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The Illumination of an English Psalter: A Preliminary Assessment

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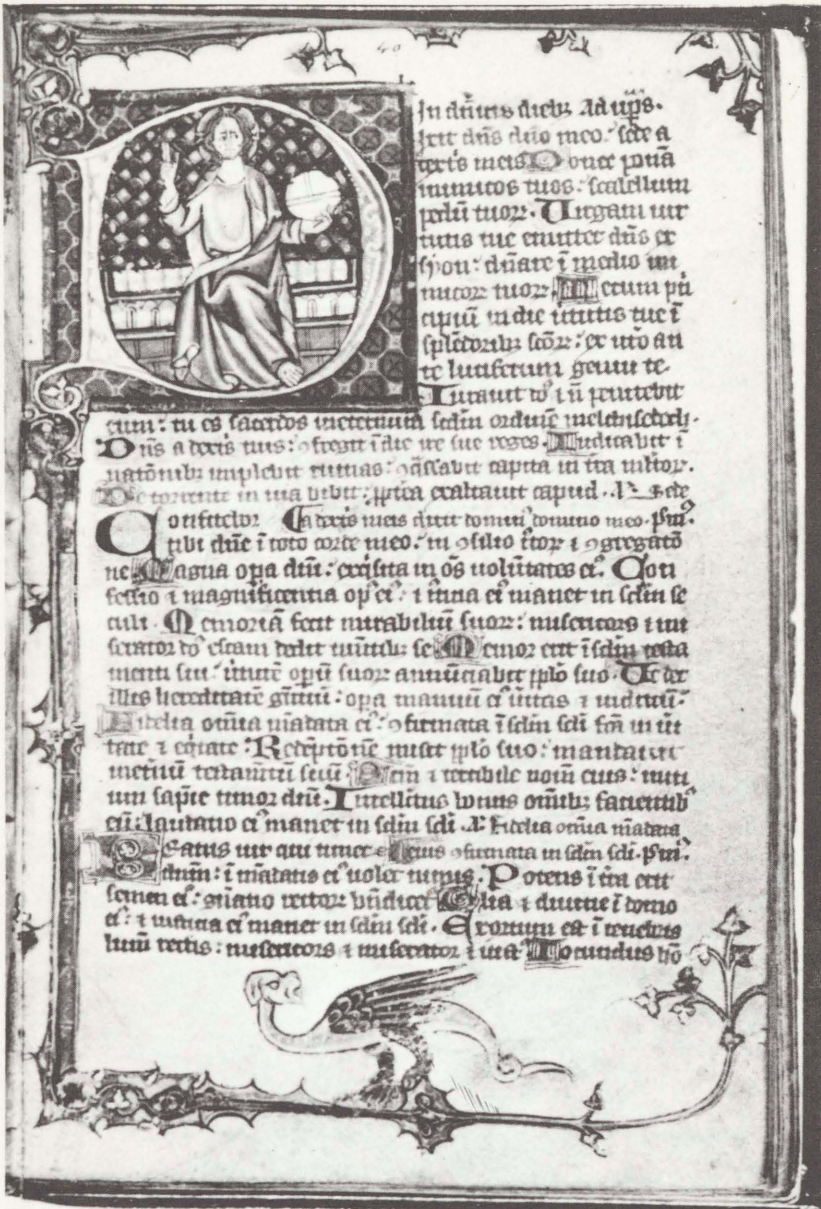


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Psalm 109 initial. Syracuse, Syracuse University,
George Arents Library, Uncat. MS 1, f. 40v.

THE COURIER

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The Illumination of an English Psalter: A Preliminary Assessment

by Bruce Watson

The psalter, or Book of Psalms, was probably the most popular devotional text from the early Middle Ages through the fourteenth century.¹ Rarely, however, did a psalter consist of just the psalms. The standard contents could include a liturgical calendar, a litany of saints, canticles—or songs from the Bible—private prayers, and, often, a book of the dead. There were, to be sure, variations in not only these contents but in the order of the psalms. For instance, there were ferial psalters that were arranged according to their liturgical sequence; nonetheless, the most frequent arrangement was the Biblical sequence.

