St. Paul's Shipwreck in Early Illuminated Manuscripts

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ST. PAUL'S SHIPWRECK IN EARLY ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

JOANNA LACE traces rare illuminated miniatures of St Paul's shipwreck at Malta.

Of the many thousands of miniatures in biblical texts that have come down to us, only a very few portray details of the voyage and the shipwreck of St Paul off the coast of Malta. More popular have been his dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, and the miracle of the viper, an event which took place after he and his companions had reached dry land. One reason for the scarcity must be the fact that artists commissioned to illustrate the St Paul story were faced with a formidable choice. We know more about St Paul than about anyone else in the New Testament. We are even told what he looked like:[1] from the beginning there has been no mistaking the high forehead, slightly hooked nose and dark hair and beard, be it on a minute ivory carving, or amongst a crowd in a painted scene.

As it happens, the few miniatures that we do have cover a period of important stylistic changes – from the late twelfth century to the fourteenth century – so that taken chronologically they illustrate key developments in the history of the art of illumination.[2]

It is not so long since this art was considered "a minor branch of painting" and "only interesting as it reflect(ed)

Fig. 1 From Peter Lombard's Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to Titus, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, M. 939, f.233 v *(detail);* Spanish, 1181.

Fig. 2 Peter Lombard writing his Great Gloss on St. Paul, London, private collection; very early 13th cent.

supposedly more major art". [3] In the same vein, the name "miniature" was in the past assumed to come from the Latin *diminuere*, to reduce, whereas in reality it refers to *minium* – a frequently-used red pigment. Marginal decorations were often ignored altogether. The attitude today is very different: illumination is considered a study in its own right, with painted scenes no longer a poor substitute for major works presumed lost. Also, an illuminated page is seen to have three basic components: script, picture, and ornament, so that in examining the shipwreck miniatures we become aware of the constant interplay of these three.

Our first example comes at the opening of St Paul's *Letter to Titus*, part of a manuscript copy of a *Commentary* by Peter Lombard on the Epistles of St Paul *(Fig. 1)*. The manuscript was commissioned by the Abbot of the Monastery of Sahagún in Spain, and is dated 1181. The wider right-hand column gives St Paul's text, and the left-hand column, written in smaller script and with correspondingly smaller initial letter, gives Peter Lombard's commentary; to the left of this again, in tiny red lettering, are the names of the Church Fathers upon whose writings his commentary is based.

Commentaries were being produced in vast numbers at this time: a great explosion in book production came with increasing literacy and the spread of learning during the last decades of the twelfth century. The universities growing up around the cathedral schools, used the Bible as their fundamental textbook, made up for study into twenty or so separate volumes, with their commentaries or 'glosses'. Peter Lombard, the author of this commentary, was the outstanding theologian and teacher of his day *(Fig. 2)*: his *Great Gloss on the Psalms and Pauline Epistles* and his *Sentences* (a massive theological encyclopaedia) became required reading at universities, and a 'must' for major monastic libraries. This particular copy exemplifies the preferences in the organisation of text that followed naturally from this wider readership: greater insistance than in the past upon keeping to narrow columns of text, to reduce eye strain; within the text, an ordered placing of the different types and sizes of initial; and for the initials themselves, simple outlines, for instant recognition. Before considering the folio

