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The New Medieval Book and Its Heritage

What makes early medieval manuscripts so special, and so influential for subsequent book production, with many of their features continuing through the adoption of the revolution of printing and through the early stages of the digital revolution? So much of our writing culture is taken for granted, such as the deployment of different letter forms, fonts, or different colors for different aspects of a text, beginning a new sentence with a capital letter followed by others in “lowercase” minuscule, ending the sentence with a period, and arguing about where one ought to put commas, or indent for new paragraphs. We do not argue about not running a word from the end of one line to the beginning of the next by inserting a hyphen, about putting spaces between words, or about navigating in the text with page numbers, all things assumed rather than noticed. With the exception of the last, strangely absent,¹ most of these features were innovations of the early medieval period that are still in use, and largely taken for granted. Spaces between words? Look at your keyboard. Which key is largest? The space bar is largest by far, and centrally placed, because most often used. The notion of separating words seems so natural, as inevitable as the wheel, that its origin in the early medieval period is little known, as is its general absence in earlier writing cultures, certainly in the Greek and Roman world.² Some of these features existed before the early medieval period. For example, the mostly Hebrew and Aramaic finds at Qumran, the “Dead Sea scrolls,” commonly separated

¹ For a recent discussion, see Dennis Duncan, *Index, A History of the: A Bookish Adventure* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), pp. 85–112.

² Fundamental is Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

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words by spaces.³ Some late antique Latin manuscripts include enlarged “capital” letters, sometimes enhanced with decoration.⁴ Very rarely a manuscript used different forms of script to indicate distinctions of content within the text.⁵ What is really new is the use of these and other factors, including the decorative embellishment signified by our word “illumination” as aspects of a novel and evidently, from its impact, highly effective system designed to make texts more legible, more compact, more durable, more portable, and to make them central to human culture, as they have remained. This book attempts to tell a story about how this revolution in communication came about.

Turning the pages of an early medieval illuminated manuscript is a remarkable experience, and a privilege enjoyed today by very few specialist scholars, given curators’ preeminent responsibility to preserve the precious manuscripts in their charge, now more than a millennium old, for future generations. Today, many of these wonderful manuscripts are available, and we may hope also preserved, digitally, and anyone can see them on a computer screen, or even on a telephone. Some electronic facsimiles seek through “page-turning” technology to offer at least a distant simulacrum of the experience of reading the physical manuscript. For example, the great early eighth-century manuscript commonly known as the Lindisfarne Gospels has appeared in a full-color facsimile publication,⁶ and also in the form of a CD-ROM that

³ Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 144–145, cited in David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), p. 25.

⁴ Carl Nordenfalk, *Die spätantiken Zierbuchstaben*, Die Bücherornamentik der Spätantike 2 (Stockholm: n.p., 1970).

⁵ An exception now in Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale, MS F. vi. 1, is discussed in n. 17. Different scripts were sometimes used for extra-textual features such as running titles and colophons, as discussed in Elias A. Lowe, “Some Facts about Our Oldest Latin Manuscripts,” *Classical Quarterly*, 19 (1925), 197–208 at 206 (usually in the same script but smaller); and Elias A. Lowe, “More Facts about Our Oldest Latin Manuscripts,” *Classical Quarterly*, 22 (1928), 43–62, both reprinted in Elias A. Lowe, *Palaeographical Papers 1907–1965*, ed. Ludwig Bieler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

⁶ *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Luzern: Faksimile Verlag, 2003), commentary volume by Michelle P. Brown also available separately as Michelle P. Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe*, The British Library Studies in Medieval Culture (London: British Library, 2003). There is an older and also very fine complete facsimile publication, with only the decorated pages reproduced in full color, however: *Evangeliorum Quattuor Codex Lindisfarnensis*, ed. T. D. Kendrick, T. J. Brown, R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, et al. (Olten: Urs Graf, 1960). The manuscript is now available in complete digital

