



ORNAMENT AND STATUS: THREE EARLY PALAEOLOGAN ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

ORNAMENTO Y ESTATUS: TRES MANUSCRITOS ILUMINADOS DEL PERÍODO PALEÓLOGO TEMPRANO

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Abstract

The ‘Vatican Epithalamion’ (BAV Vat. gr. 1851) was recently dated by Peter Schreiner to 1271 or 1272. In this paper, I present an additional argument for his dating by comparing the Epithalamion’s zoomorphic initial letters with those found in two other codices datable to the reign of Michael VIII Palaeologus: a Gospelbook (Mount Athos, Iviron Monastery, 5) and a Psalter (Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchal Library, Παναγίου Τάφου 51). This comparison suggests also that zoomorphic ornament functioned at the time as a marker of social status.

Keywords: Vatican Epithalamion - Palaeography - Illuminated Manuscripts

Resumen

El ‘Epithalamion Vaticano’ (BAV Vat. gr. 1851) ha sido ahora fechado por Peter Schreiner en 1271 o 1272. En este artículo presentamos un argumento adicional para su datación comparando las letras iniciales zoomorfas del Epithalamion con las encontradas en otros dos códices fechables en el reinado de Miguel VIII Paleólogo: un libro del Evangelio (Monte Athos, Monasterio de Iviron, 5) y un Salterio (Jerusalén, Biblioteca Patriarcal Griega, Παναγίου Τάφου 51). Esta comparación sugiere también que el ornamento zoomorfo funcionó en ese momento como un marcador de estatus social.

Palabras clave: Epithalamion Vaticano - Paleografía - Manuscritos iluminados

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The so-called ‘Vatican Epithalamion’ is an illustrated Greek poem preserved in a single copy, BAV Vat. gr. 1851.¹ Many leaves, including the title page, have been lost, so that just a hundred and nine verses of text and seven figural illustrations remain. They tell, in words and pictures, of a foreign princess arriving by ship at Constantinople in order to wed the emperor’s son and heir. The date when this occurred cannot be easily determined because no person is ever named in the manuscript. Even so, the poem contains enough detail for Peter Schreiner to have argued that it must refer to the marriage of Anna (PLP 21348) with Andronicus Palaeologus (PLP 21436) circa 1271–1272 (the exact year is uncertain).² Schreiner’s dating is supported by the text’s zoomorphic ornament, which can be usefully compared to that in two other well-known codices from the early Palaeologan period.³ The comparison also suggests that such ornament marked the social status of those who commissioned illuminated books.

Apart from the figural miniatures, the painted decoration in Vat. gr. 1851 consists at present of five initial letters: X on f. 1v, M on f. 3r, E on f. 4r, Π on f. 6r, Ω on f. 7v.⁴ Two more, now missing, have left offsets in the upper right-hand corners of the pages they once faced, where traces from of an M (f. 3r) and an O (f. 5r) remain. There was also a T in the upper left-hand corner of the recto side of a lost leaf which preceded f. 8.⁵ I cannot make good sense of the faint traces from that T, but it was clearly zoomorphic. The missing M contained two

¹ *Diktyon* 68480. A digital reproduction of this manuscript is available on-line at https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1851.

² Schreiner 2019. This article reviews all earlier studies of the Vatican manuscript, which has been variously dated to the late twelfth, late thirteenth, or mid-fourteenth centuries. In favour of a twelfth-century dating see most recently Pérez Martín 2019.

³ On the Palaeologan date of these two manuscripts, see notes 7, 8, and 10 below.

⁴ There are also six gilded (rather than painted) initial letters on ff. 2r, 4v, 5r, 5v, 8r, 8v. One more was present on the now-lost page preceding f. 8r. These are not considered here because their shapes are relatively simple and thus not very characteristic.

