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LATE SAXON AND VIKING ART

by

T. D. KENDRICK

M.A. HON.D.LITT., F.B.A., F.S.A.

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PREFACE

IF this book has merits, they are due to the help I have received from my many most generous and ingenious colleagues. In particular, I acknowledge my indebtedness to Francis Wormald, who has instructed me in the matter of the manuscripts, to Dr. F. Saxl, and to Sir Alfred Clapham, who has encouraged and corrected me with a characteristically kindly wisdom in all the essays that I now present to the reader. As in the preface to the first volume, I have to thank many incumbents, librarians, and curators, for allowing me to take photographs, and also the editors and authorities who have given me permission to reproduce illustrations, the source of which is named in the list of plates and figures; and I must thank especially the Editors of *Antiquity* and the Council of the British Archaeological Association for letting me make use of material in two previously published papers. I should like, furthermore, to record how much I owe to Robert Freyhan, Ernst Kitzinger, Lawrence Stone, and Margaret Wrigley, and all my other friends who have accompanied me in the survey of the stone crosses, a task in which we were assisted by an ample grant from the Leverhulme Trustees. In this matter it is a duty to record with gratitude how much I have learnt from the wise and charming writings on the Northumbrian crosses by the great antiquary, Mr. W. G. Collingwood, whose works and, especially, his great series of drawings, still remain the foundation upon which all studies of these carvings must be built. Finally, I acknowledge an irredeemable debt to my colleague Elizabeth Senior, who was killed in 1941, for she gave me invaluable assistance with her camera and her sketch-book, and I know well that her sensible suggestions and courageous opinions have brightened and improved almost every chapter I have written. *Flet tamen admonitu motus, Elissa, tui.*

T. D. K.

BRITISH MUSEUM
1948

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I

WINCHESTER ILLUMINATION: THE MAIN DEVELOPMENT

THIS book begins with an account of the paintings and drawings of the 'Winchester' manuscripts of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The first thing to say is that 'Winchester' is just a commonly used and convenient descriptive term that must not be interpreted too strictly.[1] The 'Winchester' style, it is true, is in the main one of Winchester inspiration, and many of the manuscripts to be described are indubitably of Winchester origin; but the style is not a Winchester monopoly. It is not even exclusively West Saxon. We must think of it as a generally established English manner, predominantly perhaps southern, but as much at home in places like Exeter, Glastonbury, Canterbury, Abingdon, and Ramsey in Huntingdonshire, as in the West Saxon capital. This should be remembered, because, in accordance with custom, we are going to use the descriptive adjective 'Winchester' without the cumbersome inverted commas.

A second, and a more important preliminary observation is that in this Winchester work we have the best thing in Anglo-Saxon art, as I think most students would agree. And here I must add that in my view its beauty often resides as much in the colouring as in the drawing, so that monochrome photographs do not do it justice. The reader who looks at the original manuscripts will have many delightful surprises. The difference, for instance, between Plates IX, 1, and XXIII, 2, here and the actual drawings is of such significance that the monochrome version in some respects fail to illustrate the style I try to describe.

The supreme interest of Winchester art is that it provides the successful solution of the outstanding aesthetic problem of English pre-Conquest art, that of combining the glittering abstract patterns of insular 'barbaric' illumination with the more substantial dignities and the gentler graces of the classical tradition

[1] See Francis Wormald's remarks *Archaeologia*, XCI (1945), p. 131.

in painting. The nature of these two quite different arts has been described in the first volume of this book,[1] and the reader will find therein an account of the recurrent clashes and of their occasional attempted amalgamations; now, however, in the Winchester manuscripts we come for the first time to something that is a just and lucid compromise between them, a formula revealing the united elegancies of both. It is an achievement of such significance that it must rank above everything else in this book. What we are going to learn about it is, firstly, that it is English-born; and, secondly, that its influence outlives the Saxon period. In fact, Winchester illumination is the first really English thing in English art.