Psalters were made for clerics and laymen alike. They were used often as an integral element in the devotional exercises of the Canonical Hours in which all the psalms were to be recited within the week. Sunday Matins began with Psalm 1. Monday began with Psalm 26, Tuesday with Psalm 38, Wednesday with Psalm 52, Thursday with Psalm 68, Friday with Psalm 80, and Saturday with Psalm 97. Psalm 109 began the Vespers cycle on Sunday.

It seems only natural in retrospect that this eight-part division of the text should have become, certainly by the early thirteenth century, the subject of a program of illumination. The illumination added not only a handy visual index but splendor to the manuscripts. Again, there were variations on this scheme. Some earlier psalters were simply divided into three parts. By the mid-thirteenth century, Psalm 51 was earmarked as the beginning of the second third of the text. By the early fourteenth century, additional psalms were illuminated, especially Psalms 101 and 119, resulting in a more complex division of the book and richer illumination.²

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¹After which the Book of Hours gains prominence. See, for example, G. Fjero, "Smith MS 36: A Study in Fifteenth Century Manuscript Illumination," *The Courier*, XIII, 1 (1976), pp. 3-27.

²G. Haseloff, *Die Psalterillustration im 13. Jahrhundert*, (Kiel, 1938), pp. 28-32. See also, V. Leroquais, *Les Psautiers Manuscrits Latins des Bibliothèques Publiques de France*, 2 vols. (Macon: Protat, 1940-41).

Several years ago the George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University, acquired a small English illuminated psalter (Uncat. MS 1), dated *ca.* 1300. It formerly had been in the collection of the Virtue and Cahill Library of the Cathedral Chapter of the Diocese of Portsmouth. Thus far, to the best of my knowledge, the only publication of the work has been the necessarily brief description of it by Barbara Larkin and Kenneth Pennington in the exhibition catalogue *Medieval Art in Upstate New York*.³ Placement of the style of the illumination of this psalter in the development of English Gothic manuscript painting may be possible through a study of certain details.

The psalter is 11.5 x 8 cm (4-1/2 x 3-1/8 inches) in size. It is comprised of but 66 vellum leaves organized into quires of twelve folios each (the last wanting a leaf). The calendar and the text are independently foliated. There are 34 lines of text on each folio in single columns, with the exception of the litany which has two columns. The incomplete litany is preceded by prayers. Both the calendar and litany are of Sarum Use, a liturgical form generally found throughout the southern, East Anglian, and Midlands areas of medieval England.⁴

There are nine historiated initials in the manuscript: folio 1r (text), the *Beatus* page, contains the initial B for Psalm 1. It frames David playing a lyre (fig. 1);

folio 8r, *Dominus illuminatio*, Psalm 26, shows David pointing to his eye as he kneels before the Lord (fig. 2);

folio 13r, *Dixi custodiam*, Psalm 38, depicts David kneeling before the Lord, pointing to his mouth (fig. 3);

folio 17r, *Quid gloriaris*, Psalm 51, marking the division of the text at the second third of the psalms, shows David cutting off the head of Goliath (fig. 4);

folio 18r, *Dixit insipiens*, Psalm 52, shows David reproving the fool (fig. 5);

folio 22v, *Salvum me fac*, Psalm 68, depicts Jonah being expelled from the mouth of the whale (fig. 6);

folio 28v, *Exultate*, Psalm 80, shows David ringing bells (fig. 7);

folio 36r, *Cantate*, Psalm 97, has two monks singing (not shown);

folio 40r, *Dixit dominus*, Psalm 109, depicts Christ giving the sign of Benediction (fig. 8).

³*Medieval Art in Upstate New York*, M. Lillich, ed. (Syracuse: Everson Museum of Art, 1974), #66, pp. 95-96. Hereinafter Exhibition Catalogue.

⁴The three other liturgical Uses in medieval Britain were York, Hereford, and Bangor. For Sarum see W. H. Frere, *The Use of Sarum*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, University Press, 1901).



Fig. 3: Psalm 38 initial. Syracuse, Syracuse University, George Arents Library, Uncat. MS 1, f. 13r.