⁵ The ornamented initials were first described by Strzygowski 1901 and studied in detail by Iacobini 1995, 369–373, 384–386, 408–409. These two publications remain fundamental.

addorsed hounds leaning on vertical plant-stems. The O seems to have been a griffin biting its tail. X is formed by the intersecting bodies of a lioness and a cheetah. M is an eagle with open wings. For the E, a griffin turns its head backwards, raises its tail, and spreads one of its wings sideways. Π is a hound resting on all fours, its head and tail bent down. Ω consists of two hounds with their front paws raised and their tails intertwined.

In general, the text in the Vatican manuscript is neatly segmented: each fifteenth-syllable verse takes up exactly two lines and always ends with a large, red high point. The painted initials serve essentially as paragraph marks: X follows the words ‘written in golden ink, the message ran as follows;’ Ω signals the narrative transition ‘so when a message of this sort came to the mighty ruler,’ etc.⁶ These were added after the book had received its figural miniatures: on f. 6r, part of the finished picture had to be scraped off in order to make room for a large Π. Initials and miniatures are doubtless not the work of a single person: in the former, details are crisply defined with thin black lines, while the latter are painted with a thick brush in a somewhat ‘blurred’ manner. Several artists then – one or more illustrators and one decorator – worked on Vat. gr. 1851.

The same decorator evidently embellished a Gospel book (Mount Athos, Iviron Monastery, 5)⁷ and a Psalter (Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchal Library, Παναγιῶν Τάφον 51 with Saint Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Gr. 273 and Gr. 274)⁸ where extremely similar lionesses, cheetahs, and hounds occur (Figs. 1–4).⁹ The handwriting in these two manuscripts differs, and neither hand is identical with the one that wrote Vat. gr. 1851. It is safe to assume that the various people involved in the production of the three volumes collaborated, because nothing suggests that ornament was added long after the text had been copied. The three scribes and the decorator must have worked within easy reach of one another. Given the

⁶ I have translated these two passages myself. The Greek text of the poem was most recently printed in Schreiner 2019, 127-130. (Caroline Cupane has now prepared a new, improved edition, which will soon appear in print). This is followed by a German translation: *ibid.*, 131-134. There is a full English translation in Hilsdale 2005, *passim*.

⁷ *Diktyon* 23602: Pelekanidis et al. 1975, 34-53 and 296-303; Galavaris 2002, 51-61, 124; Maxwell 2014, 105-144 with pls xxx-xxxii and figs 15-25.

⁸ *Diktyon* 35288, 57345, and 57346: Cutler 1984, 42-43, 45-46, 170-171, 174-175 (cat. 25 and 28); Vocotopoulos 2003, 74-77 (cat. 17). A digital reproduction of the main (Jerusalem) part of this manuscript is available on-line at www.loc.gov/item/00279389724-jo/ Petrop. gr. 273, a detached fragment, was originally located after f. 321 of the Jerusalem manuscript. Petrop. gr. 274, also a detached fragment, was originally located before f. 322 of the Jerusalem manuscript.

⁹ Iacobini 1995, 371-373, 408-409 discusses these and some further parallels.

demonstrably imperial provenance of Vat. gr. 1851, it is most probable that all four of them resided in Constantinople.

Let us now look at the aforesaid Gospel and Psalter in some detail. It is impossible to say for how long their decorator remained active and whether he adhered to the same painting style throughout his career. Even so, the two books are *prima facie* likely to be roughly contemporary with Vat. gr. 1851 and thus, to date from Michael VIII's reign (1259–1282).¹⁰ They, too, have figural miniatures, including in both cases a portrait of the manuscript's commissioner. (Just as in Vat. gr. 1851, these figural miniatures are not by the artist who executed the manuscripts' ornamental decoration.)