We must stress first of all its laboured beginnings, and the original impetus that was due to the revival of classicism under the West Saxon kings of the house of Alfred the Great, who died in 899. As was explained in the first volume, after Alfred had defeated the Danes, the classical tradition was in the ascendant in southern England, and barbaric art was to a large extent relegated to the distinct and outlandish provinces of Northumbrian and Viking art. This generalization needs, of course, some qualification, because the Christian expression of barbaric art to be seen in the many surviving manuscripts of the Hiberno-Saxon Church was not condemned, nor, presumably, were such of these manuscripts as happened to be in the south English libraries put out of sight; and the fact is that the barbaric art they represent did have, as we shall see, some influence on the development of the Winchester style; but the point is that barbaric art, which did not, like classical art, include naturalistic drawings of people and scenery and buildings, consisted principally of extravagantly stylized human beings and soulless spreads of animal-pattern and interlace; and after the wars with the Danes that kind of decoration became so closely associated with the invaders, the enemies of Christendom, that classical art was correspondingly identified in the eyes of the court at Winchester with surviving Christian civilization and was therefore elevated by the West Saxon kings to the rank of a national English style. Thus, when Queen Ælflæd of Wessex (d. 916) ordered a stole and maniple to be embroidered for Frithestan, Bishop of Winchester (enthroned 909), her needle-women worked in coloured silks figures of Saints and

[1] Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900*. London, 1938.

Prophets that were not done in anything even distantly resembling the Celtic or Hiberno-Saxon manner, but were dignified naturalistic drawings of Frankish, or Byzantine, type that foreshadow the later Winchester style.[1]

Bishop Frithestan's stole and maniple were found in the tomb of St. Cuthbert (d. 687), and it is under King Athelstan (d. 939), who presented these vestments to the Saint's shrine, then at Chester-le-Street, that West Saxon classical art is first found in the manuscripts. Probably Athelstan himself guided its development, for his interest in Frankish illumination is proved by the books he chose as presents. He reigned only fifteen years; but his wars were part of the re-conquest of the Dane-law, and he died Rex Totius Britanniae, a great Englishman in his own right and a ruler with powerful Continental connexions, for he was the brother-in-law of Otto the Great. His fame as a donor of manuscripts is well-founded, and it is almost certain that among his numerous gifts made to St. Cuthbert was the copy of Bede's Life of this Saint that is now in the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (MS. 183). It is a southern manuscript, probably from Winchester or Glastonbury, and at the beginning there is a full-page picture of Athelstan presenting the volume to Cuthbert (Pl. XXXIII). This was painted about 935, a quarter of a century later than the embroidery of the vestments, and the figures are still classical; but they have lost the Byzantine graces of those on the stole and maniple, and are stolidly and stiffly drawn in a very clumsy imitation of Frankish painting. The colours are heavy and opaque, and the shading is crude, and the general effect of the page is a solemn, dark assemblage of dull purple and gloomy reds and blues. The style, in fact, is a plodding, uninspired classicism, though it is sincere and sturdy work that illustrates the determined trend of the time. The elaborate foliate scroll in the border, done in white on a dark red background with yellow margins, is something that the Saxon artist found much more to his liking, and we shall refer to this later on, and also to the charming little barbaric initials in the body of the manuscript; but for the moment we are concerned with the laboured classicism of the figural style in the principal illuminated page. This is found again in the English illustrations of the same date added to the earlier and largely Frankish Athelstan Psalter (British Museum,

[1] Kendrick, op. cit., Pl. CII.

Galba A. XVIII), for they are executed in the same stumpy and heavy sub-Frankish style, though we must note that their frames are in the Hiberno-Saxon tradition, as is also their colouring, which is enlivened with orange borders and much milky blue.

It was not long, however, before this solemn and awkward figure-style began to change, and it was Frankish art that provided the English with the necessary inspiration. In the Bodleian Library at Oxford there is a foreign grammatical treatise (Auct. F. IV, 32) that bears on the first page a drawing of Christ holding a rod and an inscribed panel, and at the foot of the page there is a little kneeling figure of St. Dunstan and the words of his prayer (Pl. I). The figure of Christ is not centrally set on the page and has the drapery so arranged that St. Dunstan and the lettering above him seem to be part of an originally intended composition; indeed both the saint and the inscription are ornamented with the same shade of orange-brown paint as that colouring Christ's halo, and the tightly creased fold-style of the smaller figure corresponds with that at the right knee of Christ. There is, accordingly, the high interest attached to the folio that it may be, as the statement at the top of the page tells us, the actual work of St. Dunstan, a man who very greatly influenced monastic life and, probably, monastic art, in England; but the main matter is the style of the drawing, for whether this be Glastonbury work of *c.* 950 (note the Hiberno-Saxon character of the head of Christ), or whether it be Frankish, it reveals very clearly the nature of the figure-style that profoundly altered the work of the Saxon artist in the middle of the tenth century. It is a style appreciably more graceful than that on which the Athelstan manuscripts of the 'thirties are based, and the change is due to the significant clarity and sensibility of the line-drawing. This crisp and lightly handled linear design which, since it has no weighty shadows, comes glittering to the surface of the page, was something that the English knew well and could exploit with enthusiasm, for this kind of calligraphic exercise was a principal part of the Hiberno-Saxon heritage. In the tenth century it provided just the style of drawing that was able to give a truly insular lightness and gaity of manner to the heavy figures of the Athelstan period.

