

Scribes as Artists

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The fascinating subject of production of medieval manuscripts raises the question of “who done it”, which often puzzles manuscript scholars. However, instead of regarding a manuscript in its entirety — considering its codicology, text, palaeography and decoration, scholars tend to be great experts in one or two aspects, leaving the rest for other experts.

The deepest rift is between palaeographers and art historians, two disciplines which are closely related and interwoven on the written and illuminated page, but disconnected in scholarship.

Not entirely disconnected, however, because in the age of facsimiles all collaborate: palaeographers deal with the scribes and art historians deal with the artists. This means that scholars assume *a priori* that the people who produced the manuscripts were likewise divided into two groups: those who copy the text and those who illuminate it. Thus the clear cut division between experts undermines our ability to prove that in some cases scribes were also artists.

The problem of identifying a scribe who is also an artist becomes more acute in manuscripts which lack colophons. The key to the solution is to consider the manuscript’s codicology, text, palaeography and illumination and their interrelations, and thereby unravel the division of labour between the people who produced it.

In an example of a Hebrew prayer book from Franconia, Germany, of c. 1310¹, the scribe has adorned his display script with dragons, as seen especially in the ascender of the letter *lamed* (fol. 48v — fig. 1). Once the scribe has divulged his style of drawing, it is possible to recognise his dragons and other motifs anywhere else in the manuscript.

Sometimes, however, palaeographical evidence shows that three or even four scribes are involved: the scribe who wrote the text, another who vocalised it, a third who wrote a commentary and a fourth who wrote in micrography the *masorah*². One example in a Hebrew Pentateuch of c. 1300 from Franconia, Germany, shows Jonah praying in the mouth of the big fish, outlined by the micrography script of the masorater, who has written the *masorah* text at the bottom of the page (fol. 292r — fig. 2)³. Since all illustrations in the manuscript were similarly done, we may regard the masorater as the artist of this Pentateuch.

An interesting example which demonstrates how a text scribe intervenes in the work of an artist, is found in the large prayer book known as the Worms Mahzor from Würzburg, written according to the colophons by the scribe Simha bar Judah in 1272⁴.

The opening prayer for the special *Shabbat Shkalim* (fol. 1v — fig. 3) is decorated with an arch done mainly in pen-work, in contrast to the use of gold and colour application with highlights in the arch

¹ London, British Library, Add. 16916.

² The eighth-century tradition of spelling and grammar of the Bible; see Encyclopaedia Judaica XVI (1971) 1402 ff. See also L. AVRIN, Hebrew Micrography. One Thousand Years of Art in Script. Jerusalem 1981.

³ London, British Library, Add. 21160. See S. FERBER, Micrography: a Jewish Art form. *Journal of Jewish Art* 3/4 (1977) 12–24, fig. 4.

⁴ Jerusalem, Jewish National and University Library, Heb. 4° 781/1. M. BEIT-ARIE (Ed.), Worms Mahzor. Introductory volume to facsimile. Vaduz–Jerusalem–London 1985.

decorating the opening prayers to Passover (fol. 48v — fig. 4). Looking closely, there is a marked difference in the articulation of leaves and their lobes in the scrolls which decorate each arch, and in the rendering of the lions which support the arches.

On the other hand, the pen-drawn lion, which supports the arch of the opening prayer (fol. 1v — fig. 3), resembles two lions which are closely connected with the text. One is enclosed within the display letter *Mem* of a prayer for Passover, which was written by Simhah the scribe (fol. 66r — fig. 5); a similar one separates the opening words to a prayer for Pentecost, also written by this scribe (fol. 113r — fig. 6). These and other examples suggest, that although most of the decoration was done by someone we may call an artist, the front page of the manuscript was decorated by Simhah the scribe.