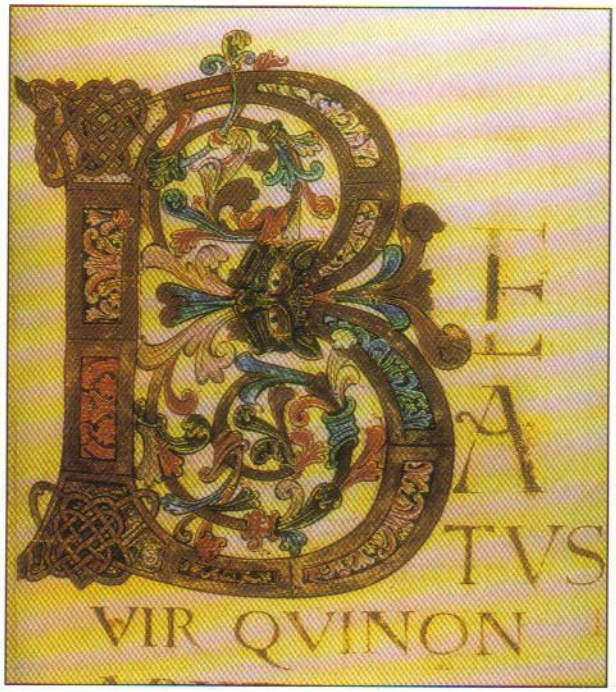

Fig 3. Initial B, from the Harley Psalten, now in London, British Library, Harley 2904, f.4 *(detail);* Winchester, c.980.

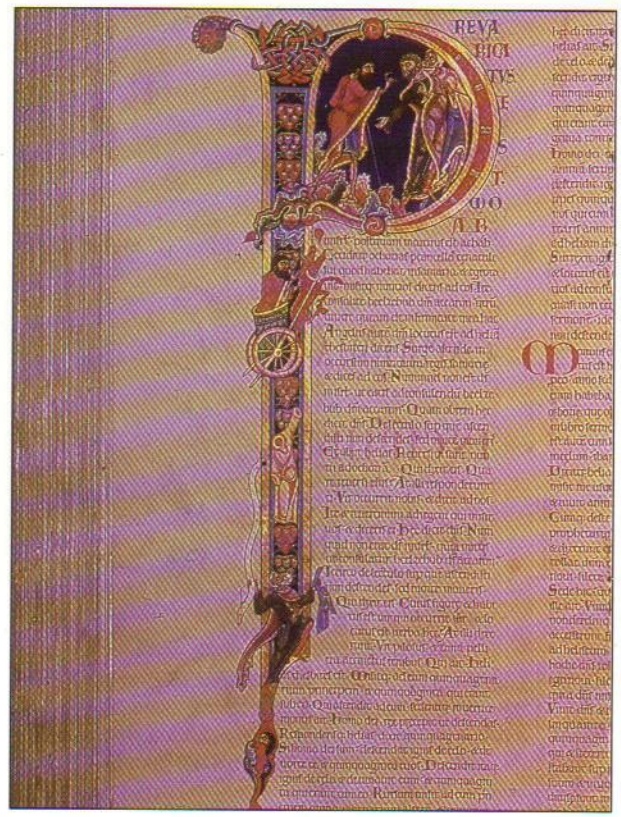

Fig 4. Initial P, from the Winchester Bible, Winchester Cathedral Lib., MS.17, f.120v. *(detail);* mid-12th cent.

in detail, a few facts about initial letters, and their history, help to place it in context.

Three kinds of initial are involved in illumination: the simplest 'decorated' initial, embellished with purely decorative designs; the 'inhabited' initial, where the letter encloses unidentifiable figures – human and/or animal, or fantastic creatures (seen here within the Commentary); and the largest, the 'historiated' initial, which encloses a figure or scene specific to a main text, seen here within St Paul's text: P(aulus).

The practice of decorating initials in written texts goes back to the Ancient World. They were always signals, diminishing in size from the opening page, to chapter headings, to sub-sections, guiding the eye of the reader, who was in many cases reiterating well-known passages. A text was thought of, above all, as something spoken and listened to. This remained the case when later, with Christianity, the Word of God was seen as being revealed in The Book, that is to say, in the written Gospels, and Christian texts, in their physical presence, became of their nature objects of veneration, and therefore meriting the finest embellishment.

During the seventh and eighth centuries the outlines of initial letters in West European texts were immersed in intricate interlacing, amongst which were embedded animal heads, fish, and playful metamorphic creatures. Irish missionaries carried this so-called 'insular' art far across the continent, and the idea of combining an initial letter with a picture was probably an innovation of insular artists. The following centuries present an on-going conflict between elaborate decoration and legibility: the fanciful scrolls of flat foliage introduced during the ninth century certainly dominated the initial; by the tenth century their ingenious contortions almost submerged its outlines altogether.