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allows one to “turn the pages,” or at least the major decorated pages.⁷ The wonderful Gallica system allows one to see an enormous number of manuscripts in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, in Paris, in their entirety, generally in color and with an ability to zoom in on details.⁸ Increasing numbers of libraries and museums offer something similar. Digital resources are wonderful, and will increasingly support and enhance the study of manuscripts, but electronic experience of these works has little in common with that conveyed by handling an original bound volume, which has size, weight, feel, sometimes even scent as integral aspects of the observer’s contact with it, even without considering what Walter Benjamin termed the “aura” of the original as opposed to a derived multiple.⁹ The closest approach to that experience available to most people, including most scholars, is through a printed facsimile publication, of which a large number have been produced over the last century and more. Some of these facsimiles are themselves fabulously costly, available to very few people in only a very few libraries, but most academic libraries have some examples, and some are available in large and inexpensive editions.

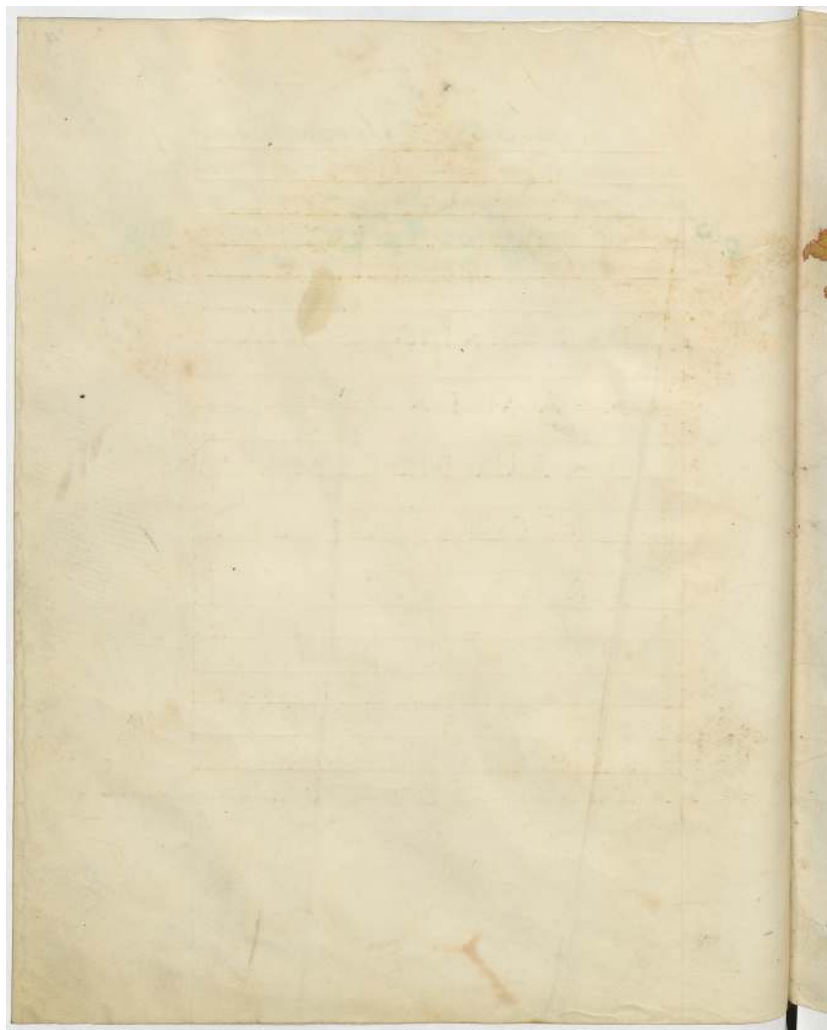
reproduction at www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_nero_d_iv_fsooir (accessed December 15, 2019), and a good selection of images is available online at https://imagesonline.bl.uk/?service=search&action=do_quick_search&language=en&mode=&q=Lindisfarne+Gospel&qw=&page=1&grid_layout=2&grid_thumb=3 (accessed December 15, 2019). Since both printed facsimiles are themselves rare and available only in a few research libraries, often themselves with restricted access, for most interested people the manuscripts are best examined through more popular studies, such as Janet Backhouse, *The Lindisfarne Gospels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), which reproduces all of the major decorated pages, and Michelle Brown’s study just cited. For some problems associated with the older historiography and the origin of the manuscript, see Lawrence Nees “Reading Aldred’s Colophon for the Lindisfarne Gospels,” *Speculum*, 78 (2003), 333–377, and Francis L. Newton, Francis L. Newton, Jr., and Christopher R. J. Scheirer, “Domiciling the Evangelists in Anglo-Saxon England: A Fresh Reading of Aldred’s Colophon in the ‘Lindisfarne Gospels,’” *Anglo-Saxon England*, 41 (2012), 101–144.

