

POSSIBLE EVIDENCE FOR LITURGICAL DRAMA AT BURY ST EDMUNDS IN THE TWELFTH CENTURY

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IN THE LAST few years much new scholarly attention has been devoted to the nature and rôle of liturgical drama – that is, the elaboration into dramatic form of the intrinsic rituals of worship, as distinct from the more ‘popular’ and secular mystery plays – in the early and high Middle Ages.¹ The importance of liturgical drama as an influence on medieval art and iconography has also received increasing recognition, much of it in works on English Romanesque art.² Concrete evidence for the performance of liturgical drama or of Mystery Plays at Bury St Edmunds is admittedly sparse³ and one must beware of over-enthusiastic speculation in the matter. However, in the light of recent studies on liturgical drama and in the course of my own work on Bury manuscripts there has come to my attention an illuminated initial which may indeed reflect the enactment of the basic liturgical Epiphany drama, the *Officium Stellae*, at Bury St Edmunds in the 12th century.

In the *Officium Stellae*, the Magi were represented by three high clerics in rich vestments who processed down the length of the church to kneel at the high altar where they presented their symbolic gifts with a series of speeches and accompanying hymns that varied little over several centuries.⁴ Recent important studies, primarily concerned with French Romanesque ‘Majesties’, or cult-statues of the Madonna and Child, have indicated that in this liturgical re-enactment of the Adoration of the Magi, the rôle of Virgin and Child was filled, not by human actors, but by a ‘Majesty’ cult-figure placed for the occasion upon the high altar.⁵ Although there is less explicit evidence for such practices in England in the same period, logic suggests that parallel practices obtained here also. The existence of early English Majesty statues is well documented at Ely, Abingdon and Coventry and in Wessex.⁶ And, of course, the *Regularis Concordia*, the English guide to monastic rituals and observances of c. 970, contains an early dramatic elaboration of the Easter Liturgy, the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, with indications that a crucifix, representing the body of the dead Christ, was symbolically buried and resurrected on Easter morning⁷ – a ritual offering many resemblances to that of the *Officium Stellae*.

Among the early pieces of evidence offered for the use of a cult-statue of the Virgin and Child in the *Officium Stellae* in France are two drawings in the margins of manuscripts: one, specifically representing the golden Majesty of Clermont-Ferrand, in a late 10th- or early 11th-century account of that statue’s early history, and the other a full Epiphany scene in a 9th-century Sedulius manuscript (The *Carmen Paschale* or Easter hymn) in Antwerp, in which the Madonna-and-Child group clearly echoes the form of early cult-statues.⁸ Such reflections of mainly sculptural evidence in the manuscript medium lend credence to the possibility that a similar practice may have inspired illustration in the same medium in England.

The Bury manuscript in question is Pembroke College, Cambridge, MS. 16, a copy of St Gregory the Great’s Sermons on the Gospels dating from c. 1140,⁹ decorated with historiated and ornamental initials in delicate line-and-wash with occasional background touches of body-colour in rich greens, rusts and a brilliant blue. Although Pembroke 16 is one of the finer surviving manuscripts made at Bury in the middle decades of the 12th century and its initials are of high artistic quality,¹⁰ they do not suggest an artistic programme of any intellectual consistency or symbolic depth: most are purely decorative or contain figures to which no specific subject-identification can be attached. Moreover, the sermons that were to receive historiated initials illustrating their contents seem to have been chosen at random

and the scenes are in some cases ambiguous, as if adapted from borrowed or alien models.¹¹

