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Review of John Williams, *Visions of the End in Medieval Spain. Catalogue of Illustrated Beatus Commentaries on the Apocalypse and Study of the Geneva Beatus.*

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Williams, John. *Visions of the End in Medieval Spain. Catalogue of Illustrated Beatus Commentaries on the Apocalypse and Study of the Geneva Beatus*. Ed. Therese Martin. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017. 291pp.

The so-called Beatus manuscripts are the surviving copies of a medieval commentary on the Apocalypse, attributed to the eight-century northern Iberian monk Beatus of Liébana. In 2015, UNESCO included them in its Memory of the World Programme, placing them among the most beautiful and original works produced by Medieval Western civilization. Indeed, they are unique for several reasons: they were key artifacts in the transmission of ancient culture and knowledge to medieval times, they were also a definitive milestone in the development of Western apocalyptic tradition. The fame and importance of these manuscripts is based on the pictorial cycle that illustrates twenty-nine of the surviving copies. In fact, many of them are illustrated with a set of striking and vivid color images, located between the *storiae* (biblical passages) and the commentaries. They thus constitute the most profusely illustrated Christian exegetical work created prior to the eighth century and one of the largest and longest pictorial traditions in medieval art, along with the *Pyschomachia* and the *Speculum Virginum*. Finally, the growing recognition of the Beatus manuscripts over time and their deep impact and influence on Modern and Contemporary culture must be highlighted. For instance, they served as a source of inspiration for Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*.

John Williams was one of the most renowned specialists on the Beatus manuscripts, to which he devoted a lifetime of study. His major contribution was, no doubt, the publication of the five-volume *The Illustrated Beatus: A Corpus of the Illustrations of the Commentary on the Apocalypse*, which came out between 1994 and 2003. In *Visions of the End in Medieval Spain*, his latest book, Williams revised and summarized his ideas on this set of manuscripts, taking into account the conclusions of Roger Gryson's last edition of the work as well as information and material from two new, previously unknown illustrated copies of the manuscripts that have come to light very recently. In addition, the book offers a new and updated census of illustrated Beatus commentaries, both complete and fragmentary, and an in-depth study of the Geneva Beatus, one of the recently discovered illustrated copies.

To carry out this project, especially in the final stages of its preparation for publication, Williams had the assistance of his former student, and later colleague, Therese Martin. A specialist on Medieval Iberian art history herself, Martin edited the volume and oversaw the publication process until the book went to press, just a few months after Williams's death. Thanks to Williams and Martin's joint efforts, this book offers the first comprehensive study of each of the twenty-nine illustrated Beatus manuscripts that have been discovered and identified to date.

The book is structured in four parts. The first (21-66) is an introductory essay, where Williams contextualizes the work's creation in eighth-century Iberia. He considers both the textual and pictorial traditions of the work, discusses the main Iberian monasteries and scriptoria where these copies were made, and presents new ideas on the copies made outside the Peninsula.

Williams reformulates here one of his most important analyses of the Beatus manuscripts, which concerns the illustrations' origin; indeed a controversial issue for

twentieth-century historiography. Taking into account that the *Beatus Commentary* borrowed a lot of textual material from the fourth-century *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by the North African writer Ticonius, conventional wisdom among scholars was that a lost copy of the illustrated Ticonius had served as a model for the eighth-century work, including both textual and visual components. However, fighting against the idea of “lost models” playing a defining role in medieval book illumination, Williams earlier defended the originality of the images accompanying the eighth-century *Commentary*. According to his previous publications, they would have been created specifically for this work and subsequently served as an inspiration for coeval and later illustrators. Here, Williams slightly qualifies this conclusion and suggests that the work could have been conceived as an illustrated work with a Tyconian manuscript as model, ultimately leaving the issue open to further investigation.

Notably, in this opening section, Williams proposes a new family tree of copies of the *Commentary*. The original eighth-century work did not survive, but up to forty-one witnesses to the *Commentary* have been found to date, including illustrated and non-illustrated copies. Twenty-nine of them have illumination and are thus represented in this *stemma*, which includes for the first time the recently discovered Geneva *Beatus*, copied and illuminated in Southern Italy. Furthermore, based on Roger Gryson’s idea that as many copies of the manuscript have been lost as have survived, Williams suggests that at least 100 complete manuscripts could have been executed.

Part 2 (66-148) is a complete register of the twenty-nine illustrated *Beatus Commentaries* and fragments known to date. Williams adds here the Milan fragment and the Geneva *Beatus*, discovered after his previously published five-volume catalogue, but excludes the two non-illustrated complete copies (the Alcobaça and Poblet *Beatus*). Each entry provides the manuscript’s codicological information, a brief description of its key historical, stylistic, and iconographical features and specificities, and the main bibliographical references.

Part 3 (151-166) is an introduction to the main features of the Geneva *Beatus*, which is bound together in a single codex with another work (Priscilian’s *Institutiones grammaticae*), is written in Beneventan script, and belonged to the manuscript holdings of the Swiss Congrégation des Missionnaires de Saint François de Sales. This chapter focuses on the location of this recently-discovered copy within the family tree of *Beatus* manuscripts, the model on which the *Commentary* might have been based, and the scriptorium where it could have been produced. Williams proposes including this copy within the first—and older—of the two basic branches that form the family tree, based on conclusions that other scholars, such as Roger Gryson, reached when conducting their textual analyses of the manuscript. As for the model, Williams leans toward one possibility: he believes it was a manuscript which originated at the monastery of San Millán de la Cogolla, and was later transferred to Southern Italy. Williams provides several reasons to consider Monte Cassino as the scriptorium where the Geneva *Beatus* could have been produced, such as the similarities the manuscript has to a copy of the *De rerum naturis* of Hrabanus Maurus (Cod. Casin. 132). At the end of this chapter, Williams adds a brief discussion of the illustrator’s contributions to the images accompanying this manuscript, which serves to introduce the material analyzed in the forthcoming section.

The last part of the monograph (167-267) is a comprehensive study of the

illustrations accompanying the Geneva Beatus. One by one, he analyzes each of the images that form the pictorial cycle, providing first the biblical passage that is illustrated, then pointing out the inscriptions and textual captions that were added to the miniatures, and finally describing the main iconographical features of the image.

This analysis is followed by a photographic appendix (208-267) containing all of the miniatures in the manuscript, and a second appendix detailing the manuscript's codicological construction (269-271). It is remarkable that, beyond the photographs of the Geneva Beatus, the book contains more than a hundred photos of other Beatus copies and medieval works of art, to which Williams refers throughout the four chapters. Although some of them are black-and-white and some are low-resolution, it is laudable that the publishing house made the effort to gather such a considerable number of photographs, especially when the trend in publishing is precisely the opposite. The monograph ends with a very comprehensive bibliography and three useful indices of people, places, and subjects.

For anyone interested in Beatus manuscripts, this book deserves a close reading. Williams' latest book will become a landmark where Western apocalyptic tradition is concerned, as well as a reference monograph for specialists in medieval art, manuscript studies, book illumination, and medieval Iberia and Spanish history.

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