⁷ *Lindisfarne Gospels: Turning the Pages* (London: British Library, 2000).

⁸ The starting page is at <https://gallica.bnf.fr/accueil/en/content/accueil-en?mode=desktop> (accessed April 24, 2022).

⁹ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” both reprinted and translated (by Harry Zohn) in Hannah Arendt, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 214–218. The German edition was reprinted in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Scheppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972–1989), 1.2, pp. 435–469, but it is important to note that this famous article was first published in 1935 as “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,” then in French in 1936, and in a revised German text of 1939. For discussion of the different versions and some of the immense literature on this essay, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Benjamin’s Aura,” *Critical Inquiry*, 34 (winter 2008), 336–375.

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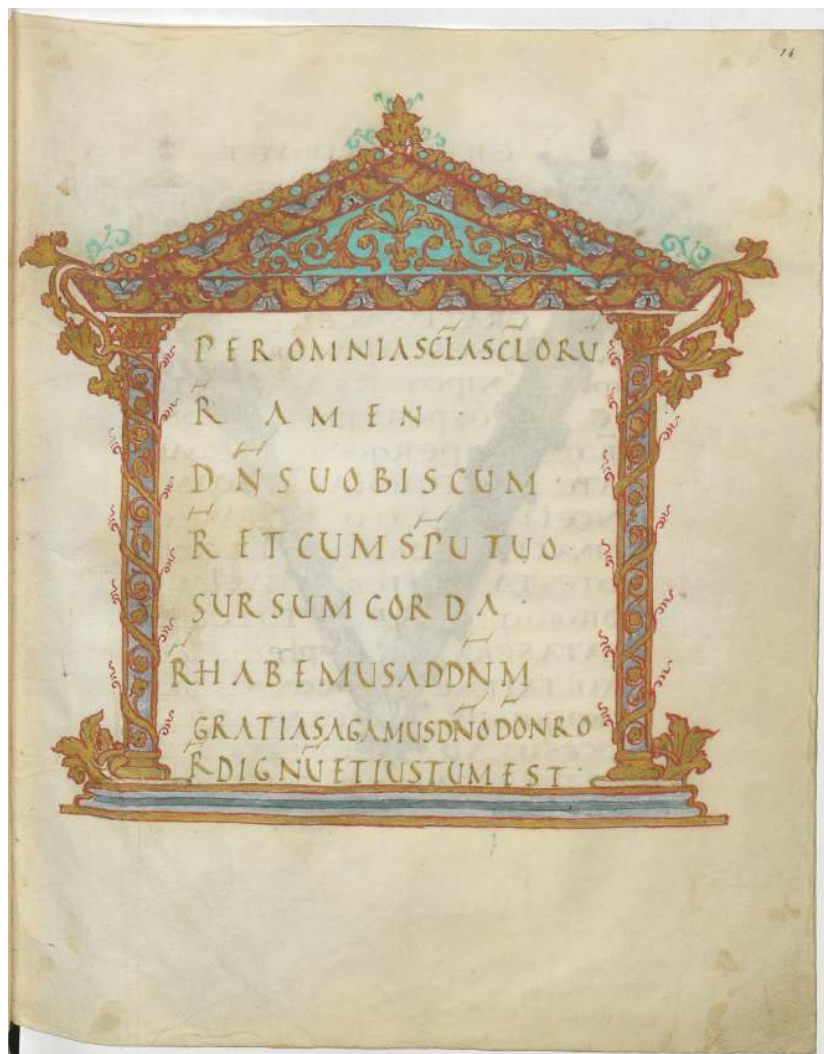