However, the subject of the first historiated initial, the Epiphany *S* on fol. 19v (Pl. XVIII b), is absolutely specific and clearly related to the topic of the sermon it introduces, Homily x on the Epiphany story in Matthew, i, 1–12.¹² The initial contains the Adoration of the Magi, and the scene is composed within it in a particularly dramatic and effective manner. In the upper loop of the letter, the Virgin is seated on a cushioned bench, her veiled head slightly inclined as she regards the Christ-child, who is seated in profile on her right knee, blessing with his right hand and with his left supporting a closed book propped on his knee. The two seem to gaze into one another's eyes, and the Virgin gestures in wonder with her left hand, palm outward. Below them, in the lower loop of the *S*, the Magi approach from the right. Only the foremost, bearded and middle-aged, is shown fully as he half-kneels, offering a round object in veiled hands to the Virgin and Child above. The second Magus, young and beardless, is visible to mid-thigh as he stands, a covered vessel in his veiled hands, and looks backward to the third and eldest who is just emerging from the curve of the initial. He too holds an offering, shaped like a chalice, in veiled hands. All wear tunics; the first wise man is crowned, the second wears a cap, and the headgear of the third is hidden by the initial. Between the two groups of figures, on the mid-part of the *S*, is a medallion containing a frontal head: such an ornament was frequently used on 12th-century initials and probably has only decorative significance here.

The veiled hands of the Magi¹⁴ and the division of the composition between the two levels of the letter – a scheme frequently used to good effect in English Romanesque art¹⁵ – give the Epiphany scene in Pembroke 16 a markedly sacral air. The Virgin and Child do indeed resemble a cult-image,¹⁶ and the first Magus a priest elevating the host or one of the clerics in the *Officium Stellae*, kneeling before the altar to present his symbolic gift. Although the idea must be treated with proper caution, it is possible to see in this composition a reflection in England of the same sort of liturgical drama, involving a Majesty statue, as that recently shown to have existed in France. The influence of religious drama on English Romanesque art is firmly established, and the conversational grouping of the three Magi, with the second turning back to the last while the first offers his gift, lends strength to the connection, for it corresponds to the iconographic tradition noted by H. Kehrer¹⁸ as arising first in France in the late 12th century and, according to him, reflecting two scenes from the *Officium Stellae*: in the first, the 'Magi' (i.e. the richly robed clerics) look and point up at the star hung from the ceiling of the church; in the second, each in turn, led by the one with the gold, presents his gift before the Child at the altar. Although an early form of this composition occurs in the pre-Romanesque frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome and Santa Maria Foris Portas at Castelseprio,¹⁹ its appearance in Pembroke 16 is to my knowledge its earliest in English manuscript art²⁰ and certain features of the Pembroke initial's iconography indicate that it is less closely related to the discursive Eastern pictorial tradition of Castelseprio and Santa Maria Antiqua than to the 'dramatic' tradition described by Kehrer.

The first indication of the Pembroke initial's relative modernity – a feature primarily attributable to mere change of fashion – is the change in the garb of the Magi from Persian dress to western tunics;²¹ the second, the fact that they carry phials and chalices instead of the Early Christian *missoria*. The foremost wise man, too, wears a crown of 12th-century type instead of the early Christian Phrygian cap, illustrating the development from 'Magus' to 'King', and he is shown in a deeper kneeling position than in the earlier tradition, which invariably shows the leader in the forward-hastening posture characterized by Kehrer as the 'Knielauf'.²² A fuller kneeling position, on the other hand, is reflected both in the *Officium Stellae* and in late 12th-century French examples based upon it.²³ In view of the known

early origins of the liturgical Epiphany drama, it would not be surprising to find an earlier appearance of this new iconographic tradition than those cited by Kehrer and other early writers on the subject: Pembroke 16 certainly is no later than the mid-12th century.

