Carolingian Culture at Reichenau & St. Gall

The Carolingian Libraries of St. Gall and Reichenau

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Tours of the Libraries of Reichenau and St. Gall

Book Production and Illuminations from Reichenau and St Gall

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For many, the most compelling aspect of the Plan of St. Gall is that this **“meditation on the ideal early medieval monastic community”** was conceived and executed not as written text but as a visual document. As such, the Plan is an important reminder that the monks of Reichenau and St. Gall, like their counterparts throughout the Carolingian realm, were aware of the potential for graphic design to communicate in ways that texts could not. In the Middle Ages, adding visual material to a book (or document) through the techniques of drafting and painting required additional planning and expense, and medieval patrons and artists undertook such activities for multiple reasons. The application of paint, and such precious materials as gold and silver, could be used to embellish a book to enhance its sacred quality (such books also often had luxurious covers in gold, silver, and ivory); figural drawings and paintings could add to that effect as well as serve to provide visual guidelines or intellectual interpretations to the texts they accompanied; and decorative features could function to manifest the status of the work’s patron(s). The surviving manuscripts from the libraries of Reichenau and St. Gall display a range of visual strategies that are typical of Carolingian book production, and so a survey of this corpus provides insight into both those scriptoria and the broader Carolingian realm.

In a certain sense, books came in essentially two categories in the Carolingian monastery: they were either used primarily as service books in the sacred liturgy, in which case they were kept in the sacristy or treasury, or they were books for reading and study of some sort and so stored in a library. As an object *per se*, the most important book would have been the Gospels: not only were passages read from this during the liturgy, but the book itself would have been processed to the altar as part of the Mass, giving it a “public,” communal face. It is not surprising, therefore, that such books as **Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 9453** were adorned with covers in ivory, gold, and precious stones (it might also be noted that this cover was altered over the centuries, reminding us that decorating books, or other medieval art objects, was not a static activity). These materials evoked the splendor of the Heavenly Jerusalem and were considered appropriate “garments” for cladding a book that was understood to hold not just the word of God, but The Word, i.e., God himself (John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”) In the Paris manuscript, the late ninth-century ivory centers on the Crucifixion of Christ; the eucharistic nature of that event is underscored by a personification of *Ecclesia*, the Church, who holds a chalice up to Christ’s right side to catch the blood flowing from his wound. Within the book, which is actually an evangeliary (an abridged version of the Gospels with just those selections used as Mass readings), the first introductory text page [fol. 1v] is written in stately gold initials (gold is also used throughout for reading headings and for the first letter of each verse), while large decorated initials in gold, silver, and red mark the first letter of each reading. A similar use of decorated letters to mark individual readings can also be seen in a tall, thin epistolary (**Geneva, Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire, Ms. Lat. 37 a**), which contains those passages of the New Testament Epistles also read at Mass.

The central moment of the Mass, of course, was the Communion and its introductory prayer, the Canon. In many medieval service books, such as a ninth-century sacramentary from Reichenau (**Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Codex Donaueschingen 191, f. 6v, 7r**) the “Vere dignum” and “Te igitur” are marked with enlarged, interlace initials. In keeping with the scriptorium’s early preference for decorative, rather than figural art, the Reichenau sacramentary is relatively restrained in using simply these initials. Although this was also the predilection in St. Gall during the ninth century, a tenth-century sacramentary (Cod. 339, **p. 191 [e-codices]**) transforms the *T* of “Te igitur” into a full-page cross upon which Jesus hangs; this was a common medieval convention that, by recognizing the inherent symbolic content of the prayer’s very letter form, made manifest the importance of the Crucifixion for the Eucharistic ceremony being enacted by the priest.

The Bible (that is, either the Old Testament or a pandect, a full Bible with both the Old and New Testaments) was not used during the liturgy, but it was nonetheless a book central to monastic life. Perhaps the most impressive example from Reichenau and St. Gall is the so-called “Great Hartmut Bible,” comprising six large volumes executed under Abbot Grimbald of St. Gall (841–72) with the assistance of his provost and deacon, Hartmut (849–72). As was common, the first initial for the Book of Genesis is the most spectacular—a large *I* ("In principio") sketched in minium (red) but filled with gold and silver, extends the entire height of the page and establishes a frame, or anchor, for the rest of the letters that are executed in a hierarchy of scripts (**Cod. 77, p. 9**). The medium-sized, alternating gold and silver letters of "N PRINCIPIO" are also arranged vertically, each with delicate leaf offshoots. The text, all in (smaller) capital letters, continues in alternating lines of gold and silver. The use of the decorative initial, the capitals, and the precious materials all contribute to give the sacred text a grand beginning, while the simple but insistent alternation of gold and silver, like the rigid symmetry of the relatively exuberant initial *I*, convey a sense of controlled structure that is in marked contrast to earlier manuscripts in St. Gall and Reichenau (compare, for example **Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Aug. perg. 4, fol. 1r**).

