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Byzantine Influences on Gothic Illuminated Manuscripts

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The purpose of this paper is to examine a particular piece of Gothic Art that may stand as an example of the Byzantine influence in the West. Description, style and iconography of the art work will be discussed and a comparison between the particular art work and examples from the Middle Byzantine Art of various media will follow with an emphasis in style.

One of the most significant stylistic influences in Gothic Art and in the West in general, during the late years of Middle Byzantium (1150-1261) took place basically in Italy and Germany. However, the most representative country in Gothic Art and the most original places of the Gothic Art are France and Germany (Demus, 197). The so-called Byzantinizing style takes place in Germany basically in the first half of the 13th century. In Germany, we see astonishing affinities of Venetian Art with German art works of the 13th century. Evidently, the Byzantine influence in the Germany‘s original Gothic style helped her to create its own, such as the zigzag style in the third quarter of the 13th century (Demus, 198). The Byzantine influence in German art finally reached its peak in the third quarter of the 13th century.

The Master of the Berthold Missal (died in 1235) is the painter of a series of missals (liturgical illuminated book) from the Bavarian abbey of Weingarten, Germany. In his Hainricus Missal at the Pierpont Morgan Library, the Master of the Berthold Missal is characterized by his eccentric and impressive style (active between 1220-1230) that incorporates features of expressiveness, sense of tragic as well as sense of humor in a form of parody. These features of style remind us his Byzantine models in his attempt to “out-Byzantine Byzantium”, as Otto Demus claims (Demus, 197).The blend of the styles often make scholars misidentify it even as Romanesque (AVEDA, 2012). The particular illumination we will study is a scene of the Crucifixion that comes from the Hainricus missal, a book that dates c.1217 and it is kept at the Pierpoint Morgan Library in New York (Swarzenski, 82).

The media is tempera on vellum and gold. Jesus Christ is on the cross and on the left is the Virgin Mary, and on the right is Saint John. The virgin with her head inclined and her right foot protruding to the front, with hands touch a cross in a solemn gesture of prayer has a ritualistic expression of sadness, but her insisting, agonizing look strays to her hands isolated. The cross is ornamented in a floral motif that unfolds to the background and frames the scene. Saint John looks upwards at the dead body of Jesus with his hands solemnly crossed. Circular miniatures mark each corner of the picture the one on the right depicting a kneeling angel holding a

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book, and the other three are animal symbols of the Apocalypse. Such are a grotesque bird to the upper left, as (I personally think) those birds of Hieronymus Bosch (e.g. “The Garden of the Earthly Delights”), and a lion and a bovine holding books, both to the bottom left. The plasticity of the bodies and the sobriety of the compositions as well as the play of grotesque details make a contrast and remind us of the same artist’s creation: the Brandenburg Gospels. Drapery is detailed with thick expressive, but elegant lines shadowing the light colors in a contrast. Such characteristics of drapery are similar to those of other illuminations of the Hainricus Missal, like the Byzantine webbed highlights of the folds of drapery in the Canon (picture) (Swarzenski, 83).

Eccentric treatment of the composition causing fear and awe are Gothic characteristics that kept Nordic freshness contracted and paralleled with the Byzantine characteristics of pathos (passion), sobriety and elegance. The symbolism emerges from the New Testament: the narrative of the scene comes from the Gospels and the animal and angel miniatures radiate a mystique from the book of the Apocalypse. The book is the "Theios Logos" (ΘείοςΛόγος=Divine Providence), including the moral teachings of Jesus and the apocalyptic prophesies. The symbols announce in a pictorial style the meaning of the Crucifixion and its soteriological and eschatological character. The praying John is a symbol of devotion and loyalty as described in the Gospels. Mary also expresses a mix of sacred sadness and devotion.