The other interesting feature of the initial and its iconography is, of course, the possibility that the figures of the Virgin and Child may represent an actual Majesty statue used in a performance of the *Officium Stellae* at Bury. Although no 12th-century English cult-statues appear to have survived the Reformation intact,²⁴ their presence in England in that period, especially that of statues of the Virgin and Child, is well documented.²⁵ It is known, for example, that Ely Cathedral, not far from Bury, possessed a particularly splendid example until 1066,²⁶ and the Epiphany scene on a 12th-century ivory comb from St Albans contains a Virgin and Child strongly resembling the pose of Ottonian figures such as those at Paderborn and on the Hildesheim bronze doors.²⁷ Although there is no specific record of such a statue having existed at Bury St Edmunds in the 12th century, a chapel in the crypt of the Norman Abbey and an altar in one of the chapels of the upper church bore a dedication to the Virgin, and by the early 14th century at least, there was an 'image of the Virgin' of some sort in the North aisle of the church.²⁸ From 1121 to 1148 Bury was ruled by Abbot Anselm, nephew of Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm of Bury's devotion to the Virgin is attested by his re-introduction into England of the celebration of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception²⁹ and his compilation of one of the earliest collections of the Miracles of the Virgin;³⁰ his many continental connections and his love of the flamboyant and dramatic are well known.³¹

These factors taken in combination suggest that Bury St Edmunds would have been an eminently probable venue for the performance of the *Officium Stellae* as liturgical drama, and its subsequent depiction in a miniature produced in the Abbey Scriptorium.

APPENDIX

DESCRIPTION OF PEMBROKE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, MS. 16

St Gregory, *Homiliae xl super evangelia*, etc.

Vellum, 304 x 230mm, ff. ii and 124, in original white skin over flush, slightly bevelled boards. Tabs originally lined with brocade, of which some shreds remain; double columns of 32 lines, lections and sermons rubricated. Bury pressmark G.8 on spine of binding and on upper corner of f.1r; also on f.1r, Bury *ex-libris* inscription, *Omellie gregorii de armario claustrum monachorum sancti Edmundi*.

Provenance: Given to his college by William Smart, Portman of Ipswich, in 1599.

Literature: 12th – 13th-century Catalogue of the Bury Library, on ff. 117r–119v of Pembroke College, Cambridge, and published in James, 1895, 1, 'Bibliotheca Buriensis', 23–32, No. 177, *xl^a ii omellie gregorii. G.8; ibid.*, 58, No. 117; *idem*, 1905, 13–14; *idem*, 1926, No. 132, p. 255; Boase, 1953, 161–162, Pl. 59a (f. 19v); Pollard, 1962, 12; Ker, 1964, 17; Hoving, 1964, 335, 339, Fig. 32; Parker, 1965, 251 *et seq.*, 290; Rouse, 1966, 486 n. 37, 489 nn. 50, 52; Thomson, 1972, 637 n. 122; Kauffmann, 1975, Cat. 57, Ills. 154, 156, 157.

Extant illuminated initials: Historiated initials on ff. 19v (Epiphany); 30r (David or Samson and the Lion); 47r (Men fighting); 63r (Fiddler); 70r (Christ and the Ruler); 71v (Ascension or Mission to the Apostles); 90v (Sapientia?); 102v (Man and Dragon); 112v (Nude man). Dragons, monsters, etc. in initials on ff. 3v, 6r, 17r, 19v, 32r, 41v,

54r, 63r, 71v, 82v, 108r, 112v. Other foliate ornamental initials in fine brown outline with delicate washes of green, rust-red, buff and blue, notably on ff. 7v, 9v, 15v, 27v, 50r, 54v, 56v, 75r, 98v. Initials on ff. i, 29, 32v, 85, etc. have been cut out. Handsome rubricated initials in typical Bury penwork style throughout.

