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Materiality Analysis

A Case Study of the *Utrecht Psalter*: Proving Charlemagne's Failure through Materiality

"Though not profound, Charlemagne's Carolingian Renaissance was important as it was an attempt to unify Western European Culture, using learning and literature as integrating agents," said Gabrielle Spiegel, a Johns Hopkins Professor and Fellow of the Medieval Academy, in a lecture that I recently attended. Charlemagne, by his own evaluation, might not have succeeded on this front. And yet, the renaissance he inspired nurtured cultural growth, which arguably laid the foundation for the two subsequent "renaissances" in the middle ages. Despite the evidence that the Carolingian Renaissance was not successful in terms of homogenizing culture, there is plainly something in some of its works that initiates intimate expression and engagement (Spiegel). This quality, I believe, is the chief aim of art. Manifested in the Utrecht Psalter, this quality, many academics contend, makes it the most salient piece of the era ("The Utrecht Psalter"). This essay will trace a coherent logical progression from the text's construction, to its peculiar style, and, finally, to its content by considering its size, binding, script, illustrations, and text respectively. In doing so, I hope to characterize high Carolingian art, epitomized in this psalter, as truly masterful. Finally, I will argue that medieval Europe during Charlemagne's rule was built on a contradiction: for a brief time, society had uncovered a technique to cultivate a unified and sophisticated Western European culture, but the society had not yet changed to reflect this fact.

To begin this undertaking, let us consider the psalter's anatomy, its size and binding. It is useful to start with size, because, as we discussed in class, manuscript size is a metric by which modern scholars can deduce its purpose (Bledsoe). This psalter, measuring thirteen inches vertically and ten horizontally, would have been large enough for a sizable group to read it ("The Utrecht Psalter"). With its size in mind, I would argue that this psalter was most likely used as a central text of worship. Though it may seem trivial, binding is undeniably another fundamental aspect of a manuscript capable of telling us a great deal about a text. If a manuscript is rebound, we can infer that it must have been of great value, taking into account the extreme difficulty and cost of re-binding a book far older than the person who would have actually deconstructed and then re-assembled it (Bledsoe). K van der Horst notes that "[s]ometime between 1590 and 1620 [the psalter] was . . . rebound" (Horst 170). The continued interest in preserving the psalter, I would then extrapolate, shows that those who called for its rebinding considered it immensely valuable. The material elements of this psalter suggest it served a highly important liturgical function. But other material elements, too, can tell us a great deal about this manuscript.

There must exist some reason, in addition to its anatomy, that explains why the *Utrecht* is among the most venerated texts produced during the Carolingian Renaissance. In her lecture, Professor Spiegel characterized the cultural development that Charlemagne spearheaded, arguing that it was "fundamentally a grammatical renaissance." Specifically, a linguistic reconstruction occurred, which yielded a "standardized form of medieval Latin" and Carolingian minuscule, a knockoff of Roman majuscule (Spiegel). Valuable religious texts fashioned during this time were almost exclusively copied in the written style of choice: minuscule. This psalter, however, does not fit into that paradigm. Lisa Bessette and her colleagues describe this thought-provoking discontinuity regarding the text's script. In contrast to practically all other manuscripts from the Carolingian era, this psalter "displays . . . several types of script, all with origins in classical and late antique texts" (Bessette, Holcomb, 9). Akin to how present day scholars often employ Latin phrases to foster ethos, authors of many luxury manuscripts from the Carolingian Renaissance "use [classical script] for headings or for short passages of text" (Bessette, Holcomb, 9). However, it was unheard of to solely write in classical script, much like modern scholars do not right exclusively in Latin. Why, then, does a text so central to the period deviate from the cultural model promoted at the time? To resolve this logical inconsistency, I will summarize Lisa Bessette and her colleague's hypothesis regarding the impetus for the use of outdated script with which I agree: the utilization of archaic script demonstrates its creator's mastery as well as his or her proficiency with antiquated techniques, distinguishing the *Utrecht* from other great manuscripts (Bessette, Holcomb, 9). In other words, the psalter's creator established its salience by virtue of complexity. A paleographical and linguistic analysis of the text provides insight into the intentions of its design, which seem to clash with Charlemagne's vision of a homogenous, sophisticated culture.