The end of the tenth century saw the reintroduction of 'classical' Carolingian lettering, combined with three-dimensional foliate scrolls that nicely completed the outline of a letter, no longer dominating it *(Fig. 3)*. Even when these scrolls accommodated birds, animals, and human figures, the outline remained clear. This basic formula is the one used by our Sahagún miniaturist. It left wide scope to the individual artist, and when the central area of the letter was left plain, as here, the historiated initial came into its own, and was to remain popular for over two hundred years. It was in use on both sides of the Channel from the mid-twelfth century, and Sahagún's contemporary equivalent embellished the famous Winchester Bible *(Fig. 4)*. In both, a clear-cut outline is created by combining curving stems and three-dimensional leaves with the interlacing of insular art. In the case of Sahagún, initials are made more prominent still by setting them within deep, rectilinear, gold-enhanced frames, that enclose the bowl of the P and protrude briefly into the margin at salient points down the lengthy shafts, or 'descenders'.

The spectacular scene within the historiated P, must make the most immediate impact upon the modern eye. The preferred colours at this time were often deep crimson, and blue, with gold embellishment. In this small area they have

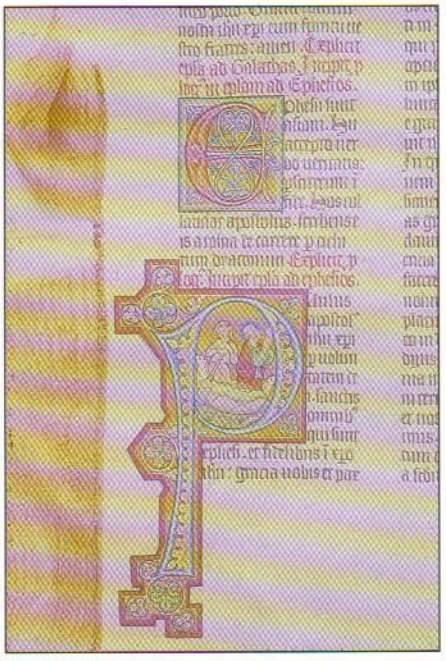

Fig 6 *Shipwreck of St. Paul,* from St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (the Aich Bible), now in Kremsmünster, Libr, Stiftsbibliotek, Cod. 354, IV, f.193 v. *(detail);* (the Aich Bible); from St. Florian, c. 1310.

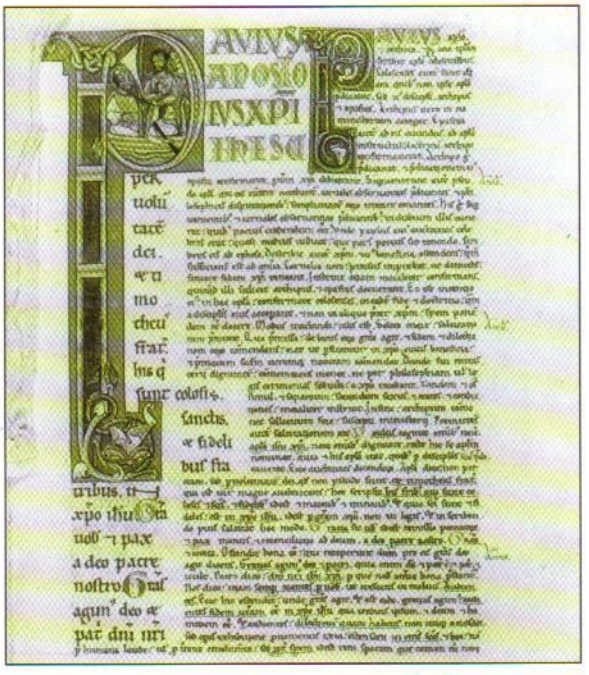

Fig 5 *St. Paul prisoner on ship,* from Peter Lombard's Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, M. 939, f.194 r. *(detail);* Spanish, 1181.

