Although early Christians did not invent the codex, it is widely accepted that they chose this form well before it became dominant in the Greco-Roman as well as Jewish cultures, and they did not waver from this choice whether as a persecuted minority or a favored majority. Unlike the scroll, the codex helped to unify a diversity of texts with multiple authors, multiple audiences, and multiple ethnicities and languages. The codex also had the advantage that it was not associated with any sacred texts, such as Torah scrolls, and was useful for study purposes. While the texts were gathered together early in Christianity, the surviving manuscripts indicate that the luxury of illuminations would take centuries to develop in any number. Illuminated manuscripts are rare, in part because they were not produced in the numbers of codices with only text and their expense was also prohibitive. It is not known how many illuminated manuscripts were made, but their appearance, and survival, begins in the early fifth century when Christianity was well established and enjoyed a wealthy patronage. Despite the small number of extant manuscripts, the variations in book design and the relationship of illustration to text indicate that between the years 400 and 700 was a period of experimentation. It can also be suggested that the earliest illuminated books were a relatively straightforward illustration of the text, while later illuminated books show a greater sophistication in how pictures might help to convey the Christian message. This chapter is organized by the type of book being illustrated moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament and then to more secular books. What is noticeable in this survey is that there are no surviving illustrated pandects, or a complete Bible as is used today. Single books, or gatherings of books such as the Pentateuch or the four Gospels, were the norm. Missing from this survey is an illustrated Psalter, since no illustrated book of Psalms has been discovered in the early Christian period; perhaps because poetry is more challenging to illustrate than narrative stories. In this early Christian period, however, there is a notable attempt to align Church teaching with the challenges of illustrating a sacred text. Although the illuminated codex was not the norm in the Roman Empire, the books created for an elite Christian audience would be firmly rooted in the aesthetics of the old religions.

**Old Testament**

The earliest Old Testament book with illustrations is the so-called *Quedlinburg Itala* (Berlin, Dt. Staatsbib., Cod. theol. lat., fol. 485) that is believed to have been produced in Rome in the
second quarter of the fifth century (Figure 16.1). The five surviving pages, four with illustrations, were in poor condition when they were glued into the bindings of Quedlinburg’s parish accounts in 1618. Two fragments of a sixth page also survive. Discovered between 1865 and 1887, the leaves contain parts of the four books of Kings (1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings). The text is one of many Latin texts in circulation before Jerome’s canonical translation, the Vulgate, was fully accepted. Each page is filled with two or more illustrations in rectangular dark red frames and interspersed within the text. Multi-figural narrative scenes are set against backgrounds painted in an illusionistic style, suggesting that the reader is looking through a window into the distance.

Figure 16.1  Scenes from 1 Samuel 15, Quedlinburg Itala. Rome, early 5th century. Wikimedia Commons.
A fascinating aspect of the manuscript is the lengthy instructions in a cursive hand, which have become visible due to the flaking of the top layer of paint. They are formulated as guides to the artist: for example, “Make where the prophet withdraws and when King Saul tries to hold him by the end of his mantle, cuts it off, and withdraws running (fol. 2).” The kingly figures such as Saul, David, Solomon, and Agag are dressed in the garb of a Roman emperor, implying that contemporary patrons had a taste for linking the imperial Roman with the Old Testament past. When new subjects were needed for Christian art, artists often relied on stock motifs, such as a representation of the emperor sacrificing, which could be the model for an Old Testament king. Although reproductions of the illustrations do not show this feature, golden highlights were used throughout the illustration on items such as robes. The fourteen surviving miniatures that illustrate even minor scenes and the instructions to the artist(s) indicate that a complex, lengthy and expensive pictorial cycle was specially created for this book. Based on stylistic evidence and the choice of Latin, there is general agreement that the book was created in Rome.

There are two surviving illustrated Genesis manuscripts, the Cotton Genesis (London, BL, Cotton MS. Otho B. VI) and the Vienna Genesis (Vienna, Österreich. Nbib., Cod. theol. gr. 31). Both contain the text of Genesis alone and were originally profusely illustrated: the Cotton Genesis with an estimated 339 miniatures, and the Vienna Genesis with an estimated 400 separate scenes on 96 pages, of which only 24 have survived. Both manuscripts, which were produced in the late fifth century, or more probably the sixth, might be considered picture books; but the approach varies dramatically in both format and the relation of text to image. In the Cotton Genesis, the more numerous illustrations are interspersed within the Greek text, which was written above and below the framed scenes. Here the illustrations complement the text, while in the Vienna Genesis the pictures are the primary focus. Also, in the Vienna Genesis, the scenes are often left unframed so that they cohabitate with the abbreviated text. Some have argued for an Egyptian patron for the Cotton Genesis, though this has not been universally accepted.1 Because the Vienna Genesis’ parchment pages were stained purple and written in silver, some others have argued for an eastern Byzantine origin since purple is the color associated with royalty and the royal court.2 In many further ways the manuscripts differ in their treatment of iconographic subjects and their style.

