From Margins to Frames.
Some Forms of Transmission of Visual Formulas in Byzantine Post-Iconoclastic Illuminated Books

Giovanni Gasbarri
SAPIENZA UNIVERSITY, ROME

The word ‘marginal’ is frequently adopted, across several modern European languages, to depict something as secondary, negligible or unimportant. Studies in history of medieval and byzantine books, however, can easily encourage modern readers to dismiss any preconception of margins. In a time when writing instruments were so expensive and a manuscript was considered as a highly exclusive product, margins were far from being merely ‘marginal’ features. Any empty area around the columns could be as important as the main text, since it offered an additional space for additional contents. Moreover, a margin was the place where the main text itself could be analysed, quoted, and sometimes even challenged; comments and glosses on margins have always been one of the most successful methods to establish a connection with a culture from the past, to ponder over its message and to produce new forms of culture—as well as new forms of art.

It is commonly acknowledged that book margins played a crucial role in the development of several fundamental aspects of visual communication in the Middle Ages. Not being disjoined from the text as with a full-page illumination, a miniature depicted on a margin produced a much more efficient combination with the content of the book. Initials, vignettes, friezes, drolleries etc. thus became an essential component in the layout of the page, resulting in a wide range of interactions with the text they accompanied. Aside from mere decorative purpose, they could also emphasise a passage, or bring it into discussion with a new interpretation; as for the initials, they could even become a physical part of the text. Marginalia, in other words, contributed to the core identity of a book by defining (or re-defining) the relation between text and image in many different ways. When it comes to this relation, Byzantium was probably one of the most creative and, concurrently, cautious amongst the societies in the Middle Ages. Byzantine intellectual élites were always very careful in dealing with the interaction between images and ideas, since art in Byzantium could easily become a matter of tremendously serious debates. The
Iconoclast Controversy (726-843) provides the most significant example in this sense. By the order of the emperor himself, in the first half of the eighth century iconoclasts contested publicly the legitimacy of worshipping holy images, as they were considered to be the distorted products of an act of idolatry. In spite of the political approval from the highest personalities in the Empire, iconoclasts were never able to eradicate holy images from the Christian cult; however, by calling into question the raison d’être of religious art, they forced even the strongest supporters of the holy icons – the so-called ‘iconophiles’ – to ponder over the nature of art itself, and to reconsider its role in Christian society. The influence of this process on later artistic production in Byzantium was enormously relevant. This included book illumination and marginalia too, which played a key role in reshaping the way in which Byzantines began to conceive art after the end of the Iconoclasm.

Despite the almost complete lack of surviving material from pre-iconoclastic era, marginalia seem to have appeared very early in the history of book illumination in Byzantium. A significant number of manuscripts dating back to post-iconoclastic years reveal that Byzantine artists had already developed different systems to arrange figures and decorations on manuscript margins. Medical books, as well as military and history treatises, could be accompanied by simple pen sketches, which immediately helped readers to visualise the content of specific passages. An elegant tenth-century copy of the Historiae by Thucydides currently in the Laurentian Library in Florence (Laurent. Plut. 69.2), for example, has preserved marginal diagrams which display the defence system of Athens and other Greek cities during the Peloponnesian War (Figure 1). Due to the technical content of such books, pictures were required to be clear, and their relation with the text had to be the most unambiguous possible. Margins were also crucial for the development of Byzantine initials. Late ninth-century lectionaries such as Paris. Gr. 277 or Patm. 70 have preserved a rich collection of initials, friezes and ornamental bands, which arguably reflects a pre-iconoclastic tradition (Figure 2). Because of their abstract qualities and their versatility, such motifs were successfully adaptable to a wide range of different

---


texts, and thus became part of the ornamental repertoire for several later Byzantine books.

The most important post-iconoclastic manuscripts with marginal illustrations can be easily divided into two groups. The first one is composed of some well-known books such as Paris Gr. 923 (Sacra Parallela by John of Damascus) and Ambros. E 49 inf.+E 50 inf. (Homilies by Gregory of Nazianzus), whose miniatures have been conventionally defined by Kurt Weitzmann as ‘Goldgewandeten Figuren’, that is ‘Golden-dressed figures’. The place of origin of these manuscripts is still a matter of debate. The second group consists of the so-called marginal Psalters, which are the witnesses of a very fortunate and long-lasting tradition in the history of Byzantine illumination. The earliest preserved psalters decorated with marginal illustrations date back to the second half of the ninth century, immediately after the end of the Iconoclasm: Pantokr. 61, Paris. Gr. 20, and the famous Chludov Psalter in the Historical Museum in Moscow (ms. D 129).

Fol. 67 of the Chludov Psalter (Figure 3) is usually assumed to be the most representative example for expounding the core characteristics of this group of manuscripts; at the same time, it is the perfect demonstration of how the discussion on art during Iconoclasm influenced in depth the development of marginalia in Byzantium. The illumination on fol. 67 is strictly related to the 21st verse of psalm 68: ‘They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink’. Two blue stripes at the end of the line refer to a peculiar visual translation of this verse, inspired by the narration of the agony of Christ as reported in the Gospels (Matthew 27. 48; Mark 15. 36; John 19. 29): on the right margin, in fact, there is a picture of a man lifting a sponge soaked with vinegar to the mouth of the crucified Christ. The miniature provides an additional interpretation of the verse, evidently inspired by recent events: as stated by the adjacent inscription, on the lower margin two ‘iconomachi’ (or iconoclasts) are covering an icon of Christ with ‘water and mud’.