been used to magnificent effect, and with great economy of form. There are no extraneous details: a heavy crimson storm cloud above, and the surging water below, into which Paul, and three companions who could swim, have hurled themselves head first, legs in the air. The resplendent gold of the background adds a kind of supernatural glow to the drama. Gold was indeed a symbol of transcendental light to the medieval mind, and here the artist has achieved a deeper, substantial brilliance by the use of the new technically-advanced plate-metal gold, or 'gold leaf', for background covering, learnt from byzantine craftsmen. Outside influences may also account for the absence of 'nested' geometric shapes, so typical of the Romanesque drapery of that period. Instead, there is a certain softness, a subtle grading of colour, which seems to foreshadow gentler Gothic modelling. It must be said, however, that in the flesh areas this still tentative technique is less than successful.

Both initials are decorated with 'droleries' – playful images that appear in insular art and onwards through the history of illumination. Here we see a stage where drolerie is well confined to the area of text, barely wandering outside the boundary of the initial, secondary to the design of the page as a whole. In the smaller initial, for example, both the lively hound, and the hare in its mouth, are set on a forward plane, 'in front of' the bowl of the letter, but the action is kept within it. In the historiated initial the drolerie is completely enclosed in a small medallion set within the descender. As subject matter, the hound and hare were part of popular hunting folklore; the pink naked man in his medallion has had his right leg amputated, and a wooden one is fitted at the knee by a bulky contraption – a long-forgotten moral tale perhaps, or just a fantasy of the artist? In later centuries droleries were to become more popular, but increasingly relegated to borders, beyond the area of both text and commentary.

Apart from style, there is another aspect of special interest where commentaries are involved. Why, we ask, was this particular scene chosen as a visual commentary on the text? Does it illustrate a passage literally, by referring to an event or situation that the author is about to describe? Alternatively, in the case of Epistles, is the artist using an event that occurs in Acts, and presenting this as an allegory, in order to illustrate a general abstract theme that will characterise the Epistle? They are questions not always easy to answer. What is certain, however, is that illustration by this date had an additional role. The twelfth century, as we mentioned earlier, was a period of sweeping changes in book production. No longer were historiated initials, for example, merely a rapid prompt for a reader in front of a group of listeners, as in former times. The shift was from *speaking* words to *seeing* words. And to the silent reader taking up a book, seeing was a different process: seeing meant scanning, at his own pace, pondering perhaps. Moreover, as it was said, in lettered circles "everyone wanted a book", and the owner of a book took more interest in its physical appearance, as an object to be read with ease, and with visual enjoyment. Before work on even a modest manuscript began, discussions would often take place with individual craftsmen. It seems likely that personal preferences now paid a part in the choice of subject matter for illustration, and would account for a lack of tradition.

Fig. 7. *Shipwreck of St. Paul,* from St. Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians, II, now in Cracow, Mus. Panst. Zbiory na Wawelu, Nr. 2459, f. 379r *(detail)* (the Sucha Bible) from St. Florian. c. 1315.

With these considerations in mind, we note that no reference to a voyage occurs in the *Letters to Titus*, so that the dramatic Sahagún scene can reasonably be understood as allegory. It illustrates the point in the voyage where the ship had run aground, and Julius the centurion had ordered those who could swim to jump overboard and make for the shore: St Paul has been the first to obey, as if encouraging by his own action the obedience of his companions. The theme of obedience is clear, and it certainly comes into the text: St Paul's instructions to Titus, his loyal disciple in Crete, include an insistance upon unquestioning obedience towards "officials and representatives of the government" (Titus 3:1-2).

As if to underline a certain freedom of choice, a second, very different scene of St Paul at sea opens the Sahagún *Letter to the Colossians*. Here St Paul writes movingly from prison of his willingness to suffer: " .... It is now my happiness to suffer for you ..." (Col. 1:24). The initial shows him held prisoner in the ship, hands bound, and a halter round his neck, its rope held firm by his guard. *(Fig. 5)*

Any ambiguity concerning the choice of a particular scene was avoided some fifty years later in a French *Bible Moralisée:* here, illuminations leave the initials and are separated from the text into columns of roundels, each one placed alternatively beside a section of text and beside its corresponding commentary. They illustrate each passage literally; allegory is confined to the written commentary. For illustrations and a full textual interpretation of the Acts section of this manuscript, readers are referred to the *Treasures of Malta* article by Mgr John Azzopardi. [4]