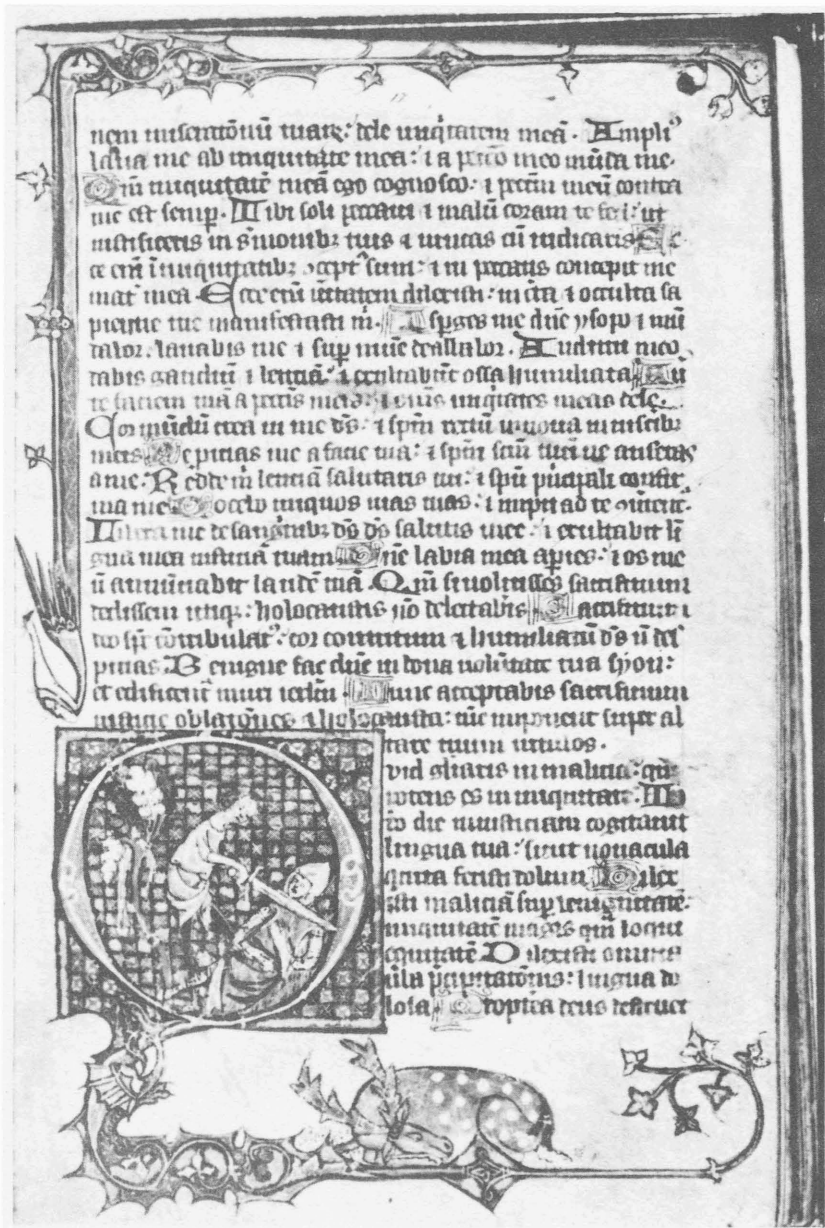


Fig. 4: Psalm 51 initial. Syracuse, Syracuse University, George Arents Library, Uncat. MS 1, f. 17r.

The iconography of these initials is within the general formula evolved in thirteenth-century psalter illumination. Although variations will be found, the scene of David as musician for Psalm 1 is certainly the most common subject in manuscripts of the period.⁵ Often variations of a minor nature occur dependent on the design of the initial. For example, if an initial is somehow compartmentalized, a slightly richer iconographic formula can be expected (cf., figs. 1 and 12). The one initial in MS 1 that is a minor variation is that for Psalm 109, showing Christ blessing (fig. 8). By 1300 one would normally expect to find Christ seated at the right hand of the Lord. After 1300 the theme is developed into the Trinity and that then becomes the convention.⁶