In order to get a complete picture of the particular piece of art and also in order to trace the Byzantine influences that group this work to the Byzantinizing Style of the Gothic Art, we need to compare it with other works in a proper chronological and local framework primarily based on style. I would begin with “a canon page with the Crucifixion, from a sacramentary” which comes from Lower Saxony, Germany, probably from the town of Hildesheim, and dates ca.1160. The medium is tempera and gold leaf on vellum and its size is 30.2x20 cm. It is a part of the collection of Ernst and MartheKofler-Truniger in Lucerne and it is exhibited in the Museum of Fine Arts in Huston, Texas. The Houston leaf marks the early development of art works with Byzantine stylistic influences in Saxony (Evans & Wixom, 475). Jesus is on the cross with the Virgin Mary and Magdalene on each side, like in our work, but with floral decoration in the frame or circular miniatures on each corner. This work is representative of the Saxon style, but our Bavarian piece still has comparable and similar features. According to Jack Schrader, the Virgin’s facial type, and particularly her poise and mantle, are characteristics of the Byzantine Art. However, here the elements are restrained in the smooth and simple planes of drapery and in the strong outline (Evans & Wixom, 476). Strong outline occurs in the case of our work, but the plane is more complicated as there are folds and curves in drapery. The Virgin’s facial type is quite different as she inclines her head (more Byzantine in origin) stairing at her hands in an expressive gesture, while in the Saxon style we have Virgin stairing at Jesus with her head raised upwards and with her hands crossed. Saint John has also different hand gesture and declines his head, though in our work, he does the opposite with his hands crossed on his chest.

The next is a Byzantine icon which is irrelevant to the Western Art and it can help us to see the purely Eastern/Byzantine elements of style in comparison to our Western (Gothic) piece. This “icon with the Annunciation” has also a Crucifixion scene and comes either from Constantinople or probably Mt Sinai, since similar scenes occur in some of the treasures of the Monastery of St Catherine on Mt Sinai in Egypt. The medium is tempera on oil and the work dates late 12th century. Jesus on the cross is sat below a baldachin with angels around, while John inclines his head, like Mary who looks at her right hand, as in our work. However, in our Bavarian work, John does not incline his head, but he stairs at Jesus with his hands crossed on his chest. Here, first the left hand touches the neck and the right touches the cloth in a gesture of nervousness and agony. In this exceptionally sophisticated piece, the icon is remarkable for its saturated golden tonality, erudite forms, and elaborate messages, with the biblical figures around the frames. In the late Komnenian style, which has a dynamic and often mannered mode of painting, linear highlights and shadowy figures appear, as in our work, and Jesus’ head inclines the same way.

Finally, we have an Italian, probably Sicilian, illumination with the Crucifixion on the upper part) and the Anastasis (Resurrection) on the lower part. The illumination appears on a page that belongs to a New Testament dating ca.1200 and it is tempera on vellum. The size of the illumination is 24.7x15.8 cm and the piece is found in the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, California. Although it is Italian and not from a country directly related to the Gothic style, but rather it has a Romanesque influence, this is a

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picture with circular miniatures and frame ornamentation. With prophets depicted that remind us the prophetic meanings of the animal depictions in the Bavarian piece. The Virgin stairs in agony at Jesus' nailed feet, just like John does in agony, though our Virgin seems to stair only at her hair in aew and puzzlement. Jesus' poise as his body is twisted to the right (left as we see it), alike the Bavarian. The drapery has Nordic features as it best corresponds to illuminations of English manuscripts. The ornamentation has meanders, geometric and perplexed floral patterns, as the Byzantine mosaics, showing a Greek and Eastern influence, and we see also a pattern of moon and sun above Jesus, unlike the Bavarian. The full-page depiction, as our Bavarian piece, is a characteristic of the missals.

In conclusion, we see that Byzantine influence is apparent in this Crucifixion scene from the Hainricus Missal of the Master of the Berthold Missal,. However, the painter keeps his Nordic and Gothic elements. This blend of styles makes some scholars to consider it Romaneaque (AVEDA, 2012). That comes int contrast with the Byzantine features, which are more like an adaptation to the Gothic Art rather than totally Byzantine in comparison to the variety of works we examined.

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