



The Barbarian Heritage

The peoples whom, following the practice of the Greeks and Romans, we call 'barbarians' put a brutal end to the ancient Mediterranean culture. This is how the epithet 'barbarian' originally meaning 'stammerer' and applied to foreigners speaking an uncouth tongue and having ways of life unlike those of the Greco-Romans, came to be a synonym for vulgar, cultureless. Long labours of archaeologists and collectors of antiquities were needed to redirect attention to the dark centuries when these peoples were active in Europe. Indeed it is only quite recently that, outside the world of specialists, any interest due to motives other than mere curiosity came to be felt in non-classical art. This explains why the term Gothic ('the art of the Goths'), invented in the seventeenth century, which today is rightly considered as descriptive of an art that was the supreme achievement of our Middle Ages, was then applied derogatively. Much the same is true of the expression 'barbarian art,' once pejorative, but which modern taste has invested with an exotic mystique, racy of the steppes and backwoods of medieval Europe. It would be wrong to see in this new vogue of the barbarians only a passing fad. It vouches for the profound affinities (deplored by some) between ourselves and that so-called backward age, and we are now able to take a juster, less biased view of it. Doubtless the barbarians speeded up the downfall of the Roman Empire, but their blows fell on a body already moribund; thanks to them, a rebirth was to follow its decease. Still, we must never overlook the immense debt this renaissance owed to the culture they overthrew.

It is unlikely that these barbarians practised any sort of painting before coming in contact with the Mediterranean civilization. True, some chroniclers speak of wall paintings made between the fifth and eighth centuries in churches and palaces; Gregory of Tours of those in Gaul, Bede of those in England, Paul the Deacon of those in Lombardy. But nothing survives of these works, which were made no doubt by Gallo-Roman and Italian artists or, at least, under their supervision.

The paintings made by the barbarians were exclusively decorative and, like all the original or derivative manifestations of their art, have survived only in illus-



trated books. If any other kind existed, no trace of it remains. An art of scribes deriving from the ornamental initial letter, it arose in the mid-seventh century and developed along different lines in different regions, on the continent and in the British Isles. But the method was everywhere the same; the scribe 'read' the forms and built up from them a written text, the painter 'saw' them and imitated them.

The British Isles

Much ink was spilt, sometimes in heated polemics, over the question of the sources of the manuscripts produced in the British Isles, until the day when the discovery of manuscripts written and illuminated at Bobbio clarified and, perhaps, solved the problem. These documents, the work of Irishmen who had settled in Lombardy, prove that contemporary Irish scribes had a sense of decoration and a technical versatility enabling them to exploit certain graphic and ornamental peculiarities found *in situ* and to get from them effects that were soon carried a stage further in the striking compositions executed in the British Isles. They also show that the ornamentation of the Bobbio manuscripts was essentially Italian and their script the only Irish element. On to a script, in itself magnificently decorative, were grafted the Celtic and Germanic decorations practised to such wonderful effect on English and Irish soil by the metal-workers, and soon these motifs were completed and enriched by figural illustrations brought back from Italy by missionaries, among them Archbishop Theodore (born at Tarsus), Benedict Biscop, and St Augustine of Canterbury. Nowhere and in no other period was there so ardent a desire to produce a perfect script, worthy of the sacred text, no matter what the cost and labour this involved. Taking over the decorative elements—geometric motifs and forms adapted from the animal kingdom—used by the metal-workers practising in the British Isles, the painter developed them methodically, combined and contrasted them, giving free play to his imagination implemented by a fine sense of the appropriate colours. The drawing conformed to the structural arrangement imposed by copper or enamel work, but inevitably it lost something of its firmness in the work of subsequent, even direct, imitators, who were no longer guided by a feeling for metal and its demands. In the hands of artists who were exclusively painters, even skilful ones, the essential qualities of the insular painting tended to die out.

Insular painting can be seen at its best in four Gospel Books, named from the earliest times after the abbeys to which they are traditionally assigned: Durrow, Echternach, Lindisfarne and Kells. Their dates are spaced out from 650 or thereabouts to approximately 800. Emerging abruptly from the pictorial void of the bar-



barian centuries, they were the fruit of long experience in a field other than that of the book. For if we are not to be led into frequent errors, a clear-cut distinction must here be drawn between calligraphy and painting. Behind these wholly novel paintings we always sense the presence of the expert metal-worker. Moreover, the magnificent artifacts recently found at Sutton Hoo testify to the superb craftsmanship of the English metal-workers at the time of the Book of Durrow, some of whose most characteristic motifs reappear in the Sutton Hoo treasure hoard. To these motifs others were added in the later books of this group: the chessboard pattern (imitating cloisonné work), spirals, shield and trumpet forms of Celtic origin, interlaces with boat-shaped corners, paired scroll-work designs traversed by a fine-spun diagonal line, Greek key patterns. The motifs are arranged in successive bands, differentiated by their colours, which, superimposing their effects on those of the motif itself, give rise on occasion to diamond-shaped forms and zigzags. The use of several colours also served to make certain parts of a uniform ground stand out, for example the backgrounds of interlaces, and to isolate them from the rest.

Preceding each of the texts is a carpet page covered with decorative motifs. By an extraordinarily bold calligraphic transposition of an image in the Mediterranean style, the symbol of St Matthew in the Book of Durrow is represented full length, frontally, with short legs shown in side-view. He wears a flat, bell-shaped cloak adorned with elaborate geometric designs and has thick hair, parted in the middle, hanging on both sides of his head. The close-trimmed moustache and staring eyes remind us of the warrior's mask found in the tumulus of Sutton Hoo. The texts begin with the large dovetailed Irish initials created at Bobbio. Here they still are relatively simple, but they soon became intricate, reaching an extreme complexity in the last of the series, the famous Book of Kells, in which the whole page is built up of a labyrinth of spirals, zigzags and interlaces.

The same decorative programme, but with some new motifs added, was utilized for the Gospels written out and painted by Eadfrith, Bishop of Lindisfarne, between 698 and 721. The Canon Tables are placed under arches ornamented, like the columns supporting them, with a frieze of large, elongated birds nibbling each other's feet like the quadrupeds in the 'ribbon style' of the English metal-workers. This motif imported from the East and adapted by the insular craftsmen is not the only one of its kind. To a similar source may be assigned the heads of a curious animal placed at the tips of certain foliated flowers or above lettrines or elements of frames; they resemble the somewhat ovine heads with thick, puckered lips and smoothly moulded features, their outlines duplicated by deep furrows, often found in Iranian, especially Sassanian metalwork. The same applies to the capitals or stepped column-bases in these illuminations, also to the motifs imitating Greek key patterns cut in wood and the key-shaped designs we see at Bawit—some of these motifs had already been used in the Book of Durrow. But the inclusion of an evangelist portrait at the beginning of each Gospel—a portrait and no longer a symbol—was a quite new departure and this borrowing from the art of antiquity was certainly due to the contacts with that art promoted by Benedict Biscop and missionaries from Italy.



171 - BOOK OF LINDISFARNE. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON.

The Echternach Gospels, which are in the pure 'metallic' vein, owe their name to the abbey founded by St Willibrord in 698. Legend has it that they were brought by him from Great Britain on this occasion, but they may more probably be dated to around 710. Precursor at a far remove of the Carolingian Franco-insular style, their sober decoration makes a striking contrast with the exuberance of the other illuminated books. Besides the sumptuous initials they contain only the four (full page) evangelist symbols by way of decoration, but surely the man who could depict so skilfully the leaping lion of St Mark and frame it in a complex right-angled pattern designed to uphold it in the page, yet without overcrowding it, ranks among the world's greatest artists. Enclosed on all sides, the image stands out strongly on a light-hued neutral ground. In his depiction of the Man, symbol of St Matthew, the artist carries stylization to a pitch far surpassing even the boldest inventions of the Book of Durrow. Much later, the Book of Kells was to retain this lapidary rigour in renderings of the saints, the Virgin, even Christ Himself, though the margins are enlivened by small animals scampering to and fro: dogs and hares, cats and mice. The reverence felt for sacred personages ruled out their representation as ordinary mortals. This was an outcome of the assimilation of the Eternal to the immutable—of theology to cosmology—now developing throughout the world of Christendom.