Though the change was still in an experimental stage, we see it operating in what is usually called the first Winchester

style manuscript, King Edgar's Charter to the New Minster at Winchester (British Museum, Vespasian A. VIII), which was inscribed and illuminated in 966.

By this time Dunstan was Archbishop of Canterbury, and St. Ethelwold had been made Bishop of Winchester, and thus we come to the second of the famous names connected with the monastic reform of the tenth century. We do not know that Ethelwold was, like Dunstan, himself an artist; but he, like Oswald of Worcester, had had experience of the Cluniac scriptorium at the Abbey of Fleury, and as he was a generous donor of manuscripts and church ornaments, we can be quite sure that he took a personal interest in the work of the great artists that produced the famous manuscripts of his episcopacy. The Charter, the first of these, is written throughout in gold, and the principal illuminated page (Pl. II) is painted on purple vellum (now faded to a light mauve) as was the custom in the most sumptuous Carolingian manuscripts. It shows King Edgar, who stands between the Virgin and St. Peter, holding the charter aloft to Heaven where Christ sits in a mandorla attended by four angels. The page glitters with gold, and the colours are light pinks and blues and greens and a warm orange. The style is sharply distinguished from the paintings of Athelstan's day by its gaiety, its pretty colours, and its excited vigorous line-drawing. The angels around the mandorla show how the artist of the Charter was using with zest and emphasis drapery-lines like those of the 'Dunstan' drawing, and we see that he could give them an added spirit and movement, this being well illustrated in the loose folds swinging away from the body, as in the figure of St. Peter. The artist, however, was severely tested because he was called upon to draw a figure in a most unusual posture. He was able to copy with accuracy a seated Christ in Majesty, and supporting angels, and ordinary standing figures; but a king with his back to us holding up a book to the skies was not a subject already among the stock patterns, and therefore he had to improvise. The result is the most lively and dramatically posed figure on the page, a Saxon *tour de force*; but it is achieved by means of an impossible corkscrew stance that strangely permits the King's toes and buttocks and face all to be turned towards the spectator. Once we have observed this proof of the Charter artist's originality and of his readiness to take liberties with his classical source, it is not

surprising to notice also that he has refused to accept the classical theory of the frame as a distinct and limiting enclosure. He has, in fact, designed it as part of the picture and not as a border; he has given it the same sort of texture and colours and crinkled liveliness as the drapery of the figures, and he has permitted these personages actually to stand on it and even to step, as in the case of the King, or fly, as in the case of one of the angels, right in front of it. In other words, by this time the Saxon artist has mastered his Carolingian model and is engaged with obvious enjoyment in turning it into English art. Quite rightly, this is held to be the beginning of the Winchester style.

Though we recognize an increased lightness and stir in the lines of this gay painting, the fact remains that the figures themselves, except the King, are still somewhat heavy and wooden. The features, as in the Athelstan period, are large and coarse, and the eyes stare with an impassive stolidity. There are no alert expressions and lively glances; there is no real emancipation from the ponderous classicism of the Frankish models. This stolidity, the legacy of the 'Ada' and the 'Metz' styles abroad, is still recognizable, though it is perhaps a little less obvious, in the greatest of the early Winchester manuscripts, the famous Benedictional of St. Ethelwold, now at Chatsworth, which was written and illuminated at the command of the Saint in the period 975–80, either at the Old Minster or at Ely, which had been refounded by St. Ethelwold.