The style of the illuminator of MS 1 is essentially linear. Each of the figures is firmly outlined, isolating them against the blue and gold diamond or checkered grounds. The figures bend at the waist, the so-called Gothic bend,⁷ and are rather short. At the same time, they have a distinct sense of volume. This is initially the function of the strong linear articulation of the drapery folds. As seen especially in the figure of David on the *Beatus* page (fig. 1), in the Psalm 80 initial (fig. 7), and in the seated Christ (fig. 8), strong curvilinear folds of drapery define the volumes of the figures beneath. This effect is much enhanced by the illuminator's use of value gradations. The drapery of David, for instance, on the *Beatus* page (fig. 1), has deep recessive values of brown along the defining lines of the outer robe. These are delicately altered to higher values of brown, approaching white, as the full projecting volume of the leg is achieved. At once more active in brushstroke but delicate in nuance is the blue robe worn by Christ in the Psalm 109 initial (fig. 8). Here the drapery falls in heavier folds. The dark, lower values of blue define the recessive pockets of the robe. These are altered with some delicacy to higher values of blue, again approaching white, as the folds are given their highest point of projection with more vigorous brushwork.

The facial features of the figures are also linear. Contours tend to be round, the eyes large and expressive, with an overall flatness to the face, itself. There are, however, a couple of exceptions. The faces of David in the *Beatus* initial (fig. 1) and in the Psalm 26 initial (fig. 2) are more concave than the others. Also, the eyes are more deeply set and the hair, rather than being the strong sand color of most of the other figures, is softly tinted, as if it were a pen wash.

⁵I. Ragusa, "An Illuminated Psalter from Lyre Abbey," *Speculum*, XLVI, 2 (April 1971), p. 268.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 276. See, also, Haseloff, *Die Psalterillustration*, Table 16. For selected psalters after 1300 see, L. F. Sandler, *The Peterborough Psalter in Brussels and Other Fenland Manuscripts* (Greenwich, New York Graphic Society, 1974), pp. 98-99.

⁷O. E. Saunders, *English Illumination* (Florence, Pantheon, 1933), p. 95.

The colors used by the illuminator of MS 1 comprise a conservative palette. Blue, brown, and vermillion are dominant. For example, David in the *Beatus* initial (fig. 1) wears a brown robe trimmed in blue over vermillion. In the Psalm 26 initial (fig. 2) David's robe is vermillion with a blue lining over brown. In the Psalm 38 initial (fig. 3) he wears a pale blue robe over vermillion and, in the Psalm 80 initial (fig. 7), blue over brown. This last combination is also found on the figure of Christ in the Psalm 109 initial (fig. 8).

The figure style of the illuminator of this little manuscript shows a family resemblance to works illuminated slightly earlier within the milieu of London Court art.⁸ Thus, the rather short, swaying little figures of MS 1, with their flat features and emphasis on line, resemble marginal figures from the *Alphonso Psalter* (London, British Library, Add. MS 24686). This work was begun just before 1284 to celebrate the marriage of Alphonso, son of Edward I, to Margaret, daughter of the Count of Holland. The prince died before the wedding took place and the psalter was completed later by another hand. Folio 14v (fig. 9), depicting a hawking scene in the lower margin, is from this manuscript. The birds around the margin are quite naturalistic but the horseman is a squat figure with wide eyes and flat features. The drapery is drawn with a strong sense of line, yet the volume of the figure is created by subtle changes in value.⁹

Closer still to MS 1 are the figures in a jousting scene (fig. 10) in the lower margin of a late thirteenth-century copy of Henry de Bracton's *de legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. C. 160). This work has been related to the family of the Alphonso Psalter.¹⁰ The figures have a slight bend at the waist. The eyes are large and round, and the features, once again, are flat. Their strong linear quality and the overall composition of the scene, itself, are very much like the drawing and arrangement of the figures in the lower margin of the *Beatus* page of the psalter in Syracuse (fig. 1).

If the figure style of MS 1 points back to late thirteenth-century Court art, then the decoration of the initials and margins anticipates developments within the early fourteenth century. It is in this context that the observation by Barbara Larkin that the psalter is a transitional work truly comes into focus.¹¹

Each of the historiated initials of the psalter is placed on square grounds that are twelve of the thirty-four lines of text in height. These grounds are

⁸P. Brieger, *English Art, 1216-1307* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1957), ch. XII.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 223, and G. Vitzthum, *Der Pariser Miniaturmalerei* (Leipzig, Verlag von Quelle u. Meyer, 1907), p. 75.

¹⁰O. Pacht and J. J. G. Alexander, *Illuminated Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford*, vol. 3 (Oxford, Clarendon, 1973), p. 45.

¹¹Exhibition Catalogue, p. 95.