172 - IRELAND. BOOK OF DIMMA. TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY, DUBLIN.






173 - BOOK OF LINDISFARNE. BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON.



174 - ECHTERNACH GOSPELS. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

The adornment of pre-Carolingian initial letters had everywhere consisted for the most part of birds and fishes, some lifelike, others stylized so as to fit in with the shape of the letter and embellish it. This striking uniformity of styles in all parts of the continent was due to their common origin: the Italian method of combining script and decoration practised by the scribe Valerianus (mentioned above). This method was adopted by two Gaulish abbeys, by Luxeuil towards the middle of the seventh century, then by its daughter house, Corbie, and soon came into favour in other places. For these two abbeys, both of them active religious and intellectual centres, began to import books from northern Italy at an early date. The stylized (graphic) type was most commonly used and easiest to design (with on occasion the aid of compasses) and no animals lent themselves better than birds and fishes to emphasizing the downstrokes, upstrokes and curves of letters; all that was needed was to elongate or expand their backs and bellies. This was not a new device; in the second half of the first century Pliny the Younger speaks of its being used by Roman scribes. Besides the very early examples, we find much later cases of it, in the scripts of fifteenth-century notaries and nineteenth-century calligraphers. Throughout the ages men with a taste for fine writing have indulged in *tours de force* of the kind. This type of lettrine was in high favour in North Italy from the sixth century on, but it was the great abbey of Bobbio, a foundation of St Columban and King Agilulf, which like Luxeuil was full of Irish monks, that appears to have excelled in this style of decoration. And, as was to be expected, it was Bobbio that transmitted it to its sister house in France.

Lombard Italy gave pre-Carolingian Gaul another type of book ornament which was widely disseminated first by Luxeuil, then by Corbie and nearby centres such as Laon, in ever more gorgeous forms, until the end of the eighth century. This was the frontispiece prefixed to books dealing with various subjects. It was given the form of an elongated rectangle or of a row of porticoes crowned by a gable or by a single or double arch, often enclosing a large decorated cross on whose arms sometimes figured a capital Alpha and Omega, a 'prophylactic' cross which on occasion stood alone on the page. A very early example of the portico design comes from North Italy; the cross bearing the letters A and Ω figures in a sixth-century manuscript, in uncials, hailing from Bobbio. This latter was a product of the Lombard abbey of St Columban, but its decorations are no more Irish than the script. The portico design which Luxeuil was to propagate in Gaul is, under various forms, a manuscript imitation of motifs often found in Lombard stone engravings; steles, inscriptions and a host of decorative plaques combine all its elements—even the rosettes above the cross (sc. the sun and moon of the Crucifixions) and animals, birds or quadrupeds (representing the believers) touching the cross with their beaks or tongues, an act of homage which brings to mind the cross in Narbonne Museum towards which a kneeling man is shown stretching out a finger.


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 EST SEX DIERUM SCI
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176 - CORBIE. ST AMBROSE, 'HEXAEMERON': INCIPIT PAGE. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

UERAX, EX
 INCIPIT
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 HIC LOCUS
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 SACRATISSIMA OR
 MILITATE NOSTRA
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177 A, B, C, D - ZOOMORPHIC INITIALS. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



178 - LUXEUIL. ST GREGORY, EZEKIEL COMMENTARY. SALTYKOV-SHCEDRIN LIBRARY, LENINGRAD.



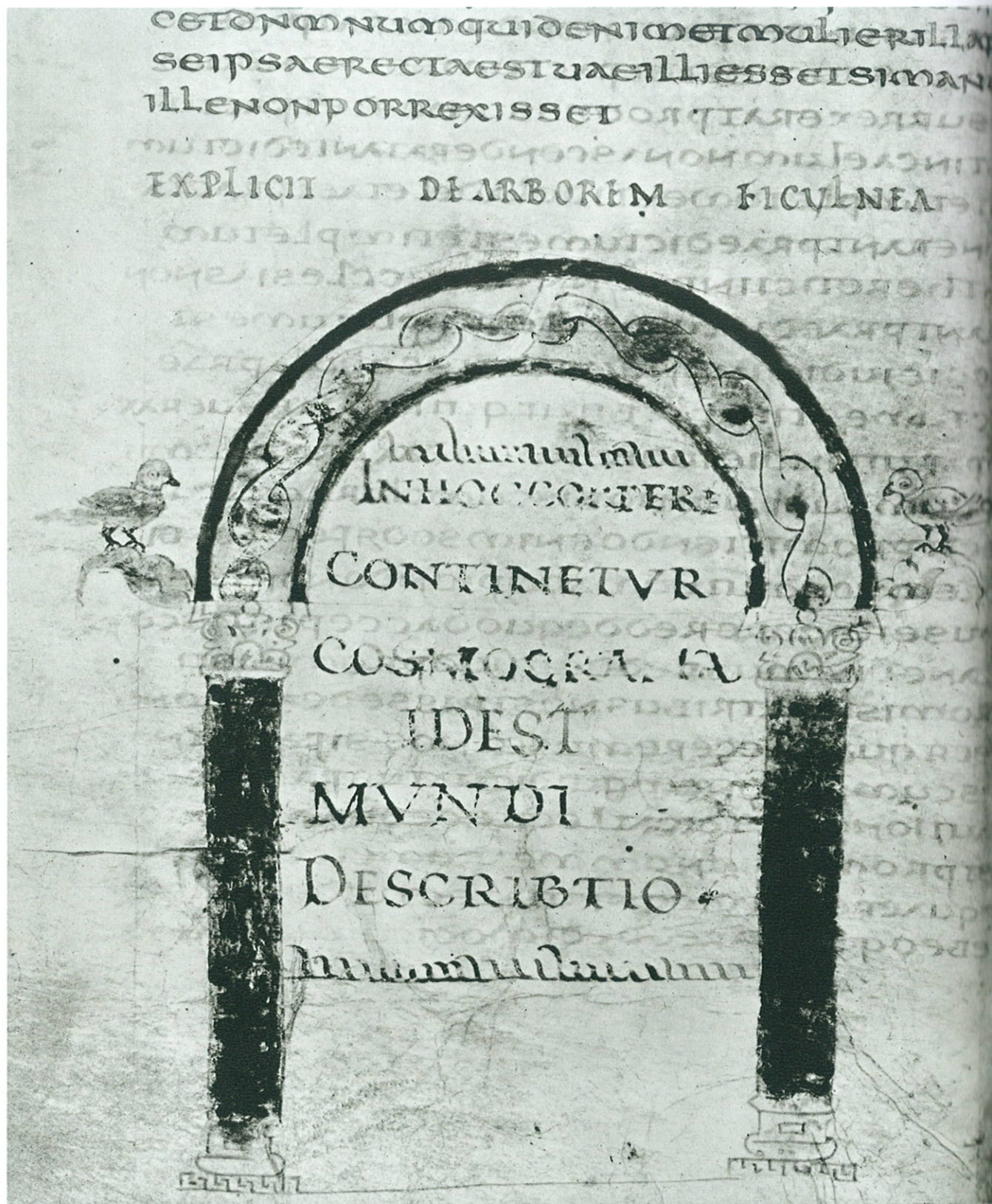
179 - LUXEUIL. WORKS OF THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH, CODEX RAGYNTRUDIS. CATHEDRAL MUSEUM, PADOVA.