The main characteristics of this beautiful manuscript are revealed in the picture of St. Etheldrythe (Pl. III) and two details from other folios (Pl. IV). In general, the figure-style is not much more vivacious than that of the Charter, though the drapery is a little more sensitive and gaily frilled, and the drawing of the faces and the hands, usually done in red ink, is more delicate; but on the whole, even in folios representing dramatic action and violent movement, it is still permissible to use words like stolid and inert and wilting in describing the personages of the picture. In the large figures the big round fleshy faces, loaded with thick white paint, match the leaden heaviness of the bodies. St. Etheldrythe is stately, but she is lifeless and heavy-looking, and the Christ of the Baptism (Pl. IV, right) is weakly drawn in spite of the felicitous sketching of certain details of the body. On the other hand, the figures in the

Incredulity scene are among the best in the whole book (Pl. IV, left) and reveal the intrusion of a much more vigorous style. Note especially the powerful forward thrust of St. Thomas's neck, and the impressionist hair with its sensitive dark brown shading on a head of pale gold, for we have here an important early appearance of a mannerism that was soon to transform the whole character of Saxon illumination.

The outstanding glory of the manuscript is the marvellous colouring that gives a brilliant cheerfulness and excitement to the pages. St. Etheldrythe is a blaze of gold and light pinkish red, picked out with white, and the thickly packed surrounding acanthus-foliage is pink, blue, purple, and green, so that the total effect of the page is one of an almost blatant gorgeousness. In the Baptism scene the background is purple; the mandorla, the Dove, and the proffered napkins are gold; the swirl of water is deep blue-green, and the Baptist is in a yellow skin; at the bottom of the picture there are purple waves.

The fact is that an overwhelmingly rich colour-pattern is the first thing one notices about the pages in the Benedictional, and the second is that each picture is one comprehensive design that embraces the figures and the inscriptions and the frame. The Charter artist had gone some way in this direction; but the Benedictional artist goes right back to the old Hiberno-Saxon tradition of the ornamental page in which the frame is simply a minor and integral part of the total picture. As a boundary in space it meant nothing to him at all. In fact, in the Incredulity folio and several other pictures in this manuscript it is to a great extent obscured by the personages of the scene who have stepped out of the frame in order that a part of their drama may be enacted in front of it.

At this point we must remind ourselves of the native taste that contributes to the formation of the Winchester style. The figures, we know, have a classical source; but the decorative scheme of the pages just described is not classical at all, and the fact is that one of the outstanding characteristics of the developing English art of illumination in the tenth century is the persistence of the Celtic system of the ornamented page as expressed in the Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts of earlier centuries. The St. Etheldrythe folio is an excellent example. It shows us what was originally a framed portrait of a woman now turned by the Saxon artist into a highly ornamental abstraction of its own

theme, a single spread of pattern obliterating the frame and also the air and the scenery in which the Saint stands; for the frame has become part of the picture, and the background is just openwork—or, better perhaps, is supplanted by an inscription used decoratively as a part of the picture. We have only to look again at the detail from the Athelstan-period Life of St. Cuthbert (Pl. XXXIII) to appreciate the striking character of the change that has taken place. The clearest expression of the Hiberno-Saxon style is in the folios that bear the great initials, such as that containing the opening words of St. Matthew's Gospel (Pl. VI) in a rather later manuscript known as the Grimbald Gospels (p. 10). If we look back from this to St. Etheldrythe (Pl. III), we see that the Saint has the same impersonal and purely decorative value as the big letter L, and if we look back to earlier Irish or Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts we can see at once the source of this type of big letter.

There is, however, one folio in the Benedictional of St. Ethelwold, the portrait of St. Benedict (Pl. V), that illustrates the assertion of a native taste better than any other illumination in Winchester art. Here figure, frame, and all are bound up into a rich and heavy spread of colour, a ponderous superstructure of purple, gold, and green set off by spaces of duller green and pinkish mauve. If the Saint's face be covered, the figure itself loses its identity as a body and merges into the stiff imprisoning ornament around it. The whole page, in fact, a showy display of abstract ornament encompassing a little white central spot of quasi-classical art. The painter did not try to represent an isolated real-life figure enthroned beneath a curtained arch through which the light streams. On the contrary, in order to avoid any sense of the natural landscape and interspaces of real light, he has sprinkled the letters of the inscription on such fragments of sky as are left, and the whole folio is recognizable as an extreme statement of the barbaric taste in Saxon art. It is, indeed, not too much to say that it is directly comparable in accent and kind with an Evangelist folio in the Book of Kells (for example, St. John, f. 291 v.), and nothing could more plainly reveal the irrepressible element of the old insular manner that so curiously contributes to the excellence of even some of the grandest examples of the Winchester style.