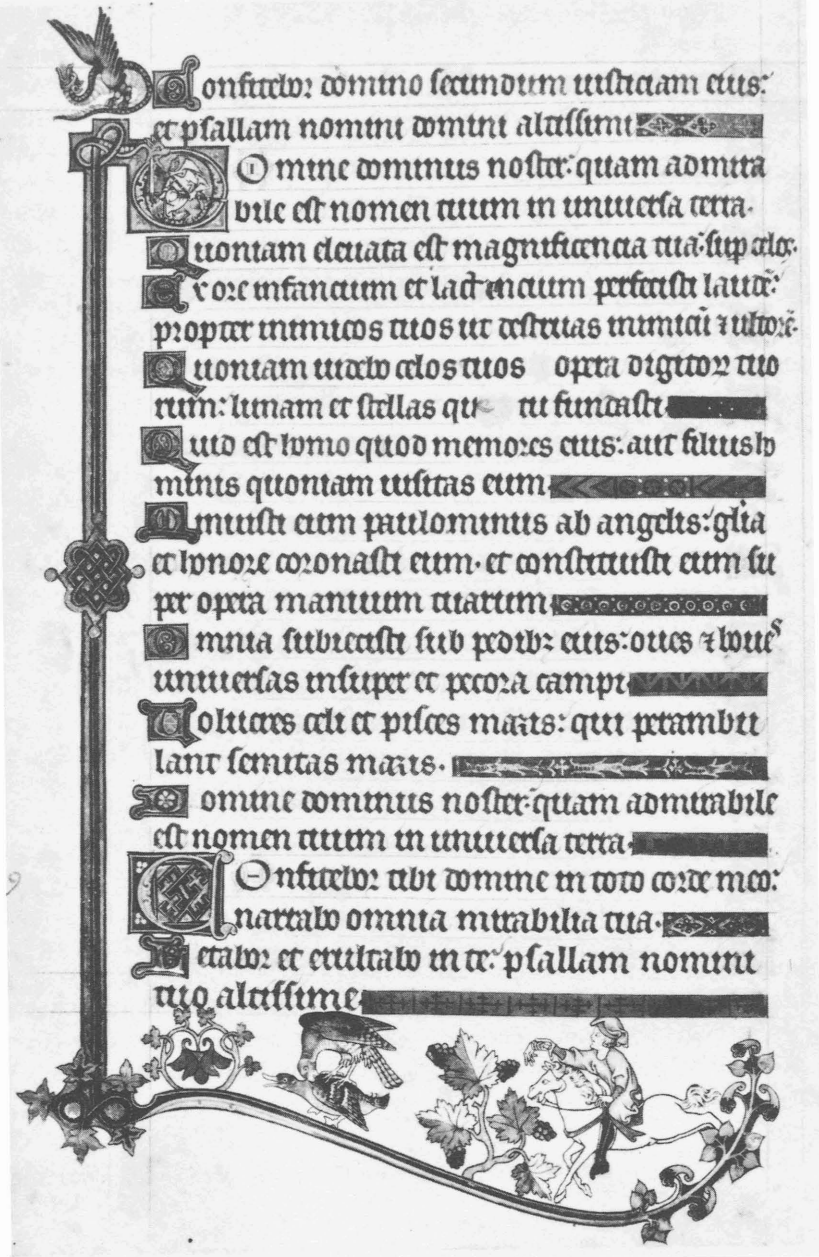


Fig. 9: Hawking scene, *Alphonso Psalter*.
London, British Library, Add. MS 24686, f. 14v.
By permission of the Board of the British Library.

framed in burnished gold and outlined in black ink. Most of the initials break open into bar or vine borders that frame the text. These terminate in sprays of blue, brown, or vermillion leaves. The initials, themselves, are blue, brown, and vermillion with white scrollwork used as highlighting. The bar borders and vines follow much the same color scheme, with burnished gold used as accent.

Each of the folios containing historiated initials is further embellished with various marginal figures. The variety used within this manuscript, as with the colors, follows an already well-established repertoire.¹² They include David and Goliath (fig. 1), a hound chasing a stag (fig. 2), a dog (fig. 3), a fallen or sleeping stag, with the added decoration of a dragon emerging from the lower margin to bite the initial as another descends from above (fig. 4), a fox (?) and a hare (fig. 5), a bird with two necks, one with a human head (fig. 6), and various other hybrids (figs. 7 and 8).