Meanwhile, historiated initials continued to embellish the pages of conventional Bibles. In the early fourteenth century shipwreck scenes appear in the so-called *Aich* Bible (St Paul's *Letter to the Ephesians),* and *Sucha* Bible (St Paul's *Letter to the Thessalonians),* both produced at the great Monastery of St Florian, in present-day Lower Austria. The style of the School of St Florian was a fusion of outside influences – German, French and Italian. Not surprisingly therefore, a characteristic palette of deep reds, deep blues and emerald green is used to very different effect within these two Bibles *(Fig. 6* and *Fig. 7).* The splendid

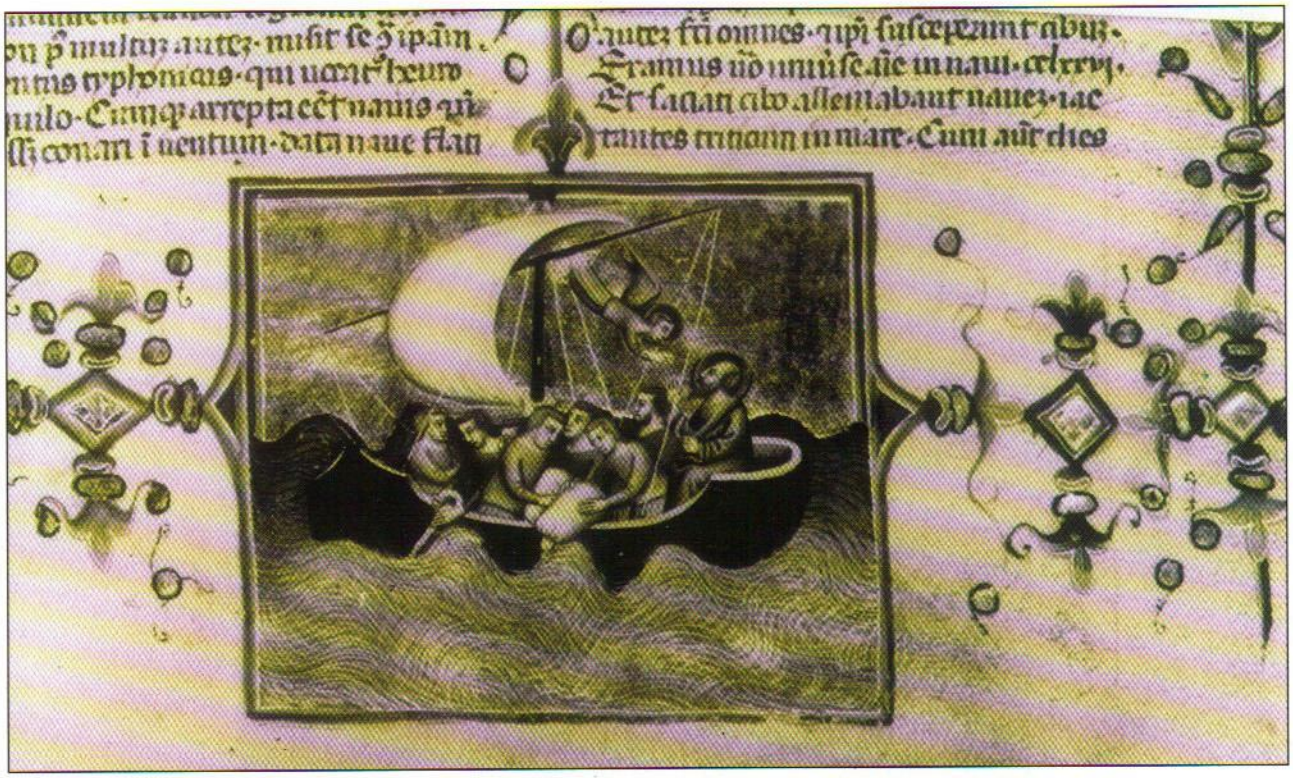

Fig 8. *Shipwreck of St. Paul,* from Bible, Acts 27; Vienna National-bibliothek, Cod. 1191 (Theol.53), f.444 *(detail)*; Naples, c.1360.

