

# Miniatures from two 13th Century Bibles

Holkham Mss. 10 & 13

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Publication nos. C00511/512

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## Two Thirteenth-century French Bibles

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### FOREWORD

At the beginning of the thirteenth century the University of Paris rose as European centre of theological studies. The teaching of the Canons of the Abbey of St. Victor (finished in 1110), especially of Hugh, Richard and Andrew, had helped to create a new intellectual interest in the "letter" of the Scriptures outside the Cloister. This interest inspired the great Parisian biblical commentators, Peter Comestor (died c.1169), Peter the Chanter (died 1197) and Stephen Langton, later Archbishop of Canterbury (died 1228), who left the Schools in 1206 after having divided the text of the Bible into chapters and verses to make easy reference possible.

The leisurely studies of St. Victor gave way to businesslike coaching for university examinations, and the Gospel commentaries began to reach the unlearned laity in fuller measure after the Dominican and Franciscan Friars established themselves at Paris in 1229 and 1231 respectively. Politically Philip Augustus had made Paris a really important centre for the first time. The way was clear for the appearance of a great Biblical commentator at Paris, Hugh of St. Cher, and for a saint of the throne, Louis XI (1214-1270).

## INTRODUCTION

Part 1 contains 84 miniatures from Holkham MS.10, a Vulgate measuring 225 X 150 mm. This series omits initials illuminated with tendrils and monsters which introduce the prologues to the Pentateuch, Joshua, Kings, Chronicles I and II, Esdras, Tobias, Judith, Esther, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and other books. The colours are blue and crimson with gold, vermilion, white and occasionally pale green. Readers of the Authorised Version should note that the Vulgate contains certain books which they are used to finding in the Apocrypha and that the first and second books of Samuel are called the first and second books of Kings.

Part 2 contains 81 miniatures from Holkham MS.13, a Vulgate measuring 225 X 140 mm. It is interesting to note the similarities and the differences in the treatment accorded to the initials of the various books of the Bible in these two manuscripts. One day it may be possible to learn much more than is known at present about the production of such Bibles in thirteenth-century France. Such knowledge may be derived from such comparisons of initials.

## NOTES ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

The pictures in Holkham MSS.10 and 13 are confined to the initials of the various books of the Bible and Prologues. Their treatment is similar to, but not identical with, other little Bibles written in Paris in the thirteenth century and one day no doubt some scholar will work out in detail the families into which they can be classified and will deduce much about the early publishing trade as practised in the scriptoria of Paris, said by John of Garland to have been situated in the Parvis Notre Dame. They worked under regulations drawn up by the University of Paris which was concerned for their good though it apparently allowed parchment makers, bookbinders and stationers to combine their occupation with that of tavermer.

The wide range of historiated initials, as initials containing pictures are technically called, allows the appearance of a number of interesting commonplaces of medieval iconography. The Prologue shows St. Jerome writing his translation of the Bible into Latin. The initial I with which the Vulgate (like the English Authorized Version) begins shows the days of Creation. It generally shows the creation of Eve from the side of Adam and stresses the spiritual link between the old and the new Adam, the loser and the regainer of Paradise by including the Crucifixion. In Numbers the pointed caps or pilei worn by the Jews are of a type which they were compelled to wear in the thirteenth century. In Deuteronomy Moses, as usual, is characterised by horns, due to a mistranslation of the Hebrew word for rays of light by St. Jerome, against the repetition of which the learned Albertus Magnus, who was teaching at Paris in 1242-48, protested in vain.

The illuminator provided the Psalms not just with a single picture of David harping in the initial B but with illustrations for Psalms 26, 38, 52, 68, 80, 97 and 109 as the Vulgate numbers the Psalms known as 27, 39, 53, 69, 81, 98 and 102 in the Authorised Version. These were some of the Psalms which were of chief liturgical importance in the services proper to the different days of the week as explained in the set on Psalter illustrations. David touching his lips, the fool (here with bat and ball), the hammering of bells by David, the tonsured choir and the Lord talking to my Lord are pictures which spread over areas under Parisian influence and contrast with the methods of Psalter illustration which had been common previously in areas under English influence. In them Psalms 50 and 100 had received illustrations. Such pictures served the practical purpose of making it easy to find places in the book which were often wanted. A picture which is self-explanatory to readers of the Vulgate but puzzling to one familiar only with the Authorized Version is the picture of Isaiah being sawn in two. This illustrates an ancient tradition repeated by Jerome in his prologue that Isaiah hid in a tree and was there cut up by a tyrant with a saw - a saw for sawing wood, mistranslated in Latin as a saw made of wood. Such points are explained further in the sets on Old and New Testament illustrations. Perhaps the most interesting is the illustration preceding Ezekiel. This shows the four beasts (derived from Assyrian mythology) from which the symbols of the four evangelists, the angel, the lion, the calf and the eagle of SS. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are derived. These beasts are, of course, shown before the relevant gospels.