The overall design that emerges from the relationship of these seemingly independent motifs anticipates a group of manuscripts illuminated in England, ca. 1310, and attributed either directly to, or to the influences of, the *Queen Mary's Psalter* (London, British Library, Roy. MS 2. B. vii) and workshop which, from reasonable evidence, is now thought to have been located in London.¹³

One manuscript from this workshop is the *Longleat Psalter* (Longleat, Marquess of Bath, MS 11).¹⁴ Folio 68v of the *Longleat Psalter*, with the initial for psalm 52 (fig. 11), has a near-identical concept of design to the *Beatus* page of MS 1 (fig. 1). In both examples, the initials are set against diapered backgrounds within frames of burnished gold. The upper-right corner of the frames of the initials have sprays of three leaves. The initials, as such, evolve into scrolls with spikey leaves. The scrolls then become the left bar borders that are turned in the lower corners by foliage scrolls. Another bar border runs along the lower margin of each folio. Although there is an iconographic difference in the scenes depicted, the design retains its integrity. The lower borders of both psalters are turned again in the right corners by foliage scrolls and become thin vertical stems along the right margins. In MS 1, the stem branches and is decorated with masks and birds. The same effect is achieved in the *Longleat Psalter* with lozenges. The *Longleat Psalter* is a

¹²L. Randall, *Images in the Margins of Gothic Manuscripts* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1966).

¹³There has been speculation that Queen Mary's Psalter was made for the queen of Edward I. J. Evans, *English Art, 1307-1461* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1949), p. 15. See, also, G. Warner, *Queen Mary's Psalter* (London, British Museum, 1912), pp. 7 ff., and P. Lasko and N. Morgan, *Medieval Art in East Anglia, 1300-1520* (Norwich, Jarrold, 1973), p. 7. Morgan notes that most of the patrons of the workshop were in London and the south of England.

¹⁴B. Watson, "The East Anglian Problem: Fresh Perspectives from an Unpublished Psalter," *Gesta*, 2 (1974), pp. 3-16.