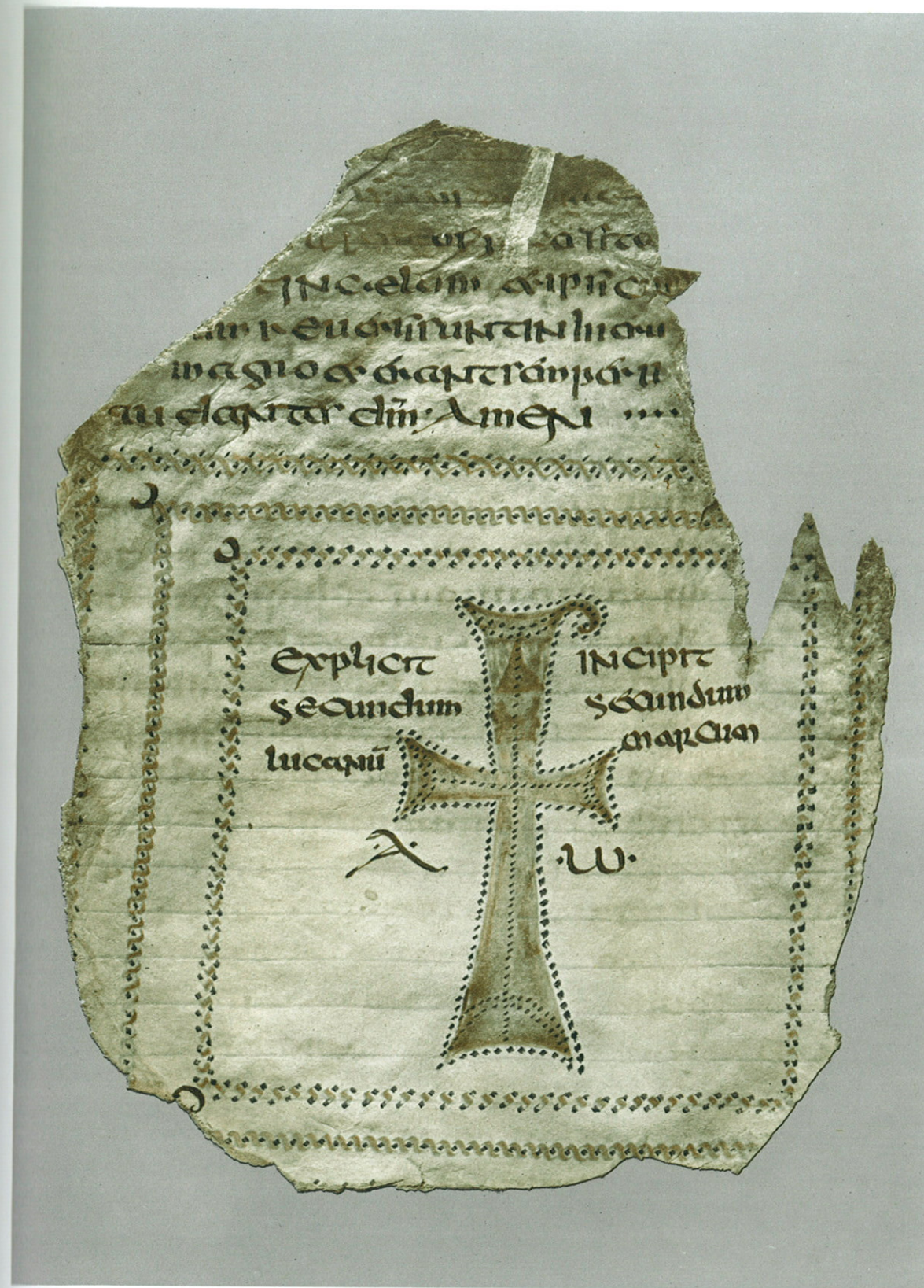
180 - CORBIE. RULE OF ST BASIL. SALTYKOV-SHCHEDRIN LIBRARY, LENINGRAD.



181 - LUXEUIL. SACRAMENTARY. VATICAN LIBRARY



182 - NORTH ITALY (?). EUCHERIUS OF LYONS, 'FORMULAE SPIRITUALES,' DETAIL. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



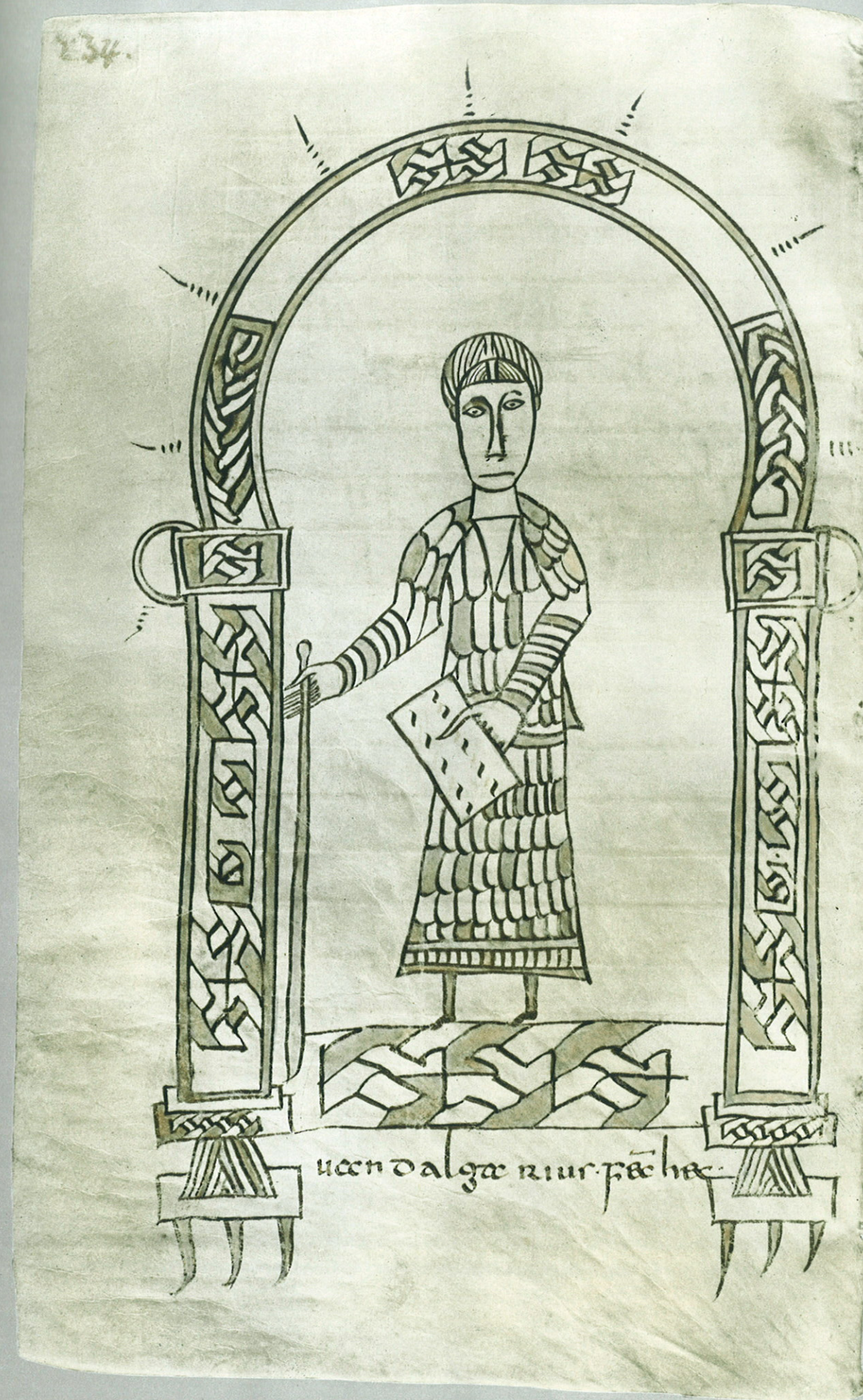
183 - BOBBIO (?). GOSPEL BOOK STYLED CODEX USSERIANUS PRIMUS. TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY, DUBLIN.