The meaning of the whole composition is perfectly clear, as well as its religious and political implications: being an iconoclast and destroying holy icons is equivalent to being one of the Jews who tortured and killed Christ. With the help of selected images, the artist transformed a single plain verse into a multileveled pictorial exegesis. There is a first level, in which the Ancient Testament is directly associated with the New Testament according to the principles of typological interpretation; there is also a second level, in which the biblical text is adopted as a reference to a very specific historical scenario. This reference, in fact, is a violent accusation against both iconoclasts and Jews, whose ‘crimes’ were often rhetorically connected in iconophile argumentation. There is little doubt that such a complex pictorial system was originally conceived by highly educated individuals, and that it was designed for a very exclusive group of readers. The ‘visual polemic’ conveyed by these psalters functioned to establish intellectual cohesion amongst the iconophiles in their battle against iconoclasts. The tradition of marginal psalters survived long after the end of the Iconoclasm, even when the harsh religious conflicts of the ninth century had become an long-distant memory. The prototypes were transformed and adapted throughout the centuries, but the influence of the original marginal system is clearly recognisable in later psalters – such as the splendid Theodore Psalter of the British Library (Add. ms. 19352, dated 1066), or the fourteenth-century ms. W.733 in the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore.

In addition, manuscripts such as the Chludov Psalter were able to condition the development of a different kind of miniature, miniatures which cannot be specifically identified as marginalia but still reveal a strict affinity with them. After all, amongst the different sources of inspiration available for a byzantine post-iconoclastic artist, marginal miniatures seem to have had a significant advantage: even the most established scenes had already been broken up in single independent units. It was much easier, thus, to extract these units from their original context and to combine them in order to create new compositions. In the past few decades, scholars have already taken into account some aspects of this phenomenon: in her 1999 monograph on the famous Paris. Gr. 510 (Homilies by Gregory of Nazianzus), for example, Leslie

---


8 CORRIGAN, Visual Polemics, 5-7.

Brubaker recognised several mutual influences between marginal and non-marginal miniatures in post-iconoclastic manuscripts.¹⁰

To this end, I would like to focus on a less-known book, which is currently preserved as ms. 211 in the National Library in Athens, and which was arguably made in Constantinople in the late ninth century.¹¹ Athen. Gr. 211 contains a collection of 41 sermons by John Chrysostom. Despite the unfortunate lack of the colophon, there is no doubt that it was designed as a high-quality product: the overall layout of the page is clear and elegant, the parchment is very pale and the margins are large, as if they were conceived for hosting a significant quantity of images or words. Sermons are written in an elegant minuscule script, and are introduced by brief titles in majuscule. Each title is surrounded and emphasised by an ornamental frame.

Of the 41 surviving frames, 26 are totally (or mainly) aniconic. The most common ones are composed of multi-coloured bands or intertwined stripes; others are enriched with phytomorphic and zoomorphic motifs, such as vines, leaves, grapes, berries, vases, ducks, quails and even small buildings (Figures 4-6). However, there is also a small group of frames with figurative elements, which bear the strictest resemblance to the tradition of byzantine marginal psalters. As in the Chludov Psalter, for example, in Athens Gr. 211 the artist made use of classical personifications of springs and rivers, with long blue stripes representing the flowing waters running freely along the margins.¹² As in the Chludov Psalter, some traditional sacred scenes have been literally dismantled, reduced to their basic units, and subsequently re-arranged into new compositions in order to illustrate appropriately the main contents of the sermons. Differently from the marginal psalters, nonetheless, in the Athens manuscript each unit remains physically connected to the title of the homily, and never spreads to the outer margin of the page.

For most of these miniatures the subject is easily identifiable, especially after reading the title they accompany. The sermon at fol. 53 deals with the Original Sin, and the title is visually associated to the corresponding episode; again (Figure 7), the

---


sermon at fol. 110v deals with redemption and Eucharistic mysteries, and is illustrated by the Communion of the Apostles (Figure 8). On the other hand, however, some frames appear to be the result of a much more sophisticated operation: in fact, several different elements seem to have been assembled without any logical order, as if they were part of an intricate pictorial enigma. Sometimes the single units are recognisable with ease, but the meaning of the whole composition is totally obscure.

Fol. 151v provides a very interesting example in this sense (Figure 9). The title of the homily laconically reminds us that ‘Hell is eternal’, but does not reveal any actual information either on the identity or on the purpose of the elements depicted. Close to the frame there are three small additional inscriptions, which are supposed to help readers in recognising some of the images. Two male figures on the left side, who are blowing horns and wearing hats with a fluttering feather on the top, are identified as ‘blowing winds’. There are also two human profiles, namely ‘the rains’, barely visible under a blue starred shield. On the opposite side, ‘the rivers’ are represented as two naked men swimming in a blue stream of water and supporting a model city on their right hand (Figure 10).

