

EBBON OF REIMS AND THE TURNING POINT IN MEDIEVAL ART

ECATERINA LUNG

University of Bucharest, ecatarina.lung@istorie.unibuc.ro

Abstract

The whole life of Ebbon, church hierarch, missionary, man of letters and 9th century politician, points without a doubt to a character who was never satisfied with what he had, what he knew or what he achieved. We intend to show to what extent this personal dissatisfaction with his lot played a role in finding new ways of visual expression which marked the transition from antique models towards a new, middle ages esthetics.

Keywords: Carolingian Renaissance, Ebbon of Reims, illuminated manuscripts, medieval art.

Biography

We don't know for sure when Ebbon was born, but probably around 775-778 in a very modest family (of serfs), although his mother was the nurse of Louis, son of Charlemagne, so he grew up together with the prince and benefitted from the same education, being, according to Flodoard, „*Ludovici collactaneus, et conscholasticus*”¹. He was freed by Charlemagne and helped, at the beginning of his career, by Louis, when the latter was king of Aquitaine². At first, he was adviser and librarian to his milk-brother, activities which made him familiar with the codices

¹ Flodoardus Remensis, *Historia Ecclesiae Remensis*, II, XIX, Latin text with French translation, ed. M. Lejeune, Reims, 1853. Oeuvre numérisée et mise en page par Marc Szwajcer, <http://remacle.org/bloodwolf/historiens/flodoard/histoire3.htm#XIX>, visited 02.06.2021.

² Régine le Jan, *Famille et pouvoir dans le monde franc (VIIe – Xe siècle) : essai d'anthropologie sociale*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1995, p. 33.

present in a royal library³. We can think that this was one of the ways he could have known about the existing images in the manuscripts. Ebbon is named archbishop of Reims in 816, shortly after Louis ascends the Carolingian Empire's throne⁴. When Louis' sons rebel against their father, Ebbon, to everyone's disapproval, joins Lothar, the eldest of them, betraying his milk-brother⁵. In 833, he plays a crucial role in the public humiliation of his old school mate and protector, who is forced, in front of the synod chaired by the archbishop, to confess to mostly invented sins and to give up the throne. But relatively quickly Louis regains power and captures the archbishop⁶. In Thionville, it is now Ebbon's turn in 835 to publicly confess his sins, in this case real, and to give up the bishop's office, later to be confined to various monasteries. After inheriting the throne in 840, Lothar remembers Ebbon's previous help and reinstalls him as bishop, an occasion for him to justify his deeds⁷. Later Charles the Bald, the youngest of the brothers, conquers western Francia where the bishopric of Reims was located and Ebbon is again sacked in 845⁸. After finding refuge at Lothar's court, he quarrelled with this ruler, too, and we find him later at the court of Louis the German, the second of the brothers, where he becomes bishop of Hildesheim and dies in 851⁹.

Cultural activity

As archbishop of Reims, Ebbon has an incessant activity, supporting the moral reform of the clergy, being a good administrator of his diocese

³ Peter R. McKeon, *Archbishop Ebbo of Reims (816-835): A Study in the Carolingian Empire and Church*, in "Church History", Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec., 1974), p. 438.

⁴ Matthew Bryan Gillis, *Heresy and Dissent in the Carolingian Empire: The Case of Gottschalk of Orbais*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 55.

⁵ Thegan of Trier accused him of being of low birth and low morals, "turpissimus rusticus"; see Theganus Trevirensis, *Vita Hludowici imperatoris*, 56, IntraText Edition CT, Copyright Èulogos 2007, http://www.intratext.com/IXT/LAT0459/_P1K.HTM, visited 02.06.2021.

⁶ Peter R. McKeon, *Archbishop Ebbo of Reims*, p. 443.

⁷ *Apologetici Ebonis forma prior*, ed. Albert Werminghoff, MGH, *Concilia*, 2/2, Hannover, Hahn, 1908, 797-798.

⁸ Peter R. McKeon, *op. cit.*, p. 444.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 447.

and helping his imperial friend as envoy, *missus*. He even plays a role in King Harald of Danemark's conversion to Christianity in 826¹⁰. Ebbon began the reconstruction of the old Reims cathedral, receiving from his imperial friend the privilege to use the stones from the city walls¹¹. He was renowned as a man of letters - Flodoard calls him „vir industrius et liberalibus disciplinis eruditus” and his interest in books is evident as he asks different collaborators to write treatises or to send him manuscripts¹².