Figures 1.1A and B *Per omnia saecula* opening, Drogo Sacramentary, ca. 850 (Paris, BnF MS lat. 9428, fols. 13v–14r) (photo Bibliothèque nationale de France)

I would like to begin by briefly discussing a single early medieval manuscript, in order to indicate some of the features whose early history will be explored in this book. The manuscript commonly known as the Drogo Sacramentary was written around 855 for the Archbishop of Metz, Drogo.¹⁰ It is now preserved in

¹⁰ Drogo was an illegitimate son of Charlemagne, and an influential figure until his death in 855. He was therefore half-brother of Louis the Pious and uncle of Charles the Bald, during whose reign the sacramentary was produced. This particular example is used as an example because of its

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Figures 1.1A and B (cont.)

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 9428. It is available in a printed full-color facsimile publication,¹¹ in an art-historical study that takes the reader

exceptional beauty and clear illustration of the points at issue, and also because Drogo was also the abbot of Luxeuil, the monastery whose manuscripts will be the primary focus in the remainder of the book. For a recent study, see Sophie Glansdorff, “L’évêque de Metz et archichapelain Drogon (801/802–855),” *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’histoire*, 81 (2003), 945–1014.

¹¹ *Drogo-Sakramentar: Manuscrit Latin 9428 Bibliothèque Nationale Paris. Vollständige Faksimile-Ausgabe im Originalformat*, Codices selecti phototypice impressi 49 (Graz:

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Figures 1.2A and B *Vere dignum* opening, Drogo Sacramentary, ca. 850 (Paris, BnF MS lat. 9428, fols. 14v–15r) (photo Bibliothèque nationale de France)

through the manuscript sequentially,¹² and online with color reproductions of every page (and of the wonderful original ivory-decorated

Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1974) (with commentary from Wilhelm Koehler, *Die Gruppe des Wiener Krönungs-Evangeliars. Metzger Handschriften, Die karolingischen Miniaturen* 3 [Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1963], edited by Florentine Mütterich).

¹² Robert G. Calkins, *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), pp. 162–177, pls. 84–94. See also Franz Unterkircher, *Zur Ikonographie und Liturgie des Drogo-Sacramentars* (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1977).

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Figures 1.2A and B (cont.)

covers).¹³ Here I will briefly describe a sequence of a few consecutive pages, presenting them as pairs, for which the important technical term “opening” is used: the two pages one always sees together when reading, the page on the left being the reverse of the preceding leaf and termed the verso, and the page on the right being termed the recto.¹⁴

¹³ <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b60000332/fi.item.r=Drogo%20Sacramentaire.zoom> (accessed December 2, 2019)

¹⁴ As mentioned previously, early medieval books were not paginated when made, and when much later librarians added numbers for ease of reference they usually number the

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The first opening described here has fol. 13v entirely blank (Figure 1.1A). This is significant, for parchment was expensive, and leaving a leaf blank is unusual, signifying that the next one makes an important new beginning, as is the case here. The facing fol. 14r (Figure 1.1B) contains the preamble prayer for the Canon of the Mass. The page is not ruled and lined for text, a sign that it was separately prepared and intended for elaborate decoration, which it displays. The text is written in compressed golden capital letters of a particular variety called rustic capitals. It is entirely surrounded by a frame of imitation architecture, a pediment resting on columns at either end, the whole colored in pale blue-green, slate blue-grey, purple, and gold. It is a splendid beginning to be sure, clearly announced by its form and position.

Turning the page to the next opening, fol. 14v (Figure 1.2A) presents a large initial letter *V* occupying nearly the entire page, for the *Vere dignum* text. Atop the left side of the letter *V* is a figural scene, often termed by scholars a miniature, with a priest celebrating mass at an altar set under architectural forms, with arches and a tower, evidently meant to indicate a church building. Atop the right side of the letter is another figural miniature, the Lamb of God, *Agnus Dei*, appearing under a gable on columns. The initial *V* is surrounded by script in golden capital letters, called uncials by palaeographers – broad and often rounded letters. The uneven spacing of the letters and deviation from straight lines is partly because the leaf was not ruled and lined for text, so that the scribe worked free-hand, after the large *V* had been drawn and painted. On the facing page, fol. 15r (Figure 1.2B) is the beginning of the *Sanctus* text from the mass, presenting the hymn sung to God by the seraphim and read by the officiating priest at the mass, Holy, Holy, Holy. The image depicts a single seraph, with six golden wings, its head having the faces of the four beasts of the eschatological visions of Ezekiel, with the eagle at top. Like the initial *V* on the facing page, this leaf was not ruled and lined for text, apparently reserved for a major image, which was painted first. Text of the seraphic hymn being sung surrounds the figure, suggesting a cloud of sound following continuously from the text on the facing verso. This page is differentiated from the facing verso by its script, which is in more compressed rustic capitals rather than expansive uncial. The script thus returns to the rustic capitals used on fol. 14r

