

The Methodology of Credibility

Assessing the Manuscript Witnesses
to Beatus of Liébana *On the Apocalypse*

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Amount of Funding Requested: \$395,500

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Project Description

The Material

Two books of the Bible are principally concerned with the end of historical time and the coming of the Apocalypse: Daniel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New. Both employ complex imagery and have attracted commentators over the centuries. A major Latin commentary *On the Apocalypse* was produced by Beatus of Liébana, who composed its first recension around the year 786 in his monastery of Valcavado in Asturias, now in Northern Spain. Beatus related the visions described in Revelation to events in his own time and interpreted their signs as a fulfillment of those prophecies.

Beatus's long and densely woven text, together with an extensive cycle of illustrations, continued to be copied over centuries, mostly in Spain. In some copies, his text keeps company with the commentary by Jerome (circa 342–420) *On the Book of Daniel*, also illustrated, as nowhere else among its own witnesses. Composed perhaps in 407, it belongs among Jerome's many commentaries that emerged from the long work, in Rome and Bethlehem, of producing his Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, whereas Beatus's text arose in troubled times of division and heresy within the Spanish Church, coupled with Muslim incursions into the Iberian peninsula. The Beatus manuscripts offer a powerful testimony in both word and image to a continued interest in Apocalyptic material of both Testaments, re-shaped for new times and concerns.

The surviving copies comprise some thirty-five manuscripts or fragments. They belong to thirty-two public or private collections, housed in libraries, museums, and archives. Mostly they reside in Spain (Barcelona, Burgo de Osma, El Escorial, Girona, León, Madrid, Monserrat, Salamanca, Seo de Urgell, Silos, Valladolid, and Zaragoza). The others of known location reside elsewhere in Europe (Berlin, Lisbon, London, Manchester, Paris, Rome, Turin, and the Vatican City) and North America (Mexico City and New York City). More copies or fragments may yet come to light.

Some copies come from Asturias, and perhaps even from Beatus's own monastery, but none dates from his lifetime, so that it remains debatable to what extents the illustrations and their titles derive from his own time or represent later accretions or re-interpretations. The survivors date from the ninth to eighteenth centuries; some were made in stages, in different styles, and some late copies amount to primary witnesses, as they preserve traces of lost manuscripts. The group employs Visigothic, Mozarabic, Romanesque, Gothic, Humanistic, and Archaizing styles, with some Late-Antique, Islamic, and other influences. There are an unusual number of colophons, citing dates and names of scribes, artists, patrons, or places, as successive makers saw fit to mark their own identity upon the transmitted work. The corpus attests to diverse patterns of circulation, transmission, style, cultural concerns, and approaches to the art of the book.

The Nature of the Problem

The text and illustrations have each been the focus of scholarly investigations, producing a growing body of secondary literature. These works include editions of the text; and surveys, individual studies, or catalogues of the manuscripts, arranged according to various practices or interests. Facsimiles or partial facsimiles of some important witnesses to the group have appeared in print, with specialist commentaries examining aspects of their codicology, palaeography, library history, and art history. Even with all this work, there remain numerous issues that the current approaches often cannot take fully into account.

There are questions to be asked of each and every witness in the corpus. Each can testify in some way, but to what does it authentically testify and to what extent is it self-consistent? Of its composition, what came from its exemplar(s) and what is a product of its own time or maker(s)? Such concerns apply to text and image alike. Changes in political and theological thought would inevitably color interpretations of the Apocalypse and of Beatus's views. The very passage of time required that his interpretations of the sixth age — the time-span of unknown length extending from the Incarnation to the Last Judgment — had to

find adjustments; and yet, at the same time, the copying might strive to preserve the venerable text without undue distortion. In the illustration, script, and decoration a similar tension pertains between the authority of the exemplar and the need to present an updated or enlivened rendition for a new patron, location, or situation. Apparent lapses to different styles or habits in an otherwise seemingly consistent approach might signal traces imposed by a different witness. When discerned as such, these complexities can render each manuscript “translucent,” as a window onto earlier states in the transmission of the genre, at one and the same time as it embodies the circumstances of its own contribution.