184 - NORTH-EAST FRANCE (?). ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, 'CONTRA IUDAEOS.' BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

These porticoes and steles sometimes contain portraits of the authors, delineated with a singular clumsiness and a total incapacity for lifelikeness. For the barbarian artist has not yet learnt to 'read' forms otherwise than in terms of writing and their realities escape him.

185 - BESANÇON REGION (?). 'LEX ROMANA VISIGOTHORUM.' STIFTSBIBLIOTHEK, ST GALL.





186 - NORTH-EAST FRANCE (?). ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, 'CONTRA JUDAEOS,' DETAIL. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



187 - NORTH-EAST FRANCE (?). ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, 'CONTRA JUDAEOS,' DETAIL. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

The most lavishly decorated of these porticoes and crosses are those on the frontispieces of manuscripts made in northern Gaul, in the neighbourhood of Laon and perhaps Corbie: the Sacramentarium Gelasianum (c. 750) and the near-contemporary manuscript of 'St Augustine on the Heptateuch.' The latter is more interesting since it combines motifs stemming from the eastern Mediterranean with an insular ground. It is from the East (perhaps from Coptic embroidery) that these standing quadrupeds, confronted on each side of a small tree, originate, though their wispy legs and clawlike feet are treated in the British manner. From the East come, too, the rows of large beads, palm-leaves and rosettes embellishing the portico and the big cross it surrounds, from whose arms, symbol of the time they span, hang the Alpha and Omega, terminals of a universe of which Christ is the master. On top of the cross stands an eagle, image of Christ and the Resurrection, decorated like a Merovingian fibula inlaid with cloisonné work. At the beginning of the text of this manuscript we find a curious imitation of the insular lettrines, but here, too, are some distinctively Oriental touches; the I and N in the words *In Dei Nomine* fall naturally into place in the text, but on the left the convoluted animal grappling with a sort of ribbon of interlaces merely duplicates—in a vaguely insular manner—the initial of the word *Quaestiones*, part of which is enclosed in a cartouche (this too a device characteristic of the British Isles). The insular decorators exercised, and were long to exercise, an influence on the continent justified by their talent and their inventiveness, but here the penchant for English mannerisms seems overdone.

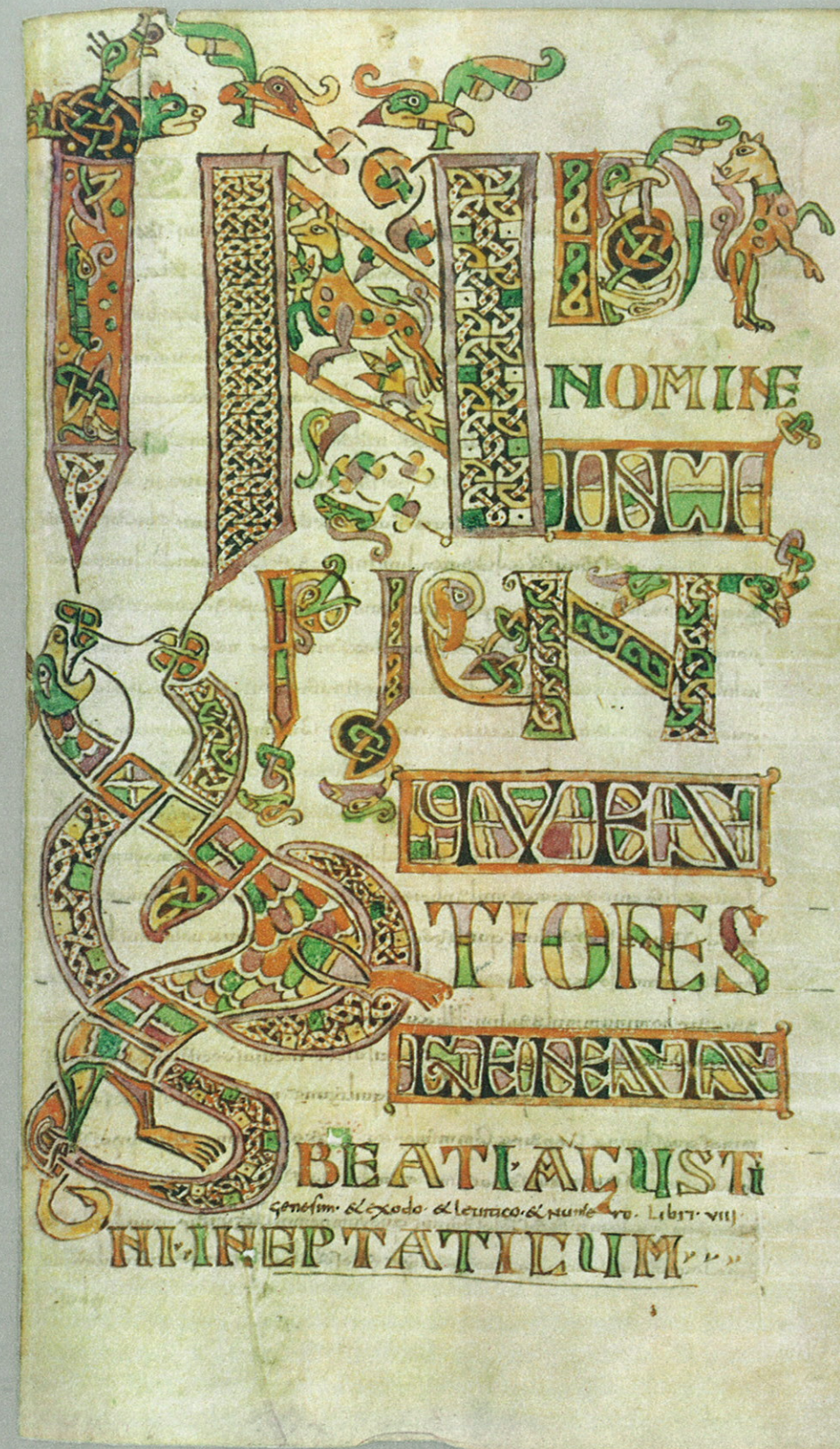
It is possible, indeed probable, that reminiscences of the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean—Coptic textiles, above all, or other objects having the same origin—may have partially inspired these Italian prototypes. Of special interest is the fact that we find in Lombardy all the basic elements—zoomorphic initials and porticoes—of eighth-century continental book painting. Scribes and decorators of the age did not need to look far afield, for their techniques were supplied by their neighbours. Thus, as they had done already, in the domain of ancient art, the Lombards were soon to play a leading role in the Carolingian revival.

The figures decorating a Gospel Book of the second half of the eighth century, which is attributed to the abbey of Flavigny (Burgundy), though still lacking in elegance, are of a considerably higher quality than the clumsy sketches some of which we have discussed above. But the interest of this manuscript derives above all from the nature of its illustrations, wholly novel and, doubtless, unique. They consist of simple Canon Tables, their pilasters adorned with insular motifs. The first of the Tables assembles on a single page the figures that were, later, dispersed in various parts of the Carolingian Gospels: Christ to begin with, as a rule, then, at the beginning of each Gospel, the evangelist writing under the eyes of the 'living creature' of the Apocalypse that symbolizes him. (In early Carolingian times there were some exceptions to this rule.) There are also portraits of the authors, in accordance with an old tradition exemplified particularly in one of the earliest Virgil manuscripts; in short, strictly and exclusively documentary images. But in the Flavigny Gospels a different idea prevails, as is evidenced by the singular composition grouping these authors round the Master. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are writing,





189 - NORTH-EAST FRANCE. SACRAMENTARIUM GELASIANUM. VATICAN LIBRARY.