To arrive to this conclusion the palaeography of the manuscript was carefully studied to check whether one or more scribes have written the text; the style of decoration was analysed to determine how many hands were involved; the relationship between text and decoration was examined to see how closely they are interwoven; and finally, how it all fits with the codicology, so that the roll of each person and the sequence of work between them can be established.

There are neither rules nor short cuts regarding such a study because each manuscript is unique in its making. Nevertheless, sometimes conclusions regarding one manuscript are corroborated by the study of other manuscripts produced in the same scriptorium or workshop. An example is the twelfth-century scriptorium in Hamersleben, an Augustinian monastery in north-eastern Germany⁵.

The study of the Hamersleben Bible of c. 1170–1175⁶, has revealed two hands: Scribe A, who wrote 33 quires (fols. 1r–247v), and Scribe B who wrote the last 5 quires of the book of Chronicles (248r–281v). However, although writing less, Scribe B was responsible for the correction of the entire text, whether written by himself or by Scribe A. Moreover, though each scribe wrote in turn the explicits and incipits in display script, Scribe B intervened in Scribe A's work, most notably by writing the opening word of Genesis (*In principio* (fol. 6v). This he wrote in alternating red and green, an unusual combination which he used also at the end of the manuscript, for the opening word of Chronicles (*Confortatus* (fol. 264v)⁷.

Why should Scribe B intervene in the display script of Scribe A, especially at the beginning of the manuscript, unless he was responsible not only for the correction of the text but also for its aesthetic aspect? Analysis of style has shown that the entire manuscript was decorated by one hand. How can this hand be identified?

Examining the relationship between each decorated initial and its attached verse written in built-up letters, it seems that Scribe A wrote the opening verses while he copied the text, but the decoration was drawn later, in the space he allocated for it. On the other hand, since the built-up letters of Scribe B conform to the shape of the decorated initial, it means that the decoration was done after he wrote the text and before he wrote the built-up letters. In other words, the decoration is part of the sequence of work of Scribe B.

Another observation which shows the close connection between Scribe B and the decoration is the historiated initial which depicts King Solomon holding a scroll (fol. 224a verso)⁸. Although the text was written by Scribe A, the scroll is inscribed by Scribe B (*Sentite de domino in bonitate*; Wis. 1:1). Why should Scribe B intervene in Scribe A's quires, unless he was closely linked with the decoration?

In the title page of the Bible (fol. 1)⁹, the large figure of St. Pancras is standing between two church towers, surrounded by Augustinian canons. According to an inscription added in the fifteenth century, this book belonged to the monastery of St. Pancras in Hamersleben in the diocese of Hal-

⁵ A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, *Scriptoria in Medieval Saxony: St. Pancras in Hamersleben*, Wiesbaden 2004.

⁶ Halberstadt, Cathedral Treasury of St. Stephen, Inv. No. 472 and Halberstadt, Historisches Archiv, Gymnasialbibliothek; M2. A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5) 22–40, 186–192.

⁷ A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5), figs. 10, 19.

⁸ Torn single page in Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, No. 4480. A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5), fig. 18.

⁹ A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5), fig. 1.

berstadt. A closer look reveals that several of the figures are identified by name: *Thietmarus primus praepositus* (1108–1138); *Godfridus* (after 1138); *Petrus praepositus* (until 1146); *Sifridus praepositus* (1146–1149); *Vulferus* (1159); and *Bernardus* (1170–1175). These names and the dedication to St. Pancras which is held by two prostrated canons, as well as the beginnings of the Gospels on the right, were written by no other than Scribe B.

Scribe B's script which conforms to the decorated initials, his intervention in writing opening verses in Scribe A's quires, and the inscriptions he wrote in the King Solomon initial and the title page, all these show that Scribe B was closely linked with the decoration. We may thus conclude that Scribe B, besides writing 5 quires of text and correcting all of it, was also involved with its decoration.

Indeed, support for this conclusion can be found in three other manuscripts which were produced in the scriptorium of Hamersleben.