Even if he usually asked the others to write on various subjects, Ebbon too left us a series of writings, amongst which *Apologeticum Ebbonis*, an attempt to justify his deeds, when he re-occupied the office of bishop¹³. But his name, linked in his time to treason and lack of loyalty, is for us connected with an essential moment in the history of medieval art: the Carolingian Renaissance.

When Charlemagne, king of the francs from 768, starts the conquest of more and more new lands, he is quickly faced with the issue of ruling over peoples who didn't share ethnicity, language or culture. It then becomes crucial for him to find a common element, which at the time can only be religion. Some of his new subjects were pagan, so they had to be christianised, but even among the already christian there were differences in terms of church ritual, but especially in terms of languages. Some were germanic, others were diverging from latin to become the later Romance languages. Therefore the king, crowned in 800 as emperor of a presumed "Roman Empire", which was anything but, channels his efforts into imposing upon all the churches under him the same structure, the same ritual based on the same lithurgical books¹⁴. These books, manuscripts copied after models brought from Rome, are illuminated and form the most important aspect of the cultural movement started by Charlemagne and called the Carolingian Renaissance.

¹⁰ Matthew Bryan Gillis, *Heresy and Dissent in the Carolingian Empire*, p. 55.

¹¹ Flodoardus Remensis, *op.cit.*, II, XIX.

¹² *Ibidem*; Peter R. McKeon, *op. cit.*, p. 438.

¹³ *Apologeticum Ebbonis*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, [https://www.documenta catholicaomnia.eu/02m/08160845,_Ebbo_\(Ebo\)_Rheminensis_Episcopus,_Apologeticum,_MLT.pdf](https://www.documenta catholicaomnia.eu/02m/08160845,_Ebbo_(Ebo)_Rheminensis_Episcopus,_Apologeticum,_MLT.pdf), visited 05.05.2021.

¹⁴ Ian Wood, *Culture*, in Rosamand McKitterick (ed), *The Early Middle Ages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 188.

Before explaining the role played by Ebbon in the imposition of a style which later proved successful just because it was breaking previous conventions, we need to focus momentarily on the manuscript production of this era. These were usually copied in the workshops of some monasteries, at the request of members of the aristocracy, whether clerical or laity. The artisans were travelling around in search of commissions or at the request of those *Maecenas* who were essential in financially supporting their creations. This circulation of craftsmen, following their masters/sponsors around, laid the basis for some of the artistic schools of the time. It must not be forgotten that writing was done on vellum, sheep or cattle skins, and for luxury manuscripts with inks containing gold, silver or purple dye, which were extremely expensive. It is likely that the models used for illustrations came from other books, from their ivory covers, but also from images seen by the illustrators in church interiors in various parts of Europe¹⁵. For this reason, the circulation of painters and of manuscripts, as well as their support by patrons, *Maecenas* of wealth and political influence, are essential in the development of the medieval illuminated art, which really starts to flourish during Charlemagne's reign.

Of course, illuminated manuscripts survived from the late Roman period, the oldest dating from the 3rd-5th centuries. These manuscripts are recopied by carolingian era scribes, leading to the, sometimes quite faithful, reproduction of the existing illuminations. Usually, the manuscripts are quite rare, and as the most used, and thus copied, books in the church are the Gospels, the most important, or sometimes the only, figurative representations are those of Christ and the Apostles¹⁶. The models used by painters (usually people different from the copying scribes) may be late antique manuscripts, Byzantine works (originating via Italy, with a strong Byzantine influence in the North-East around Ravenna or Venice and in the South around Apuglia and Sicily) or works from the British Isles (especially Irish ones). The Irish influence was great in the first part of the 8th century, as seen from the Gospels of the scribe Gundohinus

¹⁵ John Beckwith, *L'Art du Haut Moyen Age*, French translation H el ene Seyr es, Paris, Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 34-36.

¹⁶ Christopher De Hamel, *Scribes and Illuminators*, London, British Museum Press, 1992, p. 4-5.

finished at Vosevium in 754 (year marking, through an interesting coincidence, the starting moment of the Carolingians as monarchs)¹⁷.