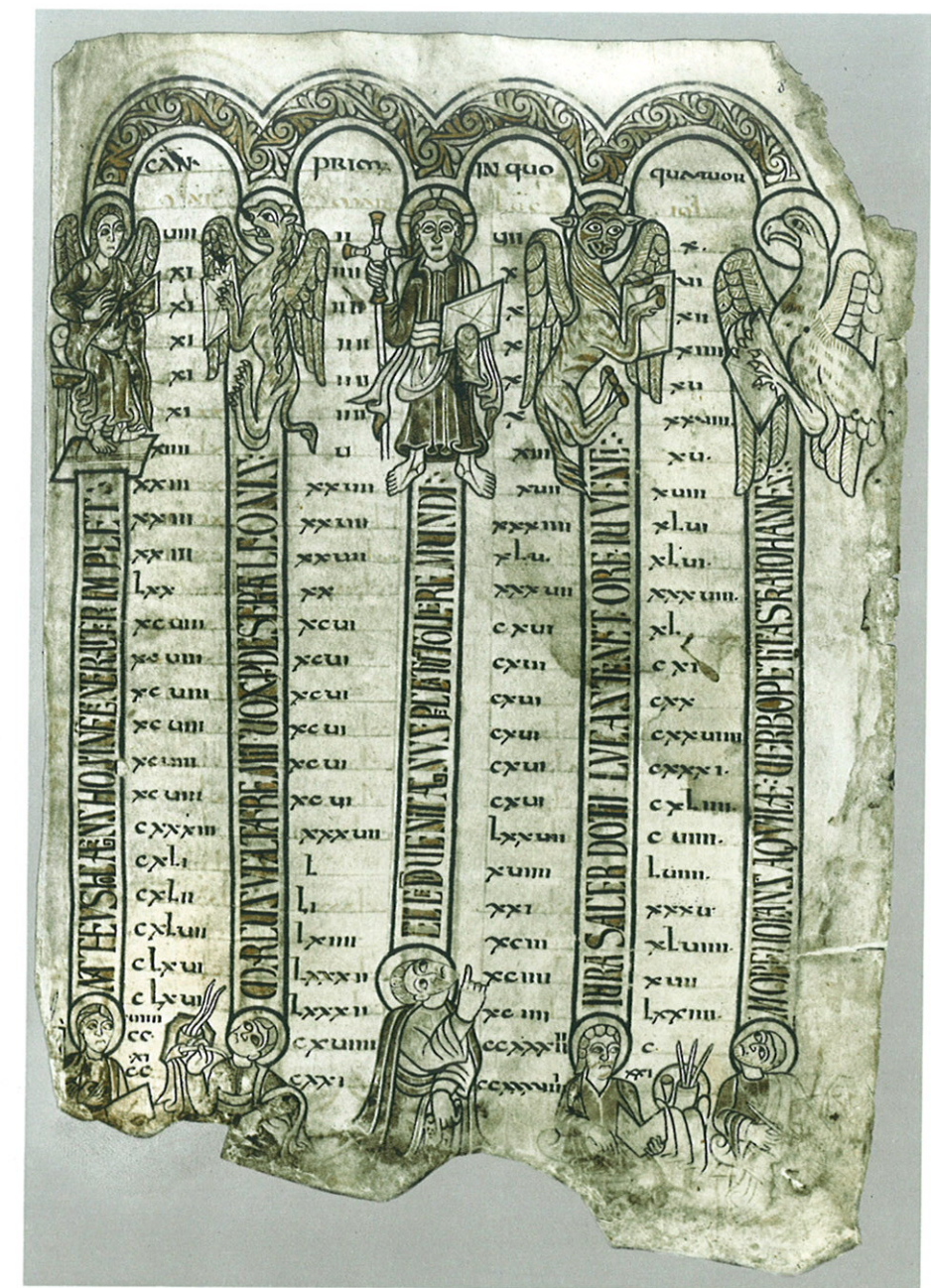


190 - LAON (?). ST AUGUSTINE, 'QUAESTIONES IN HEPTATEUCHON.' BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



191 - FLAVIGNY GOSPELS. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AUTUN.

looking up at their attributes, which serve as capitals and towards which, along simulated columns (each of whose bases they replace), rise verses taken from the ancient *Carmen Paschale* of Sedulius. (Here it would seem that these verses, differentiating the evangelists, engaged in their common task, in terms of their symbols, are used for the first time.) In the centre St John the Baptist, who is placed at a slightly higher level, is pointing to Christ who figures frontally, full length, at the top of the page; a text from the Gospel of St John simulates the central column, summing up in one line the message of the evangelists and the detailed account they give of the Redemption: *Ecce Dei venit Agnus peccatum tollere mundi*. Thus the entire



192 - FLAVIGNY GOSPELS. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AUTUN.

message of the Gospels is condensed into a single image. We shall find the same synthesizing tendency operative, at about the same time, in the same part of the world, under various forms: in the illustration and structure of books, as formerly in the mural decorations of the triumphal arch of the presbytery in Santa Maria Antiqua. A fruit of theological speculation, and imbued with a certain feeling for a type of decoration foreign to classical antiquity, this synthesizing tendency was to affect medieval thought, under all its aspects, religious, philosophical, literary and artistic. True, the Carolingians, bent as they were on harking back to antiquity, lost touch with it, but it was to recur with their successors.



193 - FLAVIGNY GOSPELS, DETAIL. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AUTUN.



194 - FLAVIGNY GOSPELS, DETAIL. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AUTUN.