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NOTES

- ¹ E.g. Hardison, 1965; Woolf, 1972; Axton, 1974; all diverging sharply from earlier theories exemplified by Chambers, 1903 and Young, 1933.
- ² See, e.g., Zarnecki, 1951, 19–20, 39; *idem*, 1953, esp. 117; Pächt, 1962, 33 *et seq.*; Parker, 1969, 291 n. 152.
- ³ The only evidence known to me is a fragment of a 14th-century Mystery Play, London, B.L. Add. Roll 63481B, brought to my attention by R. M. Thomson. Cf. Gilson, 1921.
- ⁴ Forsyth, 1968 and 1972, 52–60, where the *Officium Stellae* is discussed in detail and exhaustive bibliography cited.
- ⁵ Forsyth, 1968 and 1972.
- ⁶ Cf. Forsyth, 1972, 36 *et seq.*, 48, 70, 100, 112, where the statues are discussed in relevant context and documentary references in Lehmann-Brockhaus, 1955–60 and other sources are cited.
- ⁷ Symons, 1953, xlix–xx, 3, 49–50.
- ⁸ Forsyth, 1972, 49 *et seq.*, 97 and Figs. 3, 4.
- ⁹ See Appendix for full description and literature.
- ¹⁰ See Kauffmann, 1975, cat. 57 and my essay, 'In the Wake of the Bury Bible: Followers of Master Hugo at Bury St Edmunds', in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XLII (1979), 216–224.
- ¹¹ E.g. David or Samson and the Lion, f. 47r; Sapientia?, f. 90v; The Ascension?, f. 71v.
- ¹² *P.L.* lxxvi, cols. 1110–1114.
- ¹³ The motif was particularly common in Canterbury manuscripts: e.g. Dodwell, 1954, Pls. 18b, c, 37d, 38a, etc.
- ¹⁴ Cf. O. Hall, 'Handgebärde', *L.C.I.*, II, 1970, col. 215, par. H, 'Verhüllte Hände'. The gesture, indicating humility when touching a sanctified object, is not uncommon, though by no means constant, in the iconography of the Adoration of the Magi, especially in the early Middle Ages: cf. Schüller, 1966, 110 *et seq.* and Figs. 245 *et seq.* In the English context the veiled hands occur in the 10th-century Benedictional of Aethelwold, London, B.L. Add. MS. 49698, f. 24v (Warner and Wilson, 1910) and the 11th-century 'Missal' of Robert of Jumièges, Rouen, Bib.Mun.MS. Y.6, f. 37, (Wilson 1896, Pl. IV), but not in the St Albans Psalter of c. 1123 in Hildesheim (p. 25, *A.P.* Pl. 18b) nor in the Winchester Psalter of c. 1150; B.L. Cotton MS. Nero C.IV, f. 12r (Wormald, 1972, Pl. 15), although the second and third Magi do have veiled hands on the detached Bible picture leaf from Canterbury, B.L. Add. MS. 37472(1)r (Kauffmann, 1972, Ill. 175). Thus the motif seems to re-enter the British iconography around the mid-12th century.
- ¹⁵ A similar linking of the action between the two levels of an initial is found in several initials in the St Albans Psalter: *A.P.* Pls. 46b, 61c, etc. A similar technique was used later by a St Albans-influenced artist on f. 169r of Bodleian MS. Auct. D.2.6 (Boase, 1953, Pl. 50b).
- ¹⁶ Cf. Forsyth, 1972, 22 *et seq.*, 113 *et seq.*, 120, 132 on the iconography of such statues and particularly of the Christ-Child: the numerous points of correspondence are convincing and suggest, moreover, a model of relatively early date for the Pembroke 16 initial.
- ¹⁷ See note 2.

