

The author references still more Classical Roman scholars, such as Gellius, famed for his *Attic Nights*, a compilation of notes on various topics such as grammar and history. He also references Lucretius, who was a Roman poet and philosopher, most famous for his philosophical poem *De rerum natura, or On the Nature of Things* which had a considerable influence on Virgil when he was writing his *Aeneid, Georgics*, and *Eclogues*.

The author of these notes appears to be a learned scholar himself, and his commentary therefore is quite useful in understanding the text. The overall context is considerably tied into
the block of Virgil’s text present on the page, and there are letters signifying which parts of the
text the notes are referring to. The notes illuminate certain points that would not have been
obvious just reading the *Georgics* as a text, although doing so would not be too tedious either.
The commentary is purely to elucidate the references Virgil is making and to dig out the
intricate points that would be confusing to someone not quite as knowledgeable reading the
*Georgics* in the time this was written. Clearly, if this was to be undertaken again today, the
references would be slightly different.