κρω Ν κωρυς
 τ κτ ι ς κ η ο ο η
 ρ ο κ η σ τ ω ρ ι α ο

κατασκευασθησεν εκ ξυλων ιστομας



196 - EASTERN FRANCE. CHRONICLE OF FREDEGARIUS, DETAIL. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

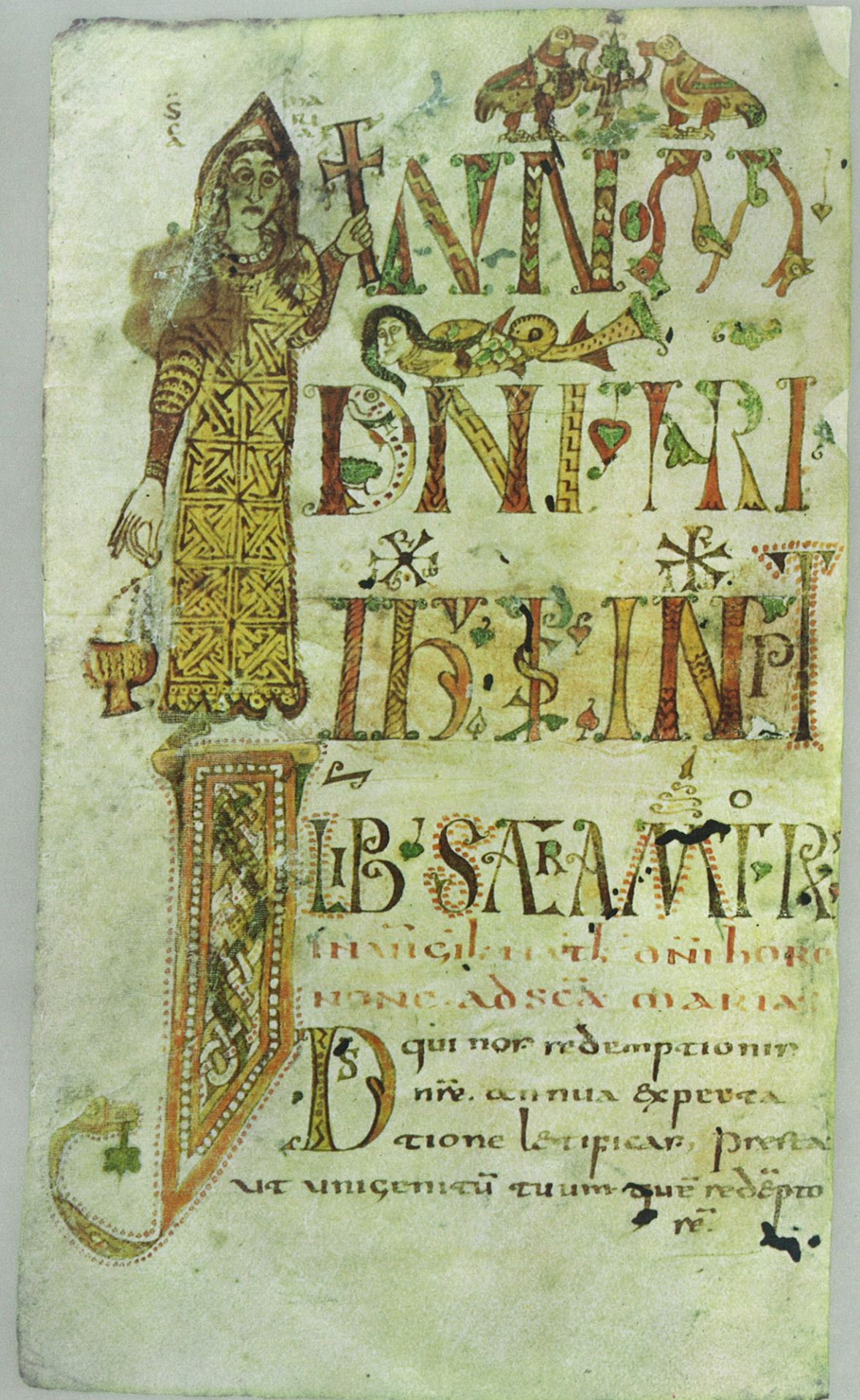
197 - EASTERN FRANCE. CHRONICLE OF FREDEGARIUS. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



197 - EASTERN FRANCE. CHRONICLE OF FREDEGARIUS. BIBL. NAT., PARIS.

Coptic art seems to have exercised an influence—this time a direct one—on some of the artists of northern and north-eastern Gaul in the course of the second half of the eighth century. We have in mind the textiles with figures deriving from Egypt that are obviously imitated in the curious graffiti (one can hardly call them drawings) inserted in the margins of a copy of the Chronicle of Fredegarius (c. 750). This early evidence of the artistic intercourse between East and West has an exceptional interest. A little later, shortly before 800, that famous manuscript from the neighbourhood of Meaux, the Gellone Sacramentary, was to derive the basic ideas of its initials from similar textiles. With these it intermingles reminiscences of insular art and highly ingenious lettrines of the scribe's own invention. Like his contemporary, the maker of the Corbie Psalter—though less convincingly—he makes them, so to say, grow out of the text; sometimes, we must admit, at the cost of extreme contortions. Thus a knight is made to represent the initial letter of the prayer in time of war; a huge pair of scissors cuts the incipient beard of a young monk at the opening of the prayer for novices; the Mass of the Finding of the Cross begins with an uncial capital D formed by a man digging a hole at the bottom of which are seen the crosses of Golgotha. The scene has too close a resemblance to a drawing in the Record of the Councils of Vercelli (mentioned above pages 139 ff.) not to have been copied from some picture of the same kind—therefore stemming from North Italy—which conformed to the Byzantine iconography. This procedure also inspired the painter with the idea of a simple and magnificent image, a masterpiece of decorative originality and synthetic 'barbarism,' a Crucifixion in which the cross supplies the T in the *Te igitur* of the Canon: a happy inspiration that was to have many imitators.

198 - DIOCESE OF MEAUX. GELLONE SACRAMENTARY. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



r habet similitudinem aquile. ego enim meta-
 teris. ait. hum. In principio erat uerbu. & uer-
 bum erat apud dm. & or erat uerbu. hoc erat.
 In principio apud dm. & quid dixi de prona
 xpi renouat bit. sic aquile. louet. turtur
 id est. ihu xpi dnm qui ter uirg. & amor turt
 Ascendit in celos. unde iam uobis concep-
 tit pignus glorie & ex omni festiuitate
 uotore ad noua tendit xpi. ane. legir & or
 dia. ut ad ueniente. die. ueniat uobis pascha
 la uas & baptis. m. & or. & or. & or. sic & or.
 hominib. m. & or. & or. & or. & or. & or.

200 - DIOCESE OF MEAUX. GELLONE SACRAMENTARY. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

201 - DIOCESE OF MEAUX. GELLONE SACRAMENTARY. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

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202 - DIOCESE OF MEAUX. GELLONE SACRAMENTARY. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.



203 - DIOCESE OF MEAUX. GELLONE SACRAMENTARY. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