The Cotton Genesis was severely burned when, on 23 October 1731, a fire broke out at Ashburnham House, Westminster, where the manuscript was temporarily being housed. In the fierce heat of the fire, the parchment leaves shrank and were partly burned or charred. The fragments of the miniatures show that the artists adhered closely to the biblical narrative; for example, the scene of Lot and the Sodomites shows Lot gesticulating toward the crowd while an angel tries to pull him into the protection of his house. The painters of the creation scenes deviated from an exact rendering of the Genesis text by giving the Creator a cruciform halo, confirming that the Christ Logos was active in the beginning. By this simple means, the opening words of Genesis are linked to the opening words of the Gospel of John. The lively rendering of figures, the use of personifications for the six days of creation, and the framing of the scene in an atmospheric perspective places the Cotton Genesis in the world of late Roman painting. The Cotton Genesis, before entering the British Library, was in Venice where it served as the model for the early thirteenth-century creation mosaic in the Basilica of San Marco.3

The Vienna Genesis was written in silver on purple-dyed parchment with the lower half of each page dedicated to illustration. The Genesis text, written in Greek, is better described as a paraphrase, suggesting that the goal of the patron was to commission a Genesis in pictures for an audience already well versed in the stories. Like the Cotton Genesis, it uses personifications,
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and there is lots of attention given to architectural elements and scenery details such as trees. Unlike the Cotton Genesis, the scenes are arranged in three formats: a single scene, several scenes arranged in registers or several scenes that rotate around as if a continuous frieze turns back on itself and down. The artists of the manuscript were well attuned to the drama of the biblical stories, and the emphasis on the pictures may have encouraged a heightened emotional approach to the illustrations. For example, in the scene where Joseph rejects the advances of Potiphar’s wife, Joseph dramatically bolts toward an open door while the woman desperately clings to the robes of the fleeing man. The majority of scholarship has focused on the place of origin, the date, or the influence of possible Jewish sources, so there remains much to be done in understanding the relationship of text and the programmatic illustration of the Genesis text. The damage to the surviving illustrations in both manuscripts may limit our understanding, but what does survive suggests that artists and patrons could vary widely in how they wanted a Genesis codex illustrated and how it would have been used.

The Ashburnham Pentateuch (late sixth–early seventh century; Paris, Bib. N., MS. nuov. acq. lat. 2334) is different again, with a liveliness and complexity not found in contemporary manuscripts. In addition to a frontispiece, it contains eighteen miniatures out of an estimated original total of sixty-nine, which are distributed irregularly through the first four books of the Old Testament. No part of Deuteronomy has survived, but it was presumably also illustrated. Most of the illustrations occupy a full page and are complex compositions, often subdivided into separate scenes in roughly horizontal registers. Unlike the Quedlinburg Itala or the Genesis manuscripts, the Ashburnham Pentateuch lacks the luxury trappings of gold highlights or stained purple pages. There are numerous lengthy inscriptions within the images, and there is a distinctive use of tertiary colors such as salmon pink or light green. The manuscript has been described as a teaching codex since the illustrations often deviate from the text to speak to a Christian, rather than a Jewish, audience.

In the scene of Moses offering holocausts, for example, a chalice, two pots, and loaves of bread have been substituted for the burnt offerings of the Exodus text (Figure 16.2). The substitution suggests a typological interpretation where Christians are the new Israelites and the priests are the new Levites. The illustrations, or rather interpretations, of the text go even further to explain what St Augustine described as stories that were “wont to cause anxiety.” In the scene of the slaying of the Egyptian firstborn, the slain children are shown, not as infants as the text implies, but as older and black, an ominous attempt to represent their sinful nature and thus their deserving of death by the destroyer. The manuscript is from the Latin West, rather than Greek East, and it has been argued that it is Italian in origin. The style varies considerably from the eastern ones in the amount of detail given over to architecture, fauna, furniture and clothing. The manuscript was at the monastery of Saint-Martin of Tours in the middle ages, and it was consulted for the frontispiece cycles of Carolingian Bibles and in the late eleventh century for the decoration of the local church of St Julien.4