The multiple aspects of the manuscripts set traps, even for specialists. As a concrete example, how credible is a colophon? Does it really name and date the people, place, and time involved in the production of that very copy? Might it not come from an earlier exemplar, or even have been added or altered later, in order to give credence and authority to a particular witness? Likewise, even if it accurately names its own maker(s), to what extent was its scribe also the artist, its artist also the scribe, or its patron taking claim for their work? For, say, an art historian to use the information presented in a colophon as evidence of dating or origin, without analyzing the full complexities of the textual, linguistic, palaeographical, and other material, can place judgments of this kind on dangerous ground.

Such cursory treatment exemplifies the assumption that the colophons, like the titles for the illustrations, are “transparent” to modern eyes. That assumption deserves to be called into question, along with the prevailing assumption that the Middle Ages and its manuscripts are readily accessible to the modern world, accustomed instead to mass-produced printed books and to far more widely diverse traditions. The dispersal, fragmentation, and destruction of medieval libraries, bindings, architectural settings, décors, and patterns of life and thought have robbed *all* the witnesses from that past of their full original contexts.

The Scope and Aims of the Project

Taken as a group, the *Beatus* manuscripts provide a unique opportunity to develop an exposition of the techniques and approaches needed to determine the integrity of manuscript evidence. Their uniqueness stems from a remarkable convergence of characteristics. The members contain essentially the same text, so that textual stemmata can be linked to production and transmission. Their number is small enough to examine in detail, yet large enough to yield meaningful interrelationships. Their wide date-range can be used to track the historical, political, theological, and other forces at work in them. Their principal clustering in the Iberian peninsula makes it possible to focus upon such forces mainly within an isolated region of Europe, albeit subjected to multiple invasions and influences. The themes and motifs span a broad range, from world chronology, numerology, genealogies, and maps, to musical instruments, textiles, architecture, living beings, and divine or demonic creatures.

The survivors amply demonstrate that the combined text-and-image did not remain static in transmission, but acquired accretions, alterations, and re-creations, as succeeding generations and different regions approached it with changing needs, interpretations, and vision. The number of survivors renders these cycles much more amenable to such analysis than the comparably complex cycles of much wider distribution accompanying the *Psychomachia* by another Spanish author, Prudentius (348 – circa 410), or, for that matter, the Bible as a whole.

The *Beatus* group offers an important, wide-ranging, and yet tractable case-study for assessing the credibility of manuscripts as witnesses to text and image, especially in tandem, given the character of *Beatus*'s text in its transmitted form, as a text designed to be illustrated, and in which thought is made visible. The didactic images are tailor-made to the text, whereby textuality is integrated with the picture program, and *vice versa*. The artists of the group created new iconographic forms specifically to explain *Beatus*'s commentary. A notable case is the image of the seven churches as seven arches, showing their coordinated unity. It is thanks to its didactic program and iconographic creativity and originality that the *Beatus* group constitutes a diverse, yet highly recognizable entity.

Several issues of credibility can be immediately discerned with respect to the Beatus material. For example, how to cross-examine elements in relation to other testimony in both the same and other witnesses to a text? How to assess the interrelationships between a text and its illustrations, between illustrations and their titles, and between different stages in their transmission? How to recognize and disentangle the multiple functions of the late copies as witnesses to earlier copies, to the early modern recovery of medieval source-materials, and to the origins of medieval studies? How is knowledge of the illustrated survivors extended or altered by the others that only contain blanks for intended illustrations, retain cut-out gaps from excised illustrations, or carry offsets or other traces from lost illustrations? How representative is the fragmentary corpus itself of the former whole? How does it stand in relation to Beatus and his time; witnesses to his other texts; book-production in medieval Spain and its neighbors; the rôle of the Apocalypse in art and thought; approaches to the Book of Daniel; and the transmission of Biblical texts and their illustrations?

Problems of credibility are not confined to the Beatus manuscripts, but this group offers an especially telling spatial and temporal locus for a broad range of the pitfalls and challenges encountered with primary and secondary sources, as well as some solutions for them. Explanations of their art do not yet fully embrace the art of the books as a whole. A comprehensive analysis of the text, its aims, and its context deserves to be set against the individual manuscripts, also viewed as products of their own place and time.