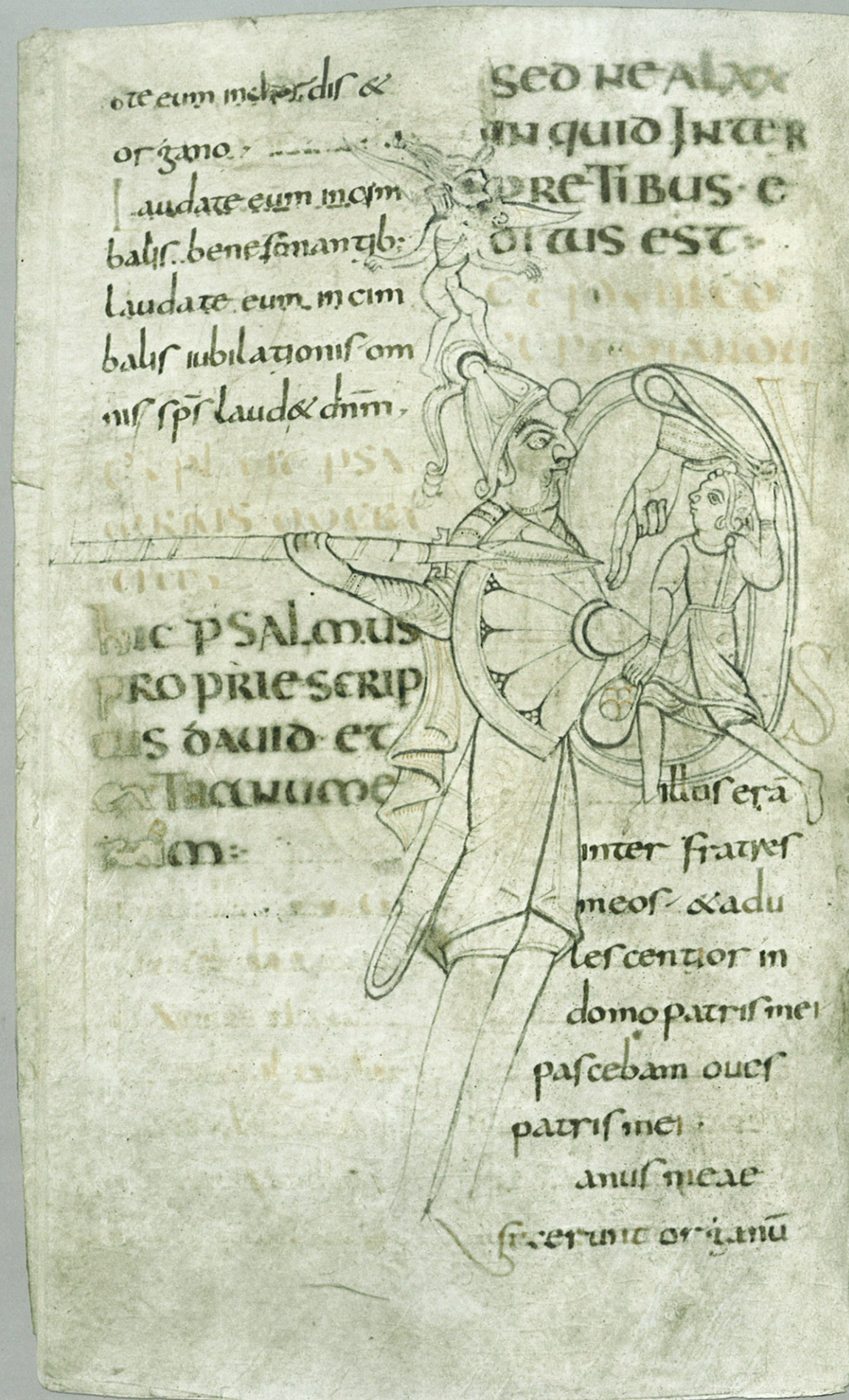


These decorative initials, in which text and illustration were skilfully associated, as a century earlier architecture and decoration had been combined in the presbytery of Santa Maria Antiqua, and these synthetic initials of a new type, due unmistakably to a real confluence of Mediterranean and barbarian art currents and not, as in the past, to their mere juxtaposition—all these new developments can be seen in an illustrated Psalter made round about 800 in an abbey which then was specializing in importations of North Italian manuscripts: the abbey of Corbie. This Psalter, a work of outstanding merit, was made by a highly gifted painter whose style continued and developed, making it far more explicit (a point of prime importance) than that of the first decorated book produced under the auspices of Charlemagne. Here, though the groundwork of the decorative scheme is insular, the general atmosphere is thoroughly Iranian, as is evidenced both by the technique employed and by the number of exotic animals worked into the initials (the only decorative pages of the book): for example the *simurgh* (bird-and-dog) and the horseman wearing a long veil (a *shesh*) to protect him from the sand, of the kind still used in the desert by his modern counterparts. The flowing curves, the muscular structure emphasized by volutes and calligraphic flourishes, recall the art of ancient Persia.

First, then, we note that while some images stem from an ancient tradition, others are inspired by a commentary on the sacred text and in these everything is original, carefully thought out. Such is the initial of Psalm LII. The mighty personage seated 'in glory,' encircled by a serpent, who is being swept backwards by a monster, is Doeg the Edomite, traitor to David, and in him Cassiodorus saw an embodiment of the Antichrist. 'Thou lovest evil more than good, lying rather than to speak righteousness. Thou lovest all devouring words, O thou deceitful tongue' (Psalm LII, 3, 4). Elsewhere, in connection with Psalm XIII, a doublet of Psalm LII, Cassiodorus alludes to the serpent. The (apocryphal) Psalm CLI begins *Pusillus eram* and the capital P is shaped to represent the combat of David and Goliath (the normal illustration of this verse). God's hand is pressing back Goliath's spear. A little demon is perched on the crest of the helmet of the giant, who seems strangely inert, incapable of averting the death-dealing stone. (This adjunct to the crest of the helmet figures in other images of the same scene.) The loop of the letter P frames the picture and also serves to indicate the earth below and the heavens above. If Goliath is placed outside it, this is only to draw attention to his monstrous stature. But the initial in which we see this painter at his most brilliant is that of the Psalm of Habakkuk, in which the entire scene, a galloping horse and a sort of ship on wheels with a tiny figure riding in it, forms an uncial D. The horse's hugely elongated tail serves to define the outlines of the chariot (or ship) and tapers off to form the peaked cap of the central figure. Two long shafts, one upholding the *vexillum* of a Roman legion, the other a sceptre or a palm-branch, are bent so as to adapt themselves to the curves of the 'ship,' a turning movement continued by the hind legs of the horse. Why this curious composition seemingly so unrelated to anything in the text? A clue may be found in a commentary on the Psalms written by Theophylactos a century later than the Corbie Psalter but probably based on an earlier exegesis, in which, when discussing this Psalm, the author speaks of chariots and athletes.



205 - CORBIE PSALTER. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AMIENS.



206 - CORBIE PSALTER. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AMIENS.



208 - CORBIE PSALTER. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AMIENS.

There is no question that this painting was inspired by the scene, so often represented on Roman sarcophagi, of Diana ascending skywards in her chariot after a night on earth with Actaeon. But the artist entirely reconstructed his models after separating out their elements and transposing the imagery into an abstract world, as the makers of bracteates did with the ancient medals. In brief, he was a barbarian. All that old mythological apparatus—galloping horse, a veil enveloping the personification of Terra whom the goddess is about to quit—meant nothing to him, but it supplied just what he needed for his uncial D. It would be a great mistake to see in this brilliantly ingenious painter no more than a copyist; he selects, interprets, strikes out in new directions. In this context we may draw attention to the fact that a scene resembling this one (sc. the Diana motif) adorns the ancient so-called Proserpine sarcophagus at Aix in which Charlemagne was said to have been buried in 814. True, the scene here is reversed, but so expert an artist would have had no difficulty

209 - CORBIE PSALTER. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AMIENS.



209 - CORBIE PSALTER. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AMIENS.

in turning the Aix motif round the other way. How is this irruption at Corbie of Mediterranean art, and particularly that of the Iranian Middle East, to be accounted for? Contemporary records mention the presence of many Greeks and 'Syrians' at the Court and in Gaul, and it is interesting to find this confirmed by objects still in existence, like this Psalter. Once again it is to Lombardy we must turn for an explanation. Desiderius, the last Lombard king, had died in the abbey some years previously; and nothing approximates more clearly the art of the Psalter than that of the Cividale Tempietto in Friuli, which was built for Desiderius and adorned with brilliantly original stuccoes of which the Carolingian paintings are, in effect, the graphic counterparts. This curious fact may well throw light on the origins of the Tempietto itself. The Sassanian imprint is more deeply marked, more evident, at Corbie than at Cividale, but a great many elements of Lombard art stemmed from the Middle East and beyond it, from Iran.

menur,
or dia
gonies
amen
na in
dispre
utcor



potentes
al tavit
imple
diuiter

dimittas seruū tuū
um dñe secundum
uerbū tuū in pace
Quia uiderunt ocu
lmet salutarē tuū.

210 - CORBIE PSALTER. BIBLIOTHÈQUE MUNICIPALE, AMIENS.