design of the Sucha artist sets the plunging figure of St. Paul against the upstretched arms of a single companion, with all the colour and drama of the late twelfth century that we saw at Sahagúr. The Aich style on the other hand, is a progression from the gentle gothic of the *Bible Moralisée*, but with the crowds gone, and the drama now expressed in personal terms by just two figures. Here, each inhabits his own world: St Paul's companion looking down at the waves, full of anxiety, and St Paul turned away and upwards to Heaven in prayer.

The notable feature of our last shipwreck miniature is its position on the page. *(Fig. 8).* This placing of an illustration beneath the columns of text (in this case *Acts* 27), was an Italian practice, and the folio is from a Neapolitan Bible of c. 1360, whose chief miniaturist was the celebrated Cristoforo Orimina (active in Naples c. 1340-c.1365). [5] The Bible is one of several that were produced, along with secular romances and histories, for the newly literate aristocracy at the Angevin court. On the question of style, also, the miniatures conform to a general tendency of Italian illumination to reflect contemporary monumental painting. Cristoforo Orimina took a great interest in the works of Giotto to be seen at that time throughout the city, and there is no mistaking the solidity, roundness of form, and above all the paired interaction between the figures in the boat – all hall- marks of Giotto. Other features to note, are a conciseness of design in the conflation of two episodes – the throwing overboard of the grain to lighten the ship, and St Paul's vision of the angel (the text of *Acts 27* actually places this vision two weeks previously); and a new, more realistic, portrayal of the natural elements.

Up to this point, the rare miniatures of St Paul's voyage and shipwreck have provided useful examples of current developments in the art of illumination. With this particular miniature, there are intimations of the future course of events. Here, the narrative has been set in line with the decoration, almost overpowered by the elaborations of the typically Italianate border, which now fills the margins, surrounds the text, and runs between the columns. As if to assert its independence, the miniature is marked off from the surrounding flamboyance by a slender border – a 'picture frame'. As artists became gradually more successful in giving narrative naturalistic spatial depth, the 'picture frame concept' was to become a popular means of reconciling a three-dimensional world with surrounding decoration. The Naples folio is thus a fitting conclusion to our brief survey: a reminder that during the fourteenth century miniatures take on more and more the character of independent paintings. To quote the art historian Erwin Panofsky: "Book illumination was not killed by the invention of printing: it had already begun to commit suicide by converting itself into paintings."[6]

NOTES

1. In the Acts of Paul; see trans. M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford 1953, 'Acts of Paul' II.3, P. 273.

2. By far the liveliest, most readable introduction to this vast subject is Christopher de Hamel's superb *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts,* Phaidon, London, paper-back edition (revised, enlarged) 1997.

3. See Otto Pacht, *Book Illumination in the Middle Ages*, London 1994, Preface by J.J.G.Alexander, p.7. The discussion on modern attitudes continues in the author's Introduction, op.cit., p. 9 ff.

4. Vol. V.No.1, Christmas 1998, pp. 9-13.

5. This Bible is one of a group of three that have illustrations not only connected with Cristoforo Orimina and his collaborators, but also with a painted cloth from the Abbey of St. Antoine de Viennois, France. See F. Bologna, *I Pittori alla Corte Angioina di Napoli, 1266-1414*, Rome 1969, p. 307 and f.n. 105; and review by D. Wilkins in *Art Bulletin,* 1974, Vol. 56.

Coincidentally, this is the cloth that served as model for Robert Fournier in 1426 for his *Picture Book of St. Anthony the Abbot*, now in the National Library of Malta: MS Libr.1. See Albert E. Abela, 'The Picture Book of St. Anthony the Abbot', in *Treasures of Malta,*Vol.II.No.1, Christmas 1995, pp. 9-14.

6. See E. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, Vol. I, New York 1971, p. 28.