How, then, did this insular style re-assert itself? To a small

extent no doubt from the surviving manuscripts of the early Church still in England. The change to the classical taste does not mean that noble books like the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Book of Chad, and the Book of Cerne had been banished. Athelstan must have seen the Lindisfarne Gospels when he worshipped at the shrine of St. Cuthbert, and that this famous work, or one very like it, did deeply impress the later artist is shown by the fact that the group of figures in one of its Evangelist's pictures was copied in the tenth century in a Winchester manuscript, now at Copenhagen, and given an Hiberno-Saxon frame of interlacing bands. Nevertheless, the main source of the insular character of Winchester art was not the example of our own manuscripts here, but the foreign books illustrating the Continental version of the Hiberno-Saxon taste, namely manuscripts of the Franco-Saxon school, many of which came into the English libraries at the time of the monastic revival. These were written in north-east France, Belgium, and north Germany, and they are the works of Carolingian and Ottonian artists who were perpetuating designs that had first been taught to the Franks by Irish and Saxon monks in the eighth century.[1]

Here we find the abstract patterned page and the great initial letters in Hiberno-Saxon frames, letters that very closely resemble in structure Winchester initials like that in Plate VI, having the same panelled main lines and interlace ends and occasional animal-head terminals. This the Winchester scribe recognized as the art of his own ancestors returned to him with, so to speak, the blessing of the Church abroad, and it is not surprising that the influence of this ancestral art should thereafter be discernible in his own work; but, in general, the Winchester artist put acanthus pattern into the panels of the letters instead of interlace-fillings, kept the interlace for the terminal crowns of these big initials, and did not allow the animal-heads, unless it were the classical lion-head in full glory (Pl. XXVII, 1), to be more than unobtrusive details.

If, therefore, we take from Continental art on the one hand the Franco-Saxon system of ornament and the originally insular types of the large initial, and, on the other hand, the figure-style and the acanthus from Carolingian manuscripts like those

[1] For a study of Franco-Saxon art, its origins and influence, see G. L. Micheli, *L'Enluminure du haut moyen âge*. Brussels, 1939. p. 152–64.

of the Ada and Metz schools, we have sufficient ingredients to explain our Winchester sources, and it is not necessary to discuss them more fully. However, on the subject of the classical origins, it is instructive to refer to the very striking comparison made by Dr. Otto Homburger [1] between the Nativity and the Baptism (Pl. IV, 2) scenes in the Benedictional of St. Ethelwold and those on the ivory casket, work of the Metz school of the ninth or tenth century, now at Brunswick. This is a most direct and convincing indication of the Continental foundation of the Winchester style as regards iconography, and it brings us back to our subject of the classical kind of figure-drawing.

The full achievement of Winchester art includes many essays and experiments. We have seen that one artist copied an Evangelist picture in the Lindisfarne Gospels or in a similar manuscript. Another, a real classicist in style and temper, when he painted the illustrations in the Gospels in the Library of York Minster, tried to preserve the outspoken classicism of the 'Palace School' in Carolingian art, and set his figures against a spacious airy background that is bordered by a severely functional frame. The Evangelists' figures at York are, however, exceptional. In general the taste for a purely decorative composition prevails over all other tendencies, and the development of the figure-style and its setting, after the stage of the Benedictional of St. Ethelwold, is illustrated by the Grimbald Gospels in the British Museum,[2] the manuscript containing the 'great initial' folio (Pl. VI) of which we have already spoken. It is probably New Minster work of the early eleventh century. Unfortunately the finest pages in the Grimbald Gospels do not make good photographs, as they are decorated with silver that has oxidized into dark blotches; but in spite of this accidental disfigurement the manuscript is still one of the most lovely works of art in the whole Winchester group. Reproduced here (Pl. VII) are two details of the St. Matthew folio, the upper portion of the Evangelist seated at his desk and his symbol, the Angel, in the top right-hand corner of the same page. The colouring is no less remarkable than the drawing; for example, the Angel has halo, sleeves, and tunic of gold, a light purple cloak, and wings of brilliant blue and emerald green with gold borders; and the calm, gracious beauty of these figures is so obvious that

[1] *Die Anfänge der Malschule von Winchester.* Leipzig, 1912.

[2] Add. MSS. 34,890.