In a Psalter of c. 1175¹⁰ Scribe B has written and corrected the entire text, and the style of decoration is similar to that of the Bible. Comparing, for example, King David in the Psalter (fol. 30v) with King Solomon in the Bible (fol. 26v)¹¹, not only the similar posture should be noted but also the figure style: the hand which holds the orb, the facial features and their shading.

Scribe B has written and corrected another manuscript, a Gospel book of c. 1178 now divided between two libraries. The Gospels of SS. Matthew and Mark are housed in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York (M.565), and the Gospels of SS. Luke and John are in the British Library in London (Add. 27926)¹². No other contemporary hand appears in this manuscript and the style of decoration is similar to that in the Bible and the Psalter. As an example we can compare the Virgins in the Psalter (fol. 46v) with the Seven Churches seated with St. John in the London manuscript (fol. 28)¹³. The similarity in style of the drapery, the movements of hands and the facial features with their shading should be noted.

The last manuscript, which was produced by Scribe B, is another Gospel book of c. 1180–1185, which once belonged to the Sächsische Landesbibliothek in Dresden (A94). I was lucky to identify the manuscript in Moscow with the help of Dr. Inna Mokretsova, who patiently restored it after it was badly damaged during the Second World War. The manuscript is housed today in Moscow¹⁴.

The style of decoration in this manuscript resembles that in the Morgan-British Library Gospels as can be seen if we compare, for example, the two depictions of St. John and the Seven Churches¹⁵. Indeed, it was done by the same hand which has decorated the Bible, the Psalter and the Morgan-British Library Gospels. In all four manuscripts the script of Scribe B is closely linked with the decoration, its inscriptions and its placement in the text. These and other examples which further prove the involvement of Scribe B in the decoration suggest that besides being the text scribe he was also the artist of the four manuscripts.

Scribes write not only *littera textualis*, but also titles and initials in display script. Sometimes the display script is very ornate, but if the characters of the scribe are recognisable, we have to accept that the ornaments are also by him, especially if they are inseparable from his letters. Thus the scribe has divulged his style of decoration which can be recognised even when it appears without his script. An interesting example is the famous Gospels of Henry the Lion of about 1185¹⁶.

¹⁰ Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 1075 Helmst; A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5) 48–58, 193–196.

¹¹ A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5), figs. 46, 19 respectively.

¹² A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5), 58–74, 197–203.

¹³ A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5), figs. 47, 61.

¹⁴ Russian State Archives of old Acts, Fond 1607, Inv. 1 No. 23. A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5) 74–95, 204–209.

¹⁵ London Gospels, fol. 28 and Moscow Gospels, fol. 122v. See A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, Hamersleben (cf. n. 5), figs. 61, 74 respectively.

¹⁶ Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 105 Noviss. 2°. D. KÖTZSCHE (ed.), Das Evangeliar Heinrichs des Löwen. Kommentar zum Faksimile. Frankfurt am Main 1989. Cf. E. KRÜGER, Die Schreib- und Malwerkstatt der Abtei Helmarshausen bis in die Zeit Heinrichs des Löwen (*Quellen und Forschungen zur hessischen Geschichte* 21). Darmstadt

The dedicatory poem (fol. 4v) praises the patrons, Duke Henry and his wife Matilda who commissioned the book from Helmarshausen. The poem closes with the invocation: “Peter, this book is the work of thy monk Herimann”. Regrettably, Herimann did not specify what he meant by the ambiguous term *labor*. It could mean that he was in charge of a group of scribes and artists who executed the work; on the other hand, it could imply that he was the scribe, the artist, or both. Indeed, examination of the relationship between text and illustration establishes beyond doubt that the scribe and the artist were one and the same person.

It has been shown that one scribe was responsible for the text and all the inscriptions. For example, the scribe’s textualis and some capital letters with which he accentuates names of saints or ends of sections (fol. 68v) is similar to the inscriptions within the miniatures (e.g. fol. 172).