After Charlemagne conquers Italy and henceforth comes to Rome more frequently, the illuminations' style changes, the Romano-Byzantine influence becomes dominant, as exemplified by the manuscript called *Charlemagne's Gospel* or *Godescalc's Gospel*¹⁸. Furthermore, the name „Demetrios presbyter“ in the *Coronation Gospel* suggests the presence of Greek painters, brought probably from Italy where the expeditions or the visits by carolingian monarchs are frequent, which could attract to the recently established court of Aachen various Byzantine trained artists¹⁹.

Patron of painters

After Ebbon becomes bishop of Reims, he gathers around him artists who seem to be disciples of the Greeks who illustrated around 800 of the manuscripts of the so-called *Court school* of Charlemagne or the *Aachen school*²⁰. Ebbon is, therefore, that Maecenas or patron who brings a breath of fresh air to the carolingian illustrations from around the 820's. He plays an essential role, because at the time he who ordered an illumination was able to impose many compositional elements, even details of what is to be represented, how, in what colours or proportions.

¹⁷ Lawrence Nees, *The Gundohinus Gospels*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Medieval Academy of America, 1987, p. 214.

¹⁸ John Beckwith, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁹ The *Coronation Gospel*, now in Vienna, was probably made towards the end of the 8th century as it was used during Charlemagne's imperial coronation; see Ingo F. Walther, Norbert Wolf, *Masterpieces of Illumination: Codices Illustrates the World's Most Famous Illuminated Manuscripts 400 to 1600, Köln*, Taschen, 2005, p. 78-79. It is interesting that the theory that Demetrios presbyter was the painter and not the scribe seems to have been confirmed by chemical and biological analyses: Maurizio Aceto, Angelo Agostino, Gaia Fenoglio, Ambra Idone, Fabrizio Crivello, Martina Griesser, Franz Kirchweger, Katharina Uhler, Patricia Roger Puyo, *Analytical investigations on the Coronation Gospels manuscript*, in "Spectrochimica Acta Part A: Molecular and Biomolecular Spectroscopy", 171 (2017), p. 220.

²⁰ Christopher De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, London, Phaidon Press, 1986, p. 48.

The first manuscript, known as *Ebbon's Gospel*, was produced at the Saint-Pierre d'Hautvillers abbey, a secondary seat of the bishopric, probably between 816 and 823²¹. The style of the illuminations seems to fit the description of Ebbon by Charles the Bald, who wrote to the Pope about the *distinction of his spirit, added to the force of his character*²². The faces of the evangelists, although inspired by the *Coronation Gospel*, depart from its classicizing style, suggesting through a vibrant and dynamic movement that the characters are moved by divine inspiration. The clothes build up in an avalanche of overlapping folds, so that each evangelist resembles a white swirl. All of it expresses an intense spiritual life. This capacity of the carolingian artists to imbue their characters with a profound inner life is the great innovation. It is the beginning of a new expressivity which will continue to permeate medieval art²³.

An extremely interesting work, albeit considered a minor one, is the *Bern Physiologus*, a bestiary inspired by antique sources and inspiring, in turn, the later production of similar, very popular, books²⁴.

Further proof of the continuation of Ebbon's school of illuminators can be found in another work, which surpassed at the time the importance of the Gospel. It is the so-called *Utrecht Psalter*, written and illuminated probably also at Hautvillers between 820 and 830, using a quick technique inspired by hellenistic models²⁵.

Each Psalm starts with a landscape composition representing many characters. These are pen-drawn, in a nervous and vibrant style of drawing²⁶. The mountainous space is divided into zones occupied by various characters. Even the ground undulates like the articulations of a giant hand. At the top the Saviour appears amongst angels or sometimes just His hand is

²¹ Peter R. McKeon, *op. cit.*, p. 438.

²² Jean Hubert, Jean Porcher, Wolfgang Fritz Volbach, *L'empire carolingien*, collection L'Univers des Formes, 13, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, p. 100.

²³ André Grabar, Carl Nordenfalk, *Le Grands Siècles de la peinture. Le Haut Moyen Âge. Du quatrième au onzième siècle*, Genève, Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1957, p. 147.

²⁴ *Physiologus Bernensis*, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 318 (<https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/bbb/0318>).

²⁵ Ingo F. Walther, Norbert Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 90. The *Utrecht Psalter* can be now seen online at <https://www.uu.nl/en/utrecht-university-library-special-collections/the-treasury/manuscripts-from-the-treasury/the-utrecht-psalter>, visited 14.06.2021.