- ¹⁸ Kehrer, 1909, esp. 129 *et seq.* See also Mâle, 1910, 261–270, esp. 264 *et seq.*, and Hamann, 1955, 79 *et seq.* Much of Mâle's original argument has been contested, but the Pembroke 16 composition is strongly reminiscent of that described in Kehrer, 1909, *loc. cit.*, as the 'französische Schauspieltypus', with the first King kneeling while the second turns back to look at the star.
- ¹⁹ This composition, which continues in later Byzantine art, has been explained (Weitzmann, 1951, 59 *et seq.* and Figs. 6, 13) as a conflation of two originally separate scenes, in the first of which the Magi look up to a guiding angel, while in the second they offer their gifts to the Child.
- ²⁰ This iconographic type does not appear in earlier works such as the St Albans Psalter (see note 14).
- ²¹ Cf. those in the frescoes of Santa Maria Antiqua and Castelseprio (Weitzmann, 1951, Figs. 13 and 6 respectively). The Magi in the 'Missal of Robert of Jumièges' still wear Persian dress, as do those in many Carolingian ivories (*A.P.* Pls. 105b, c, d) but it had been abandoned in England by the time of the St Albans Psalter in favour of short tunics, cloaks and crowns (Wilson, 1896, Pl. iv and *A.P.* Pls. 18b, 105e), a change that appeared early, though not with total consistency, in English iconography: cf. Deshman, 1969, 128 *et seq.*
- ²² Kehrer, 1909, 129 *et seq.*
- ²³ Cf. the left portal tympanum of St Gilles-du-Gard (Hamann, 1955, Fig. 126).
- ²⁴ Apparently the only surviving example of Romanesque wooden free-standing sculpture in England is the head, together with one foot, of a crucifix from South Cerney, Gloucs. (Zarnecki, 1961, No. 554, 312 and Pl. XLVI, where further literature is given).
- ²⁵ Cf., e.g., Lehmann Brockhaus, 1955–60, Cat. 41, 623, 1610, 1712, 3911, 5857, 5863, among others. These reflect 12th-century or earlier sources and include inventories and accounts of the making of new images as well as stories of the miraculous powers of such statues. Other, later documents in the same collection also mention such statues, some of which may also date from the Romanesque period. Cf. also Borchgrave d'Altena, 1961, esp. 29 *et seq.*, where such surviving English works as the relief of the Virgin and Child at York and the Langham Hall Virgin and Child of c. 1200 are discussed as offering clues to the probable nature of English Madonna-and-Child cult statues in the Romanesque period.
- Further evidence is provided by Swedish and Norwegian wooden Madonnas of the 12th and early 13th centuries, several of which are considered by Scandinavian art historians to reflect English prototypes, and in one case possibly to be of actual English workmanship. Cf. Andersson, 1966, esp. 206 *et seq.*, *idem*, 1958, 21–23 and 1957, 116–136; also Norberg, 1948, 238–243 and Blindheim, 1975, 430 *et seq.* In this connection it is interesting to note that the somewhat unusual gesture of the Madonna in the Pembroke 16 initial is echoed in one of the few Swedish Madonnas whose hands in part survive, that of Heda: Andersson (1970, 322 and Pl. 196) surmises that the same gesture may once have characterized others.
- ²⁶ Lehmann-Brockhaus, 1955–60, cat. 1524, 1530; Forsyth, 1972, 100.
- ²⁷ Beckwith, 1972, Pl. 129, cat. 65. This instance was brought to my attention by Dr Katherine Baker. Cf. Forsyth, 1972, 120 *et seq.*, 124 *et seq.* and Pls. 42, 45, 46 for the Paderborn and Hildesheim Madonnas.
- ²⁸ See James, 1895, II, 118, 121, 129. The source for the latter record, a 15th-century Bury Register in Douai, Bibl. Publ. MS. 553, I have not yet been able to examine.
- ²⁹ Bishop, 1918, 238–259; van Dijk, 1954.
- ³⁰ Southern, 1958, 183–200.
- ³¹ On Anselm of Bury see Williamson, 1929, 191 *et seq.*; Davis, 1955, esp. 236 *et seq.*; Southern, 1953, 251–253; *idem*, 1963, 10–11; Thomson, 1971, 213 *et seq.*

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ABBREVIATIONS

- A.P.*: Pächt, O., Dodwell, C. R., and Wormald, F., 1960. *The St Albans Psalter (Alban Psalter)*. London.
- P.L.*: Migne, J. P. (ed.), 1844-1905. *Patrologia Latina*. 217 vols. Paris.
- L.C.I.*: Kirschbaum, E., *et. al.* (eds.), 1968 -. *Lexikon der Christlichen Ikonographie*. Freiburg im Breisgau, etc.