At present the leaves in the Gospel book are obviously out of order, since the image of the evangelist Matthew which once faced the beginning of Matthew's Gospel is now bound at the end of the book as f. 458. The miniature occupies the verso side of this leaf, while the recto is blank. This is preceded by two leaves (ff. 456–457) which must initially have formed a sort of pictorial preface to all four Gospels.¹¹ Fol. 457v shows, in two scenes, Abraham's reception of the three angels (Genesis 18:1–22) who stand for the Holy Trinity. The miniatures on ff. 456v–457r, which were once the very first in the manuscript, feature the portrait that interests us:¹² the Virgin and St John Chrysostom bring before an enthroned Christ – just as courtiers might bring petitioners before the emperor – a bareheaded, bearded man (Figs 5–6).¹³ Mary grasps the wrist of his right hand,¹⁴ while in his left he holds a codex evidently identical with the codex where this very picture is found (the image is self-referential). The letters Ιω are written above his head. Since Ἰωάννης/John is a common name, the man cannot be identified with precision, but his clothes indicate his social rank. He wears a long blue tunic (καββάδιον) with conspicuous golden bands across the sleeves.¹⁵ The exact same attire is seen

¹⁰ On the dating of the Ivron Gospel, see Maxwell 2014, 148–154 (review of the historiography) and 215. The Ivron manuscript served as a model for another illustrated Gospel book, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Grec 54 (*Diktyon* 49615), which Maxwell dates ca. 1265–1282. It follows that the Ivron Gospel cannot itself be later than 1282. Incidentally, the two miniatures listed by Maxwell 2014, 148 under no. 7 are now Athens, Byzantine and Christian Museum, BXM 1614 and 1615 (*Diktyon* 76002 and 76003): Konstantinos et al. 2004, 379. Both are, in my opinion, twentieth-century forgeries.

¹¹ According to Soteroudes 1998, 8, ff. 456–457 form a binion, while f. 458 is a singleton. The miniatures are discussed most recently in Maxwell 2014, 109 n.37.

¹² On this composition and the accompanying inscriptions see Spatharakis 1976, 84–87; Rhoby and Stefec 2018, 207–209 (cat. GR28–GR29).

¹³ It is not true, as Maxwell says (loc. cit.), that the man's clothing and face have been overpainted. On the use of a different stylistic mode for portraying living persons in Byzantine art see Millet 1911 and Kitzinger 1963.

¹⁴ On this gesture see Loeschke 1971.

¹⁵ On these *tiraz*-like bands see Parani 2007, 110 n.52.

in an illustration of Vat. gr. 1851 (Fig. 7). The meaning of the scene shown there is uncertain,¹⁶ but the person who wears John's tunic must in any case be a court dignitary: his clothing is of the same violet (ὀξύ) colour as that of the emperor beside whom he stands. According to Pseudo-Codinus, red or violet καββάδια were worn by despots, who held the highest position in the court hierarchy.¹⁷ The anonymous man's red hat may well be the σκιάδιον that Codinus also mentions.¹⁸ John in the Gospel book, on the other hand, approaches Christ bareheaded. The blue colour of his tunic is uncommon and perhaps corresponds to the ἡεράνεον prescribed by Codinus in case of mourning: the bereaved 'wears black (μέλανα) outside, but when he performs *proskynesis* to the emperor, he wears blue (ἡεράνεα). For it is not permitted to anyone to wear black in the palace'.¹⁹

The corresponding miniature in the Psalter has now been removed from its parent volume, where it originally faced the beginning of the biblical Odes (Fig. 8).²⁰ In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was not unprecedented for Ode frontispieces to double as donor portraits (Fig. 9).²¹ Unfortunately, this particular image has been largely defaced. Its only intact part shows how the Virgin Mary, portrayed half-length in heaven, receives a rolled-up scroll from the hand of a full-length standing figure. Normally the Mother of God takes central place in such compositions (Fig. 9), and it is rather exceptional that she has ceded the stage here to another person. That person is positively a woman, since the bright red tunic seen (on the side closer to the viewer) under her cloak has the extremely wide and extremely long sleeves worn by ladies in several illustrations of Vat. gr. 1851 (ff. 3v, 6r, 7r). The large roundels on the front of this tunic resemble those on the bride's dress in the Vaticanus (ff. 3v, 6r). The lady in the Psalter also wears peal-studded shoes. She must be an empress, since only royalty could have been represented so prominently in a picture of this kind. The monk kneeling at her feet, whose figure is almost fully rubbed off, might perhaps have been her fa-