²⁶ Ingo F. Walther, Norbert Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 90

visible. At the bottom canyons or deep chasms open up, from which hellish powers rise. On Earth, the chosen people fights the others (*gentiles*) and God joins the fray together with angels to help the chosen and punish the others²⁷.

On the other hand, all seems airy light. The people, standing on tiptoes, assume elegant poses, as if their passion would empty them of any earthly weight. The representations of nature contain idyllic images and a lyrical beauty. These themes, as well as the architectural elements, are borrowed from antiquity, the artist benefitting from earlier paleo-christian models.

The Psalms are difficult to illustrate, containing no narrative elements besides the title which relates to David's history. The images in the *Utrecht Psalter* don't follow in narrative order, but are rather conceived as visual aids to the text: some verbal expressions are picked by the illuminator and turned into pictorial commentary²⁸. In Psalm 73: "grab my right hand", we can actually see the hand of God grabbing the author. Verse 20: "like the dream of the one who awakens" is illustrated with the image of a bed with a sleeping person. Verse 22: "I was like a beast of burden" is accompanied by the drawing of a mare and her foal. This manuscript inspired, in the European space, other types of works, too, such as the ivory plaques used as book covers for *Charles the Bald's Psalter* (produced in Reims or maybe Metz around 860)²⁹. It might also have inspired the so-called *Lothar's crystal* produced probably in Lorraine, around 855)³⁰. Which is more, the influence of artists trained at Reims is present in other manuscripts, produced for Lothar or even Louis the German, in whose lands Ebbon spends his final years³¹.

²⁷ André Grabar, Carl Nordenfalk, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

²⁸ Celia Chazelle, *Archbishops Ebo and Hincmar of Reims and the Utrecht Psalter*, "Speculum", Vol. 72, No. 4, Oct., 1997, p. 1055.

²⁹ *Charles the Bald prayer book cover ivories*, Zurich Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, AG-1311, DIG-3437. For the context of its production and importance, see Riccardo Pizzinato, *Vision and Christomimesis in the Ruler Portrait of the Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram*, in "Gesta", Volume 57, Number 2, Fall 2018, p. 145-170

³⁰ Valerie I.J. Flint, *Susanna and the Lothar Crystal: A Liturgical Perspective*, in "Early Medieval Europe", 4:1, 1995, p. 61-86.

³¹ André Grabar, Carl Nordenfalk, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

Between 1000 and 1640, the *Utrecht Psalter* manuscript resided in England (mentioned around year 1000 at Canterbury Cathedral), where it exerted a lasting influence upon anglo-saxon art. There were 3 copies produced here: the first, *Harley Psalter*, made around 1000, is now in the British Library³². The second, *Eadwine Psalter*, was created between 1155-1170³³. The third, known as the *Anglo-Catalan Psalter* or the *Great Canterbury Psalter*, was illuminated, the first half of it by an English artist around 1180-1190 and the second half by a Catalan one in the 14th century³⁴. Beyond these direct copies, a lot of influences and sources of inspiration can be detected in many other illuminations in the English space³⁵.

Conclusion

Without being an artist himself, Ebbon offered those under his patronage new creative directions, based on his own theological arguments and inspired by his restless spirit, translated for eternity into some of the most remarkable images found in medieval manuscript illuminations. The painters who worked under his supervision manifested an uncommon creativity and had a lasting influence on the later art of illumination, thus contributing to the creation of an original, medieval style of drawing.

³² *British Library Harley MS 603*. More details in Janet Backhouse, D. H. Turner, Leslie Webster, *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art, 966-1066*, British Library, Indiana University Press, 1984, pp. 74-75.

³³ Margaret Gibson, T. A. Heslop, Richard W Pfaff., (Eds.), *The Eadwine Psalter: Text, Image, and Monastic Culture in Twelfth-Century Canterbury*, London and University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992.

³⁴ Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Lat. 8846, <https://manuscrits-france-angleterre.org/view3if/pl/ark:/12148/btv1b10551125c/f2>, visited 18.06.2021.

³⁵ Koert van der Horst, William Noel, Wilhelmina C. M. Wüstefeld, *The Utrecht Psalter in Medieval Art: Picturing the Psalms of David*, Tuurdijk, HES, 1996, p. 234 sqv.