An initial letter in the Hartmut Bible may also hint at the kind of visual exegesis that could be found in Carolingian manuscripts. At the beginning of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians (**Cod. 83, p. 128**), the vertical stem of the large gold and silver *P* (for *Paulus*) is in the form of an erect, clawed beast. There is certainly a touch of whimsy here, as the tongue of the animal is transformed into the leafy bowl of the *P*, while his tail similarly turns into twisting strands of foliage. But the animal, usually referred to as a dog, might also be construed as a wolf, a reference to Paul's descent from the tribe of Benjamin (whose symbol was the wolf) and his ravenous actions as a persecutor of Christians before his conversion.

Unlike the Bible, which usually was read in a communal setting (such as in the refectory during meals), the Psalms were recited privately by each monk on a daily basis (in sections), making this the most familiar Old Testament text in the Middle Ages. Most monks, therefore, would have memorized the Psalms quickly, reducing the need for many Psalters. Yet Reichenau and St Gall produced a wide range of Psalters: modest ones could serve as primers for learning to read, while more luxurious examples, like the Psalterium Aureum, so-called because it is written entirely in gold ink (**St. Gall, Stiftsbibl. Cod. 22 [e-codices]**), and the Folchart Psalter (**St. Gall, Stiftsbibl. Cod. 23 [e-codices]**), included a wealth of decorated initials and full-scale figurative illustrations of the life of King David. The Folchart Psalter not only celebrates David, the presumed author of the Psalms, but also Abbot Hartmut (r. 872–83) and the monk Folchart who, according to an inscription, made the book at the abbot's behest. These monastics are pictured dedicating a book (i.e., *this* book) to Christ, communicating visually their devotion to God through the creation and use of the Psalter. Such rich books, of course, were exceptional products—most Psalters would more likely be adorned with a single elaborate *B* for the opening of Psalm 1, *Beatus vir* (**Cod. 167, p. 10**).

Although this *B* is a fairly typical initial to mark the beginning of the Psalms, it actually appears not in a Psalter but in a St. Gall manuscript containing the commentary to the Psalms by Walahfrid Strabo, a well-known Carolingian writer and theologian who served briefly as abbot of Reichenau (among his works was a Life of Saint Gall himself, another demonstration of the close ties between the two monastic houses). The initial *B*, therefore, marks both the importance of the original Pslam text and the commentary it engendered. Commentaries on scripture by the Church Fathers and more recent exegetes probably comprised the single largest category of books in the monastery, and several manuscripts include modest decoration of different sorts. Mostly, the decoration of commentaries was limited to enhanced initials at key points in the text, primarily at the beginning of the treatise or to mark chapter headings. Reginbert, the librarian at Reichenau (who was the subject of praise by Walahfrid), was responsible not only for the rubrics of a Bede commentary on the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah, but presumably also the initials in the same red ink (**Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. Aug. 144, fols. 14r, 16r**). While these initials are relatively simple, they nonetheless display the balanced elegance typical of Reichenau and St. Gall. This becomes clear in comparison with a late eighth-century manuscript from N. Italy of Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Iob*, which was brought to Reichenau by the ninth century (**Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Aug. perg. 4, fol. 1r**). Gregory's *Moralia* was perhaps the most popular early medieval treatise for providing monks with spiritual guidance, and it is not surprising that the monks of Reichenau would be desirous of obtaining an exemplar from Italy. In this representative opening, book five of the treatise is given the kind of opening reminiscent of sacred books, with a rubric written entirely in capital letters and with an enlarged first initial *P* that extends over 12 lines. All of these are given prominence through the colorful alternation of red, green, and yellow. But there seems to be little rhyme or reason to the color scheme, which was eschewed by Carolingian scribes and artists, along with the common pre-Carolingian combination of geometric and vegetal elements (as seen in the *P*) in favor of more uniform, classicizing forms (compare further the ninth-century St. Gall manuscripts of the *Moralia*, Cods. 206–09).

Moral instruction could come from many sources, including saints' lives, which became increasingly popular in the Carolingian period as moral exempla. **Cod. Sang. 557**, executed between 880 and 890, contains Sulpicius Severus's life of St. Martin and is replete with an incipit page exclusively in capital letters (**p. 12**), an oversized initial *I* to begin the text (**p. 13**), and smaller decorated initials throughout. Although this manuscript does not contain any narrative imagery, many saints' lives did, including a contemporaneous Prudentius manuscript (Bern, Burgerbibliothek MS 284, pp. 120–21), probably from Reichenau, which includes an image of St. Cassian of Imola being martyred at the hands of his stylus-wielding students!