¹⁶ See most recently Tsamakda 2023, with a review of the earlier literature (I thank Prof. Tsamakda for sending me the text of her study prior to its publication). According to Spatharakis 1976, 228: 'A herald, depicted much smaller than the imperial family, reads the message to the people announcing the betrothal of the young prince.' All that matters in the context of my article is the clothing of this man, who is standing on the emperor's right. I am not suggesting that this figure portrays the person who commissioned the Vatican manuscript.

¹⁷ Macrides et al. 2013, 26-27, 42-43.

¹⁸ Macrides et al. 2013, 40-41; cf. *ibid.*, 35n.12.

¹⁹ Macrides et al. 2013, 264-265.

²⁰ *Diktyon* 57346, Saint Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Gr. 274, which is a single leaf: Cutler 1984, 175 (fig. 157) and 45 (description). The other, originally recto, side of the leaf carries an illustration to Psalm 151.

²¹ Cf. Cutler 1984, figs 152, 348, 411. In the last case (Athens, Benaki Museum, Μπ. 68), the miniature on f.175v originally faced Ode I on f. 178r (the intervening ff. 176-177 were added in the late thirteenth century).

ther-confessor, as well as the manuscript's donor or original owner.²² He holds up a rectangular object, now extremely abraded, which probably stands for the book itself. The inscription which identifies the lady has been erased, but its first line seems to read Εὐδο. On this basis, she could be identified with Michael VIII's daughter Eudocia Palaeologina Comnene (PLP 12064), Empress of Trebizond from 1282 or so till 1297.²³

A single decorator, then, worked on three codices destined for the cream of Constantinopolitan society. With this in mind, we can return to the zoomorphic initials in Vat. gr. 1851. These do not form supplementary illustrations to the text, but serve, rather, as elaborate punctuation marks. The choice of animals is meaningful inasmuch as hounds and cheetahs were trained for hunting (note how the artist shows them wearing collars) and their presence thus refers to a distinctly aristocratic pastime.²⁴ The eagle and griffins, on the other hand, were part of the ornamental vocabulary of luxury arts and must have alluded, in a general sense, to royalty.²⁵ The conspicuous decoration of the initial letters thus betokened membership of a small, exclusive social elite.

It has been rightly pointed out that the painted initials in Vat. gr. 1851 resemble similar specimens from mid-twelfth century Constantinople (figs. 3 and 10).²⁶ These earlier, Comnenian ornamented letters also served as a mark of distinction among those who could afford to commission illuminated books at the time.²⁷ Their revival in the reign of Michael VIII is yet another aspect of that programmatic reanimation of the past which scholars term 'Palaeologan renaissance'.²⁸ But the fashion for zoomorphic book ornament did not continue under Michael's successor Andronicus II (Fig. 11).²⁹ Athanasius I, whom that emperor appointed

²² It is unlikely that the miniature was added to the book at a later date, as Cutler assumes (45). If it were a later addition, it would have been tipped in on a separate parchment leaf, rather than being painted on the back side of one of the book's original illustrations.

²³ A 'most pious empress Eudocia' is also portrayed next to St John Chrysostom in an as-yet-unpublished prayer scroll discovered some time ago by Prof. Leslie Brubaker.

²⁴ On hounds see Rhoby 2018; on cheetahs (πάρδοι) see Nicholas 1999 and Macrides et al. 2013, 269 n.786.

²⁵ For example, the inventory of the Xylourgou Monastery from AD 1142 lists 'a high-quality silk cloth with griffins' (βλάτιον καταβλάτιον ἔχον γρύψους) and 'other silk cloths with double eagles' (ἑτέρα βλάτια ἔχοντα ἀετοὺς διπλοῦς): see *ByzAD*. On griffins see also Ćurčić 1995.