Though not a form of material analysis, a careful examination of the actual stuff on the pages, the content and illustrations, is a fundamental in the study any manuscript. To fully develop my argument, then, I will deviate from a material analysis and employ critical analysis, for resigning myself to the former style would be restrictive. In doing so, I hope to use the content to validate the conclusions I have drawn from considering the psalter's materiality. To begin my analysis, I will focus on the artist's distinct decisions in the conception of the psalter and the interplay between text and image that pervades the manuscript. Let us consider Psalm One and the illustrations accompanying it in the psalter. In short, the Psalm depicts a man that "hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly," who, in contrast to "the wicked," cherishes "[the tree's] fruit" and "shall prosper" due to his religious vitality (Douay-Rheims Bible, Psalms. 1. 1-5). This miniature exemplum establishes the binary ethical code, based on the diametrically opposed forces of good and evil, that defines the Judeo-Christian tradition. The accompanying image is dynamic and powerful, depicting the eternal satisfaction achieved by faithfully practicing Christianity as well as the eternal suffering earned by refusing God's guidance. The artist contributes to the dichotomy between good and evil by placing the sinners beneath the pious, stressing the dire importance of adhering to Christian doctrine. Furthermore, the artist sketches "the dust," or the chafe enveloping the sinner, which stands in stark contrast to the "tree which is planted near the running waters" that provides the pious with interminable delight (Douay-Rheims Bible, Psalms. 1. 1-5). This visual contrast further solidifies the psalm's simple yet highly important moral; that evil is ubiquitous, and, as a result, there exists a perpetual necessity to embrace morality and deny innate sinful impulses. It is not merely the harmonious relationship between image and text that makes the *Utrecht* so impactful. Furthermore, I would argue that the sheer quality of the art, which allows the artist to engage the viewer despite the distinct lack of narrative, is a key factor that positions the text amongst the most prominent in the Carolingian Renaissance ("The Utrecht Psalter"). The artist's masterful penmanship and illustration technique in addition to his or her careful consideration of the relationship between text and the image separate this manuscript from other notable examples, especially those from the same period. Ironically, the most celebrated artistic achievement conceived during Charlemagne's period of cultural development, the Utrecht Psalter, exemplifies his failure to unify a refined Western European culture.

Basically, what proves most interesting about a close examination of the materiality of the *Utrecht Psalter* is the unlikely stylistic regression that was completely unbefitting to those who marshalled enormous, dynamic effort to advance cultural synthesis and growth. The psalter's intentionally incongruous use of script is nothing short of ironic: that the psalter created so exquisitely by artists of the Carolingian Renaissance would serve to inhibit Charlemagne's efforts to institutionalize linguistic and grammatical norms. The psalter not only demonstrates Charlemagne's failure to modern scholars, but also contributed to it. Reason being, the psalter's prominence, rooted in its liturgical usage, coupled with its unique script position the text as the cardinal text of the period. The manuscript's awe-inspiring illustrations also lend themselves to prominence. Likewise, the artist's creativity allowed him or her to intertwine text and image with an arrestingly high level of success, an unlikely feat given a psalm's distinct lack of plot—another source of the text's distinction. With its status in mind, there is no confusion as to how this single text hindered Charlemagne's goal of cultural unification. As the emperor himself once proclaimed, "to speak another language is to possess another soul" (Shwayder). By that standard, Charlemagne's efforts to unify Western European Culture, the soul of her people, were ineffectual and futile, for two souls were conceived rather than one.

Reflection

When I first wrote my materiality analysis of the Utrecht Psalter, I included a section of critical analysis. Needing to cut out a paragraph in order to meet the assignment's page limit, I removed the section of critical analysis, because it is only tangentially related to a *material analysis*. One of my comments suggested that I consider including a discussion of image as a means of further understanding the text and developing my central argument. Therefore, given the room to expand my paper, I decided that combining my material analysis, which was resolute and persuasive in and of itself, with a section concerned with the manuscript's text and images would only strengthen an already strong argument. In sum, I examined the interplay between text and image and the art's sheer excellence, ultimately concluding that the actual stuff on the pages, much like the psalter's materiality, exalt the manuscript to a position of eminence. This significant position is central to my argument, which maintains that Charlemagne's goal of cultural refinement and unification was an utter failure, given the psalter's deviation from and position within Charlemagne's vision. In order ensure a seamless integration of my new final body paragraph, I had to briefly expand both the introductory and concluding paragraphs.

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