We intend to formulate an appropriate and teachable methodology for assessing the character of such testimony as it crosses time, space, language, culture, and systems of belief. Our tenet is that these questions are answerable only by considering the evidence presented *across* disciplines and that only by identifying and resolving inconsistencies will progress be made *within* disciplines.

The Collaborative Process

Uni-disciplinary studies have an indisputable value, whereby specialists write for their own colleagues within a set field. Terms do not need to be defined, as familiarity with a specific background, previous work, continuing controversies, and current issues can be assumed. The discourse generates a focused analysis, but that very concision can render much of the important information inaccessible to scholars even in related fields, let alone to outsiders. For subjects containing material that crosses diverse disciplines, it is necessary to bring together scholars who can traverse those distances sufficiently that the analyses in one field are made accessible to the specialists in another, and can be accurately interpreted or translated, without losing or hiding the complexity and significance of the issues. Such is the case performed with manuscripts, which function multiply as carriers of text, archaeological artefacts, layers of history, works of art, and monuments of culture.

Our project will use the Beatus group to explore its own particular concrete issues and to present the methodology of investigation, inter-disciplinary collaboration, and multi-disciplinary analysis, as a casebook for other historical and art-historical endeavors. For such a project to succeed, its members must be capable simultaneously of presenting the evidence of their specialities, while comprehending the analyses from other specialist areas, so as to integrate the different aspects more precisely.

Both principal team members are committed to this approach and have experience of working together. Prof. MacCormack's scholarship ranges from classical antiquity to medieval and early modern Spain and colonial Latin America. She began working on the text of Beatus in 1993 for an invited lecture on "The City Built in Heaven." Her article on "Sin, Citizenship, and the Salvation of Souls" bears on early medieval Spain, and methodologies that she developed in her work on cultural and religious change in Europe and the Americas will help formulate our approaches to the Beatus material. Dr. Budny's research on aspects of art history in various media has produced publications for a wide range of audiences. Her recent major catalogue of *Insular, Anglo-Saxon, and Early Anglo-Norman Manuscript Art at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge* (1997) reports results of a collaborative research project devoted to a selected group of

manuscripts in a single collection. Besides its unusually broad definition of “art,” the catalogue has an extensive report of the methodology, which explains and justifies the use of the numerous approaches — codicological, historical, palaeographical, and so on — used in re-assessing the manuscripts.

Our joint approach to inter-disciplinary studies is exemplified by Dr. Budny’s paper on “Sovereignty and the Bayeux Tapestry,” at Prof. MacCormack’s symposium for her 1996–7 seminar on “Sovereignty,” using the early European encounter of Latin America as a case-study. The seminar’s examination of problems in historical evidence and interpretation made it possible to present parallels between the newly-conquered Anglo-Saxons and the vanquished Incas, as seen in the artifacts which both produced for their new rulers.

In such ways, our project can draw directly upon a manuscript scholar and art historian on the one hand, and on the other a textual scholar and historian, dedicated to the history and influences of texts and their social anchoring in their own time. Text and image are strongly represented in both our work, from different vantage points. Our different but converging experience in working with text and image in tandem, as they function in their own particular contexts and as they cross different periods and regions, gives the necessary grounding for approaching the particular characteristics of the Beatus group. Such a combination enables a powerful bridge between the several necessary areas of expertise for our project.

The Stage of Development of the Project

We propose a new project, although our work for its methodology, its combined fields, and some of its specific subject matter has advanced in our other projects over several decades. A key approach in this new methodology is to have different specialists working side-by-side over the primary evidence. In this way questions can be rapidly posed and answered and inconsistencies can be determined and explored.

As a pilot for this proposal, in spring 1998 we examined jointly the tenth-century Morgan Beatus, a pivotal and controversial witness. Working together, we noticed a number of anomalies in the published accounts, the resolution of which must await extended examination of both that and the other manuscripts. Our initial exploration also revealed fruitful lines of approach in some elements so far untapped in scholarly analysis. Following upon our observations, we have continued to plan our research by identifying the existing range of studies on the group, its members, its relatives, and their divers contexts across time and place. In spring 1999, we will both participate in the symposium devoted to “The Apocalypse in Word and Image,” organized by Dr. Budny. Its session on Beatus manuscripts will afford a valuable opportunity to gather feedback from some leading scholars in the field. We will thus be ready in summer 1999 to begin our project.