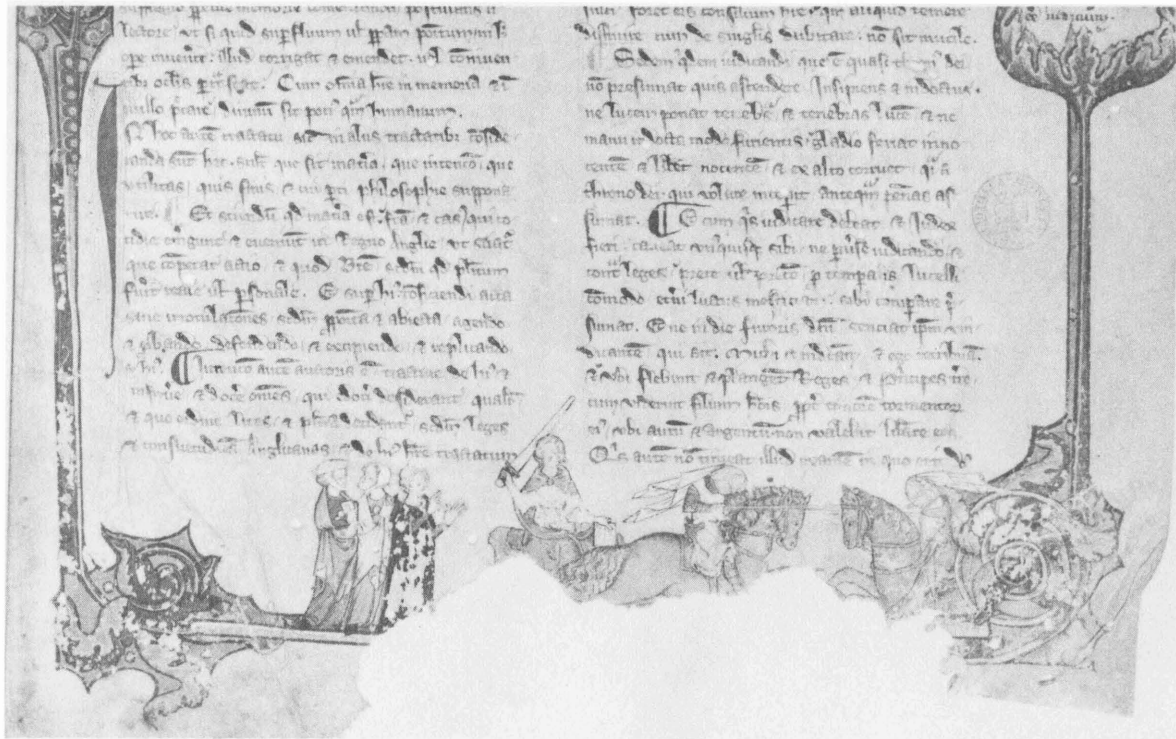


Fig. 10: Jousting scene, Henry de bracton,
de legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae.
 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. C 160, f. 1r.
 By permission



Fig. 11: Psalm 52, *Longleat Psalter*.
Longleat, Marquess of Bath, MS 11, f. 68v.
Copyright, Marquess of Bath; photo, author.

more mature work than MS 1, yet they share a somewhat archaic quality that may place them chronologically close together.

Another work that must be considered here is the *Psalter of Richard of Canterbury* (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS G. 53). Dated ca. 1310, it is a psalter illuminated by the artist of *Queen Mary's Psalter*.¹⁵ It is close in design to the *Longleat Psalter*,¹⁶ and, in that context, can be viewed as a realization of the potentials related to the earlier MS 1. Thus, the *Beatus* page of the *Psalter of Richard of Canterbury* (fig. 12) has basically the same elements of design as the other two works: the diapered ground for the initials and the gold border around the initial frame; the initial erupting into foliage that becomes the left bar border; the lower border with the foliage at each corner and with figures standing on the border; the right stem border with branches, here with daisy buds and masks. The difference is that the *Psalter of Richard of Canterbury* was executed with greater elegance and sophistication.

These similarities are suggestive of some stylistic affinities between the artists or, at least, a knowledge of the manuscripts involved. This, in its turn, necessarily raises the question regarding the locale where MS 1 was made.

It was indicated in the Exhibition Catalogue that MS 1 might be an East Anglian work.¹⁷ This attribution was based upon the listing in the calendar on June 23 of St. Etheldrede, patron saint of Ely, and of St. Edmund, an East Anglian king, on November 20. Also cited as evidence was the appearance in the illumination of the five-lobed vine leaf and the daisy bud, both considered "distinctive of East Anglian works. . ."¹⁸ Closer examination proves these to be inconclusive features for localization of the manuscript. First, although Sts. Etheldrede and Edmund are found in East Anglian calendars, their names were widely used in Sarum calendars from various places. For example, both saints are listed in calendars of manuscripts produced for such places as Exeter, Oxford, and London.¹⁹ Second, if geographic lines are drawn tightly, then Etheldrede has nothing to do with East Anglia, for Ely is technically not part of that region and had a bishopric of its own. Third, although the five-lobed leaf and daisy bud do appear in such East Anglian manuscripts as the *Ormesby Psalter* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 366), they are also found in works that were neither produced in nor destined for the region. This is exemplified by the *Longleat Psalter* that probably was produced in

¹⁵Cf., J. Plummer, *The Glazier Collection of Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, 1968), p. 28.

¹⁶Watson, "The East Anglian Problem," pp. 8 ff.

¹⁷Exhibition Catalogue, p. 95.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Respectively: the *Missal of Henry of Chichester*, Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS lat. 24; the *Longleat Psalter*; and MS 135, a Sarum missal in the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal, Paris.

London and was used in Oxford, and in the *Psalter of Richard of Canterbury* that, likewise, was produced in London and made for Richard, a monk of St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury.

None of this means, to be sure, that MS 1 was not destined for East Anglia. A special study of the calendar and litany will have to be made to determine this. Unfortunately, such documentary evidence that does exist to aid in the establishment of the destination of East Anglian works is both scarce and ambiguous. For instance, the Norwich Cathedral Priory Obedientiary Rolls indicate that scribes and illuminators were given lodging and received payment for the making of manuscripts. However, books were also sent out to be finished and were purchased in a finished state, as well.²⁰ Therefore, although MS 1 may have been destined for East Anglia, there is no need to believe that it was made there.