Another example is the beginning of St. Luke written in gold letters decorated with delicate foliate motifs, which appear in the foliage scroll of the line-filler (fol. 114r).

It is possible to recognise the hand of the scribe even when his letters become more ornate, as for example at the beginning of St. Matthew (fol. 22r): the letters of *Generationis* are formed by foliate motifs as well as birds.

Similar delicate birds and foliate motifs in gold appear as background in some illustrations, such as the dedication miniature, which shows Henry the Lion presenting the Gospel book to St. Blasius in the presence of St. Giles and his wife Mathilda (fol. 19r — figs. 7, 10).

A closer look at the background decoration reveals the delicate rendering of these motifs which characterise the decorated letters of the scribe (e. g. fols. 22r, 114r). If so, we may conclude that the scribe was responsible not only for the decorated letters but also for the ornate gold background of some miniatures.

At first glance it seems that the background decoration was done first, and the figures were later applied on to it, either by the same hand or by someone else. However, a closer examination reveals that the delicate gold motifs often overlap the figures, as can be seen on the right sleeve of St. Giles (fol. 19r — fig. 8). Moreover, the bird perched on Henry’s shoulder overlaps the outline of his garment but his hair overlaps its wing (fol. 19r — figs. 9, 10). The overlapping of background and figures in these and many other examples show, that the background and the figures were done concurrently, by one hand.

Thus, if the scribe was responsible for the decoration of his script and for the decoration of the background, he was also responsible for painting the figures. Since the study of the entire decoration has shown that one hand was responsible for it, one should literally accept the words in the dedication poem: *Liber hic labor est Herimanni*.

In this example, the script of the scribe was followed step by step, from his undecorated textualis and capitals to his most decorated display script. Since the similar motifs and style appear in the illustrations, and since the figures and background are interlaced in such a way that they rule out the possibility that two or more people could work concurrently on the same piece of parchment, we have to conclude that the scribe of the Gospels of Henry the Lion was also the artist.

This type of analysis requires minute examination of the entire text and decoration and the relationship between them. Only a large number of similar examples without a case to the contrary, could lead to the conclusion that a scribe is also the artist. This is one example of gold letters and gold decoration; a similar analysis was done with the coloured scrolls which decorate some of the scribe’s display script and illustrations, leading to the same conclusion¹⁷.

We all wish that colophons would mention names and tasks of those involved in the production of a manuscript, for example as specified in a 12th-century Homiliary from Springiersbach by *Engil-*

and Marburg 1972. See also A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, The Labour of Herimann in the Gospels of Henry the Lion. *The Burlington Magazine* 127/993 (December 1985), 880–887; enlarged version in: Helmarshausen und das Evangeliar Heinrichs des Löwen (*Braunschweigische Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft* 4). Göttingen 1992, 209–227.

¹⁷ A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, *The Burlington Magazine*, 127/993 (December 1985), 880–887.

*bertus pictor et scriptor*¹⁸. However, such examples are rare. Moreover, experience has shown that colophons cannot be taken for granted. Sometimes only one scribe is mentioned, while two and more are hidden in the text or in the decoration. In this case Engilbertus was true to his word. Indeed, he brings further proof that script and illumination are inseparable, and in some periods and regions the illumination was an extension of the work of a scribe with a dexterous hand. If palaeographers would not consider the illumination and art historians ignore the text and script, an essential component of the scribe-artist's work is lost, and with it the valuable information regarding the production of manuscripts.

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¹⁸ Trier, Stadtbibliothek, MS 261/1140 fol. 153v; A. COHEN-MUSHLIN, The Division of Labour in the Production of a Twelfth-century Manuscript, in: Rationalisierung der Buchherstellung im Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit (*elementa diplomatica* 2). Marburg an der Lahn 1994, 51–67, fig. 1.



Fig. 1: Hebrew Prayer book, Franconia, Germany, c.1310 (B.L. Add.16916, fol.48v)



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