Institutional Resources to be Consulted and Travel Plans

We aim to examine all the survivors in the flesh (subject to permission) as well as in photographic reproduction. Direct examination would enable us, for example, to study the construction of the manuscript in detail, to compare its inks and pigments, to determine sequences of its production, to assess stages in its history, and to observe evidence frequently ignored in manuscript study. Such evidence includes annotations, scribbles, and sketches, which often appear on endleaves and in margins. Such seemingly insignificant elements, when deciphered and set in context, often yield crucial information about the origin and history of the book.

Examination of the manuscripts themselves and related materials requires travel to England, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Mexico, as well as within the United States. Important related materials concern other manuscripts made by the same scribes, artists, or centers as some in the group; manuscripts of other texts by Beatus or from his region; other cycles of Apocalypse and Daniel illustrations; and other works with related motifs, images, and styles. Our journeys will include study of other materials in the same collections or other collections in the same city.

Resource materials also include photocopies, microfilms, and photographs of manuscripts, printed works, and other media. Where permitted, we would carry out photography ourselves, possibly employing specialized techniques, including micro-photography and endoscopy. It is an advantage that Dr. Budny combines the skills of a professional manuscript photographer with the expertise of a manuscript scholar.

We would visit the repositories in stages over the two years, mostly in joint visits, from summer 1999 to summer 2001. Dr. Budny would devote full-time to the project, while Prof. MacCormack would continue with part-time teaching at Michigan for one semester each year. During those semesters we would concentrate upon the secondary literature (mainly in the libraries of our institutions in Princeton and Ann Arbor) and the *Beatus* material in New York, with a visit to Mexico City in the first year and to Berlin in the second. Dr. Budny would visit Michigan at intervals to confer with Prof. MacCormack.

Our European visits will concentrate upon Spain, mainly with Madrid as a base. Three joint journeys of three months each and a fourth of two weeks would take place in the summer and the released semester of both years, with a fifth journey of one month by Dr. Budny in the second year. Within these journeys would occur our visits elsewhere in Europe. Returning to the New York material in the second year allows for its detailed re-examination in the light of our deepening knowledge of other members of the corpus, the secondary literature, and our selected case-studies.

Results

Four major results would emerge from this project. Their modes would focus on the dissemination, in word and image, to scholarly communities in art history and other fields, as well as to wider audiences.

The first is the production of a book that both details the case-studies by which the "Methodology of Credibility" has been established and guides its application in other fields. These studies, or chapters, would address significant and symptomatic problems and the strategies for addressing or resolving them. Using carefully selected examples as a model, the book would constitute a textbook or source-text for specialists and students alike.

The second is an international symposium to bring together the specialists in the diverse fields, to report our findings, and to demonstrate the importance of multi-disciplinary approaches. This symposium (for which funding would be sought elsewhere) would situate the results of our research not only within the *Beatus* group, but also within the larger arena of related genres attesting to the creation and transmission of largely illustrated texts, religious and secular, from the late-antique period onward.

The third is an exhibition of our new photography. It would illustrate our methodology, its application, its results, and its potential for other domains. The photographs and their descriptions would document aspects of the subject-matter, challenges, techniques, aims, and discoveries of our project as a whole. The exhibition would thereby complement both our book and our international symposium.

The fourth is the training of research assistants in the multi-disciplinary approach, its methodology, and its methods. Tracing and collecting the secondary literature, in tandem with our increasing understanding of the primary sources, would provide a superb training ground for younger scholars. The training would focus upon how to use, to assess, and to interpret such literature when faced with the artifacts themselves. It would thus develop a diverse range of skills valuable not only in scholarship but also in the wider world.

The combination of elements in our project will both increase understanding of the specific body of material and prepare the foundation for future work in diverse areas. It will do so by deriving and applying an innovative methodology and by stimulating new perspectives and capabilities arising only from this integrated approach. The applications suit many fragmentary bodies of evidence, whether verbal, visual, or material.