individual leaves, usually now referred to as folios. Hence the abbreviation fol. 1r[ecto] corresponds to what if paginated would be p. 1, fol. 1v[erso] to what would be p. 2, fol. 2r to what would be p. 3, and so on.

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(Figure 1.1B), but here on a larger scale, although as on fol. 14r, and unlike the facing verso, an ornamental frame surrounds the image and text.

Turning the page to the next opening with fol. 15v (Figure 1.3A) the scale of script increases again, this page dominated by a huge letter *T* filling the page, the largest letter in the manuscript, surrounded by smaller letters spelling out the words *Te igitur* (Therefore we humbly beseech Thee), referring to Christ and beginning the consecration of the eucharist. Only eight letters appear on the page, in all capitals readily recognizable as forms still in wide use, known to palaeographers as square capitals, and all eight are surrounded by luxurious vegetal ornament. The page has no frame, but the initial *T* itself contains figures, being what is often termed an historiated initial.¹⁵ It provides a frame for four figural groups. Largest, at top center, is Melchisedek offering sacrifice at an altar, Abel and Abraham stand at left and right ends of the cross bar, each bringing a lamb for sacrifice, and two sacrificial lambs are at the bottom of the vertical stroke. The facing fol. 16r (Figure 1.3B) has a frame, but no figures, within the frame twelve large square capitals, each surrounded by vegetal ornament like those on the facing page, continuing the invocation to God with the single word *Clementissime*, most merciful.

Turning the page to the next opening, both pages have neither frames nor figures, nor color, being written entirely in golden letters. Fol. 16v (Figure 1.4A) has four lines of large square capitals, as on the preceding recto, but in simple gold, without the luxurious vegetal ornament and color. The facing fol. 17r (Figure 1.4B) is also all in gold letters, but now much smaller and in uncials instead of square capitals, occupying twenty lines. New sections of text are announced by golden square capitals in the left margin. The note in the ample right margin, in much smaller script, is a later addition. Turning the page again to the next opening, fols. 17v–18r continue the pattern of fol. 17r, each with twenty lines of golden uncials, new sections of text marked by enlarged square capital initials. The next two openings, fols. 18v–19r and 19v–20r have the same pattern again, all gold uncial letters without ornament.

¹⁵ This term, like all the others used here, has sometimes been criticized, often with good reason. For a critique of the term “historiated initial” see Christine Jakobi-Mirwald, *Text, Buchstabe, Bild: Studien zur historisierten Initiale im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Reimer, 1998). For the terminology of medieval manuscript study, see Christine Jakobi-Mirwald, *Buchmalerei: Terminologie in der Kunstgeschichte*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 2008) and the glossary of terms in many European languages found at <https://jakobi-mirwald.de/glossar.html>. The most recent guide to terminology and much else is Michelle Brown, *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms, Revised Edition*, 2nd ed., ed. Elizabeth Teviotdale and Nancy K. Turner (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018).

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Figures 1.3A and B *Te igitur* opening, Drogo Sacramentary (Paris, BnF MS lat. 9428, fols. 15v–16r) (photo Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Turning the page to the next opening, fol. 20v (Figure 1.5A) continues the text without break, but shifts the script from uncials to smaller, more compact, rustic capitals, with uncial used only for the word in the sixth line from the top, *Oremus* (Let us pray). This word is given an entire line, and marks a new text with this change in script. The next line begins the prayer with an enlarged and