Since the frame alone does not deliver any further clue, it is necessary to focus on the underlying text.13 John Chrysostom wrote the sermon in order to comment on a specific passage of Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians (I Corinthians 3.10-16). According to this passage, immediately before the Second Coming of Christ, all men and women will be subjected to a severe ‘test of fire’ to prove their integrity. Only the ones who have built their life on a solid foundation – namely the word of Christ – will survive the fire and find salvation. In his commentary, John Chrysostom provides an extra reference to some Old Testament catastrophes, such as the Flood and the destruction of Sodom, both of which are considered as prefigurations of the aforementioned ‘test of fire’.

It is now possible to return to the miniature and try to decode it again from a slightly different point of view. On closer inspection, it becomes obvious that the frame was designed to be a faithful illustration of the main content of the sermon, and to visualise the connection between the Old and the New Testament as it had been described by John Chrysostom. On the upper margin, in fact, the artist depicted the Old Testament catastrophes. Winds are blowing, rain is falling down causing the overflowing of the rivers, which, in turn, are flooding over a female bust on the right; although she is not identified by any inscription, she is plausibly a personification of the earth. There is also a clear reference to the episode of the destruction of Sodom, with the gigantic snake coming out from the door of the city and devouring the unharmed inhabitants. Since it was founded on an ‘unstable terrain’, the city itself is being dragged away by the rivers. On the lower margin there is the depiction of the ‘test of fire’: a stream of red flames flows down from the throne of Christ, and runs

---

13 Patrologia Graeca, 61, cols. 75-82; Clavis Patrum Graecorum, II, no. 4428. See also GRABAR, Un manuscrit des homélies, 832-836; MARAVA-CHATZINICOLAU and TOUFEXI-PASCHOU, Catalogue, 40-42.
over a domed building with a small cross on the top; it is the temple of God, which was built on a solid ground and therefore is destined to be saved and to flourish.

This miniature is probably one of the best yet least-known evidences of the ability of Byzantine illuminators to reshape a wide range of iconographic sources in order to obtain the most accurate visualisation of the textual content of a book. Here the artist displayed the core idea behind Chrysostom’s sermon by using even the same figures of speech adopted by Chrysostom himself, namely the analogy and the antithesis between the catastrophes of the past and the catastrophes of the future. This antithesis is even more emphasised in the miniature than it is in the text, since the artist could take full advantage of the horizontal margins above and beneath the title. In fact, the two registers were conceived to be perfectly counterpoised: the water versus the fire, the city of sinners versus the temple of God, the natural forces versus the throne of Christ, the Old Testament versus the New, the past versus the future.

As with other miniatures in Athen. Gr. 211, this frame clearly inherited several motifs from the tradition of marginal illumination, as had already been adopted by the ninth-century marginal psalters. However, by moving from margins to frames, these motifs radically changed their role in the illustration programme. The difference is immediately understandable if we compare fol. 67 of the Chludov Psalter with fol. 151v of the Athen. Gr. 211. In the Chludov Psalter the miniature was designed to provide some additional ‘values’ (both religious and political) on a single verse of the biblical text. On the contrary, the frame in the Athens manuscript is actually the illustration of the entirety of the sermon, whose rhetorical structure is literally translated into a different medium. It is actually an alternative form of eloquence.14

There are only a few surviving books which bear some resemblance with the Athen. Gr. 211: for example Paris. Suppl. Gr. 1085 or the ms. 221 preserved in the Ivan Dujčev Center in Sofia;15 however, their miniatures are strictly aniconic and none of them shows any direct connection with the text they accompany. In conclusion, the Athens manuscript is a unique witness of an age characterised by daring experiments with words and figures: an age when a margin or a frame was a crucial

---


ground for the development of byzantine visual culture. When margins and frames were far from being just marginal.

Plates

Figure 1: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 69.2, f. 87v-Historiae by Thucydides (10th c.)
Figure 2: Patmos, Monastery of St. John the Theologian, ms. 70, f. 123v – Lectionary (late 9th c.)
Figure 3: Moscow, State Historical Museum, ms. D 139 (Chlouduv Psalter), f. 67r
Figure 4: Athens, National Library of Greece, gr. 211, f. 295r–Homilies by John Chrysostom (late 9th c.)
Figure 5: Athens, National Library of Greece, gr. 211, f. 310v – Homilies by John Chrysostom (late 9th c.)
Figure 6: Athens, National Library of Greece, gr. 211, f. 264r – Homilies by John Chrysostom (late 9th c.)
Figure 7: Athens, National Library of Greece, gr. 211, f. 53r – Homilies by John Chrysostom (late 9th c.)
Figure 8: Athens, National Library of Greece, gr. 211, f. 110v – Homilies by John Chrysostom (late 9th c.)
Figure 9: Athens, National Library of Greece, gr. 211, f. 151v – Homilies by John Chrysostom (late 9th c.)
Figure 10: Athens, National Library of Greece, gr. 211, f. 151v – Homilies by John Chrysostom (late 9th c.)