With this caution in mind, one may say that MS 1 was produced in London. Of course, the illuminator may have been a travelling artist; but the stylistic affinities of the psalter to earlier London Court art, on the one side, and to the later *Queen Mary's Psalter* group, on the other, would seem to diminish that alternative.

If this conclusion is confirmed by further research, then the significance of this little psalter in Syracuse is much enhanced. MS 1 would become an important element in the comprehension of the diffusion of the late thirteenth-century Court Style and the subsequent development of the *Queen Mary's Psalter* group. It is through the study of such seemingly minor works that this important transitional period in English art can be studied with the precision that has been lacking.

²⁰Sandler, *The Peterborough Psalter*, p. 134. See, also, my forthcoming article "The Tiptoft Missal and the Court Style: Perspectives from the Techniques of the Book," *Scriptorium*.

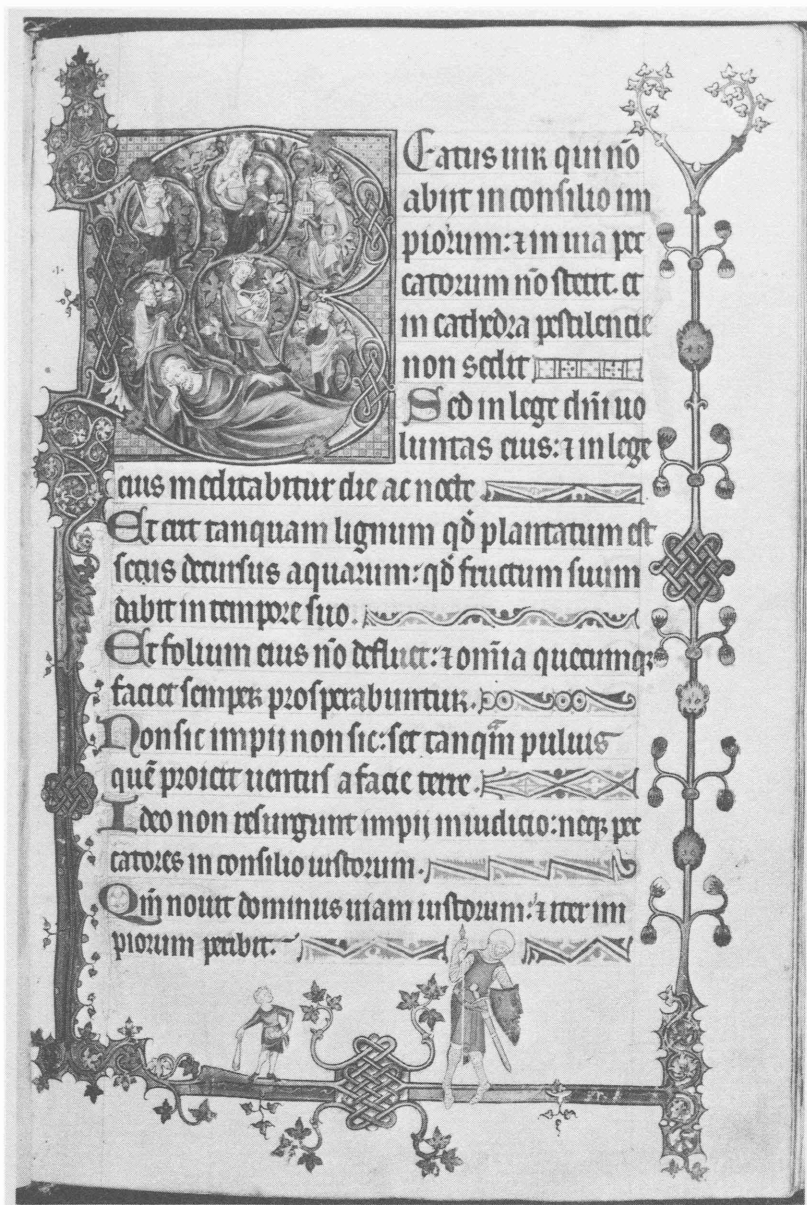


Fig. 12: *Beatus* page, Psalm 1, initial,
Psalter of Richard of Canterbury.
 New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS G. 53, f. 6r.
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