But such resemblances are sometimes accidental, and stylistic affinities can be misleading. Let us, then, look at the facts. When the Psalter was being made, the see of Amiens had been for some thirty years in the hands of a bishop with a Greek name, George; a reliable contemporary (early ninth century) record attributes to Bishop George the Latin version of an Alexandrian Universal Chronicle, of which a fragmentary fifth-century copy is extant. The Greek original was illustrated and the only known copy of the Latin translation, the one made by George and written at Corbie, leaves blanks in the text at the places where pictures were to be inserted. As Bishop of Ostia, George had accompanied Stephen II to France (in 754) where he became a member of the royal household of King Pepin. He was sent on several missions to the papal court by the king, and subsequently by his son Charles. In his capacity of Bishop of Amiens he was a member of the Council held in Rome, in 769, which condemned iconoclasm. In 798 he took part in the consecration of the churches of the monastery of Saint-Riquier. Of the illuminations of his Chronicle only one was brought to completion, that of the first initial letter, a P containing images of Eve, the serpent and the Fall: an appropriate beginning for a 'Universal History.' This initial, treated on synthetic lines, was the work of the same artist who illustrated the Corbie Psalter. At the time when George, the Hellenist, came from Italy to Amiens to take over the bishopric, the local scribes employed by Maurdranne, Abbot of Corbie, were gradually developing a new type of writing, the 'Caroline,' inspired by the half-uncial book-hand current in North Italy. It soon replaced the various local styles of writing, including that of Corbie, and from it come the letters of the alphabet we employ today. George held a high post in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but in Corbie itself Adalard, who shared in the administration of the abbey during the lifetime of Maurdranne, was a cousin-german of Charlemagne. He, too, had made several long stays in Italy, where he came in touch with the monks of Monte Cassino and many prominent Lombards, beginning with King Desiderius. At his request his friend Paul the Deacon, historian of the Lombards, sent him a copy of the Letters of Gregory the Great (written in Friuli c. 787). Something of a Hellenist, and perhaps wishing to display his knowledge of the language, Adalard wrote a note in Greek on a copy of St Jerome's *Adv. Jovinianum*, to the effect that he had given the order for the book. For fifteen years or more Corbie had been gathering together—from Greece, from Roman and Lombard Italy and the British Isles as well—all that was needed for the shaping of Carolingian painting, and it was there that Charles could count on finding his first artist. There are good reasons for believing that he had already recruited scribes from Corbie. Bishop Jesse (799-831) was George's successor in the see of Amiens, and to his episcopacy dates a Gospel Book whose frontispiece shows Christ full face, surrounded by the zoomorphic evangelist symbols framed in medallions beaded in the Lombard manner. He sits under an arch in front of a curtain edged with a narrow cord like the one in a Greek copy of Dioscorides, now in Vienna, and above him is a tablet inscribed with the Greek words ΦΩΣ. ΖΩΗ with the Latin equivalents LUX-VITA flanking them. It is evident that writers and artists of this part of Gaul looked for inspiration to the eastern shores of the Medi-

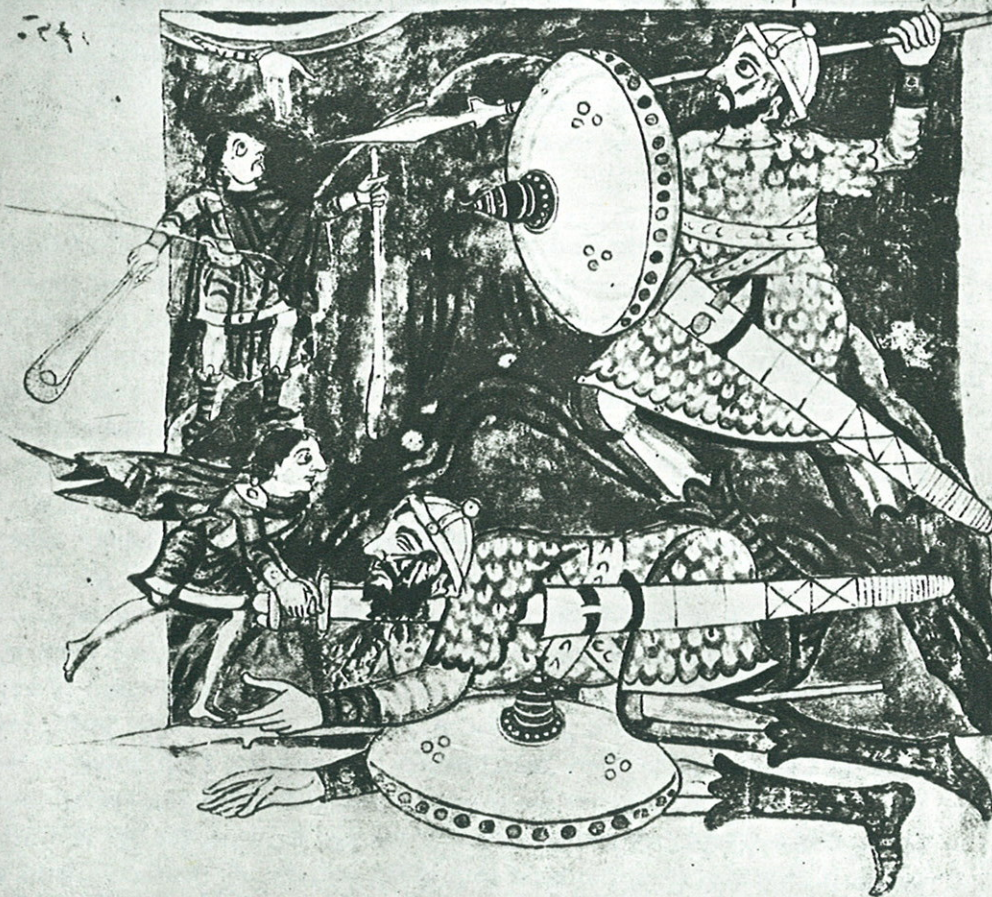


Nomnem terram exiuit sonus eorum
 & in fines orbis terre uerba eorum
 Misit posuit tuber naciūm suū
 & ipse tamquam sponsus procedens
 de thalamo suo
 & ultabit ut greges adcurrēdū uic suā
 & summo^{eto} egressio eius
 & occursum eius usque ad summum eius
 nec est qui se abscondat
 a calore eius



ex dñi immaculata conuer tens animas
 & testimoniū dñi fidele

mitte manum tuā de alto & eripeme &
 liberu me de aquis multis
 & de manu filiorum alienorum
 uozum ois locutum est uanitatē
 & dextera eorum dextera iniquitatis
 & canticum nouum cantabo tibi
 in psalterio de chordo psallam tibi
 & uide saluē regib; qui redemit dauid
 seruū suū de gladio maligno eripeme
 & erue me de manu filiorū alienorum
 quozū ois locutum ē uanitatē
 & dextera eorum dextera iniquitatis



enscuturū lūmē. Virga Regū. Lucifer
 nō est composu. & Luci, Eifer, Lucifer
 sidera Lucifer sēi. Sacerdos nō est composu
 sūi & sacer dos. Sacerdos. Xps



214 - SAINT-RIQUIER. PSALTER OF CHARLEMAGNE, DETAIL. BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE, PARIS.

terranean and that in the two decades 780-800 the influence of Lombard Italy, then a meeting-place of art currents stemming from the East, was paramount in their work. In eastern and north-eastern France there persisted, at the close of the eighth century, art forms that were still barbarian and akin to those of the Gellone Sacramentary (which cannot be dated earlier than 790-795) and those of early works made at Laon and Corbie. But already, as we have seen, the Gellone painter had treated in the manner of the Corbie Psalter the ideas he culled from his text. In it we have the first example of a synthetic initial letter inserted at the forefront of a chapter, like an escutcheon, a meaningful armorial bearing, or a sort of cipher, differing *toto coelo* from the narrative scenes of antiquity and their illusionist effects. The Carolingians, who looked back to antiquity for inspiration, were to eschew this form of imagery, but Romanesque art was to revert to it. None the less there co-existed another programme of images, wholly antique or Byzantine, devoid of any insular ingredients. An example is a Psalter at Stuttgart, datable some thirty years later than the Corbie Psalter. Here both pictures and narrative keep closely to the text of the Psalms and, following the so-called typological method, give special prominence to the Biblical 'types' or prefigurations of the age to come, the age of Christ. This makes it clear that from the beginning of the century on, there co-existed and persisted, alongside the courtly genre of painting and its ramifications, an art of classical, traditional inspiration.

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PART THREE