It is hard to underestimate the importance of the Rule of St. Benedict of Nursia, which provided the structure for Benedictine monastic life throughout the Middle Ages. An important St. Gall composite manuscript contains, among other things, a catalogue of abbots, a necrology, the institution's annals, and several monastic rules. *Ausculta o fili praecepta magistri et inclina aurem cordis tui*, "*Listen*, O my son, to the precepts of your master and incline the *ear* of your heart" writes Benedict, but the magnificent *A* that predominates the first page forcefully enjoins the reading monk to see with his eyes and visually absorb the importance of the words (**Cod. Sang. 915, p. 27**). One of the tasks set out by Benedict for monks was scriptural study, and in the sixth-century *Institutiones*, Cassiodorus outlined one such program, which incorporated the liberal arts of Grammar, Rhetoric, Dialectic, Arithmetic, and Music. At various points throughout the treatise, the text itself was written in diagram form to make clear the divisions of the material and the relationships of the consituent parts, as can be seen in a ninth-century copy brought from Italy to Reichenau (**Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Perg. Aug. 241, 17r;** CSG 855 is a mid-ninth-century St. Gall version). This format, often enhanced with broad patches of color, gives graphic clarity to the material, and such appended images as a bull, dove, or lily most probably were mnemonic devices to increase further the ability of the student to retain the material (the origin and meaning of these images is still very much disputed).

Medieval monks were not only engaged in scriptural and moral education but also were occupied with other branches of learning that informed their religious lives. In the *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville distilled centuries of classical knowledge into a kind of encyclopedic reference work. Some of that material, such as consanguinity relationships (i.e., the mapping of kinship to determine such matters as marriage), was easily rendered in graphic form, and although some tables were rendered rather plainly (**Cod. Sang. 231, p. 339**), others were often embellished in ways that add little information but some artistic delight (**pp. 340–42**). Such diagrams, of course, were appreciated mostly for the ease with which they conveyed information, especially in more abstract disciplines like math and music, as can be seen in a ninth-century St. Gall copy of Boethius's *De Arithmetica* (**Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, Ms. IV.G.68, fols. 165v, 166v, 167r-v, 168r, 169v**). But in an astronomical/computistical manuscript (**Cod. 250, p. 477**), with texts and tables useful for understanding the working of the cosmos and the reckoning of time (with both practical and theoretical implications for the liturgical calendar), the late ninth-century artists of St. Gall do a credible job recreating not only the iconography of such constellation images as Hercules Battling the Hydra, but also their late antique style (even if it must be admitted that there are more adept Carolingian renderings).

For the art historian, the manuscripts of eighth and ninth-century manuscripts of Reichenau and St. Gall provide a small laboratory for charting the slow and steady development of a particular decorative initial type that was the specialty of these scriptoria. In combination with palaeographic analysis, some have sought to attribute specific initials to specific scribal and artistic hands. In general, though, what is evident is this predilection for decorative initials rather than the full-scale figurative imagery, like the evangelist portraits or Old Testament narratives evident in other Carolingian scriptoria (though we have noted some important exceptions). The art of Reichenau and St. Gall in this period nonetheless evinces patterns seen in other Carolingian centers, with a move toward the regularization of forms and an awareness of classical aesthetics. In any event, the range of examples discussed here all demonstrate that there were instances in the production of books that called for visual elaboration. Such images could enhance the liturgical service (**Stuttgart, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Codex Donaueschingen 191, f. 6v, 7r**), provide interpretation (**Paris, Bibl. Nat. lat. 9453**), or enhance the status of the text (**Cod. Sang. 915, p. 27**). For the medieval monk, however, perhaps the most useful function of images was to provide spiritual and intellectual clarity. A ninth-century Reichenau miscellany contains Adamnan of Iona's *De locis sanctis*, a treatise on holy places written just before 700, ostensibly based on the eyewitness account of a Frankish monk named Arculf (Zurich, Zentralbibliothek, Ms. Rh. 73). Among the locations described in the text is the Holy Sepulchre, and like many copies of Adamnan's text, the Reichenau manuscript contains a diagrammatic rendering of the Holy Sepulchre (**fol. 5r**). Such an image is, technically, unnecessary, but its presence allowed the medieval monk instantly to visualize the round structure of the late antique Anastasis Rotunda and to grasp more easily the layout of the entire complex. The picture could even allow him (or, theoretically, her) to imagine a mental pilgrimage to and around the holy site. As such, this schematic rendering is similar to the St. Gall plan itself, which, like the Adamnan sketch of the Holy Sepulchre, provided at least some medieval monks with a more tangible and easily understood mechanism for understanding their sacred world.

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