²⁶ Iacobini 1995, 372, 385-386, 408-409. The resemblance, however, is not so close as to warrant a twelfth-century date for Vat. gr. 1851.

²⁷ Anderson 1991, 96-100.

²⁸ On parallel developments in figural painting and in calligraphy see, respectively, Weitzmann 1957 and Prato 1979. I only cite these two pioneering studies; the subsequent bibliography is vast.

²⁹ Constantinopolitan book illumination in the 1280s and 1290s is represented by the so-called 'Palaeologina group'. Its ornament, while lavish, is entirely non-figural. For examples see Buchthal and Belting 1978; Maxwell 1983; Nelson and Lowden 1991.

in 1289 Patriarch of Constantinople, strove for thoroughgoing reform of society based on Christian principles.³⁰ It is quite likely that in the newly austere moral climate, small paintings of griffins, hounds, and cheetahs came to be looked on as frivolous.

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³⁰ Boojamra 1993.

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FIGURES

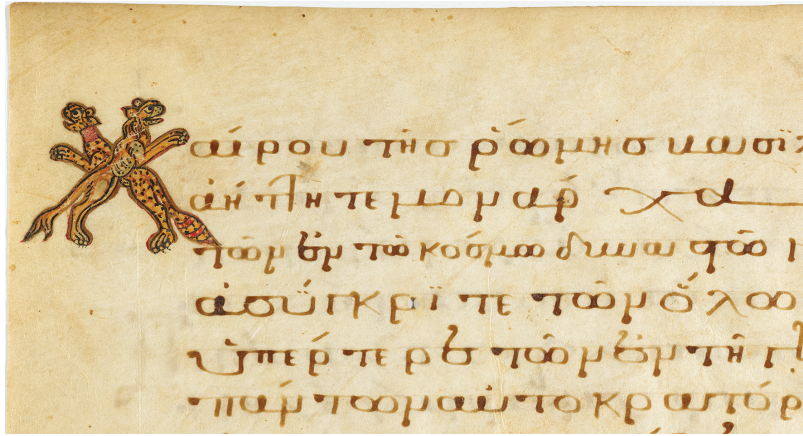


Fig. 1. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1851, f. 1v, detail (photo: library)



Fig. 2. Mount Athos, Iviron Monastery, 5, f. 137r, detail (photo: Pelekanidis et al. 1975, 38) Fig. 3. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1851, f. 7v, detail (photo: library)

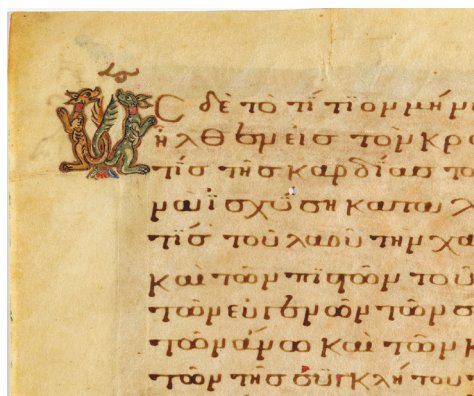


Fig. 4. Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchal Library, Παναγίου Τάφου 51, f. 109r (photo: Huber 1980, 41)



Fig. 5. Mount Athos, Iviron Monastery, 5, f. 456v (photo: monastery)



Fig. 6. Mount Athos, Iviron Monastery, 5, f. 457r (photo: monastery)



Fig. 7. Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1851, f. 7r, detail (photo: library)



Fig. 8. Saint Petersburg, National Library of Russia, Gr. 274, side A (photo: library)



Fig. 9. Athens, Benaki Museum, Μπ. 68, f. 175v (photo: museum)



Fig. 10. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gr. 1208, f. 160v, detail (photo: library)



Fig. 11. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Gr. 21, f. 143r (photo: library)