New Testament

The surviving New Testament books also show a remarkable variation in style, format and the relation of text to image. The wealth and desires of the patron no doubt played a large part in their production, but it also indicates that there was no one notion about what a New Testament book should look like in terms of its design. The approach to New Testament books was similar to that of the Old Testament: books were gathered together thematically rather than containing all the Gospels, the Acts, Letters, and the Apocalypse.
The restoration and rebinding of the two Ethiopian Abba Garima Gospels have brought these ancient gospel books to the attention of students of early Christianity. The oldest is Abba Garima III and dated to 390–650, while Abba Garima I is dated to 530–660. Originally bound with Abba Garima III was a third gospel book, Abba Garima II, of a later date. Abba
Garima III has 322 pages, including a portrait of Eusebius, elaborately decorated canon table pages, an architectural structure that perhaps references the Temple in Jerusalem and four Evangelist portraits before each of their books. Matthew, Luke, and John are standing iconic figures holding a codex. Mark is given special treatment (Figure 16.3). He is seated on a leopard skin chair in front of a lectern that takes the form of a spotted dolphin, perhaps a reference to Christ’s disciples as “fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). Mark may have been given distinct treatment since he is credited with bringing Christianity to Egypt where he was martyred in Alexandria. The gospel texts are written in Ge’ez, the Ethiopic language of the Kingdom of Axum, which is the language of the Ethiopian Church. Also written in Ge’ez, Abba Garima I consists of 348 pages, beginning with 11 illuminated pages, including canon tables set in arcades. Inserted in the middle of the canon tables and the letter to Eusebius is a four-columned tholos, or small round temple. The Abba Garima I cover is believed to have been made at the same time as the manuscript, making it one of the earliest surviving book covers. Although it is missing its precious stones, the cover is made from gilt-copper backed with wood and decorated with a large foliated cross. According to tradition, Saint Abba Garima, one of the Nine Saints credited with establishing Christianity in Ethiopia by found- ing monasteries, wrote and illustrated the gospel books. If the carbon dating is correct, Abba Garima III, the older of the two gospels, would have been produced before the revered Abba resided at the monastery.

The Glazier Codex (New York, PML, Glazier Coll. G.67) contains the text of Acts 1:1–15:3, written in an archaic Coptic known as Middle Egyptian Proper. The wooden binding is thought to be original to the codex, suggesting that there would have been a companion volume containing the second half of the Book of Acts. Carbon dating of the leather on the binding, done in 1994, suggests a date between 420 and 598, pushing back the date of 400 assigned to the codex on paleographic evidence. The codex contains a decorated cross at the end of the text (Figure 16.4). Interlace fills the arms of the cross while peacocks flank the trunk and birds perch on the arms. The cross, with vegetation sprouting from it, takes the shape of an ankh, the hieroglyph for life that would have been understood by Egyptian Christians as a reference to the resurrection. The Codex Usserianus Primus (Dublin, Trinity Coll. Lib. 55), an early seventh-century gospel made in Ireland, also preserves a decorated cross between the end of Luke and the beginning of Mark, suggesting that the insertion of a cross at the end of a sacred book was widely practiced. Like the Glazier cross, the Usserianus cross contains an end times connotation with the inclusion of the alpha and the omega hanging from the arms of the cross.

In the Greek East, the period known as Iconoclasm may have had a dampening effect on book illumination. Only the Rossano Gospels (Rossano, Mus. Dioc.) and the Sinope fragment (Paris, Bib. N., MS. suppl. gr. 1286; both probably sixth-century) survive from before the iconoclastic controversy. The Syriac Rabbula Gospels (586; Florence, Bib. Medicea-Laurenziana, MS. Plut.I.56) can be added to this list; however, none of these is complete, and each adopts a radically different scheme for its format, style, and the relation between text and image.

The Sinope Gospels survive in fragmentary shape; however, what remains indicates that this was a luxury gospel book with purple-dyed pages and a large uncial script written in gold and silver. Only the text of Matthew survives in forty-four pages. The large font, the single column of text per page, and theMatthew text alone suggest that it may have been a single volume with the other gospels bound separately and that money was no object in
the creation of this book. Five small illustrations are found in the lower margins of the text pages: the feast of Herod and death of John the Baptist; feeding the five thousand; feeding the four thousand; the healing of the blind man from Jericho; the cursing of the fig tree. All are unframed and interlock with the text. The narrative scenes are flanked by two Old Testament figures who present texts that show that the scenes are a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. In the feast of Herod and the death of John, for example, Moses stands to the left holding a large scroll with the text of Exodus 16:15, “It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat.” To the right, next to the scene of John’s followers finding
his decapitated body, David’s scroll reads from Psalm 116:15, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful one.”

The Rossano Gospels (Codex purpureus Rossanensis) are similar in many ways to the Sinope Gospel. Only the books of Matthew and Mark are included, suggesting there may have been a companion volume of Luke and John. It too features purple dyed parchment, silver and gold ink, and a typological approach to text and image. Unlike the Sinope Gospel, the Rossano makes several additions to the Sinope codex and reworks the relationship on the page between prophesy and narrative. In the Rossano much space was given over to Old Testament figures holding scrolls with inscriptions relevant to the scenes from the life of Christ, which are placed above, creating the visual link that the old covenant anticipates the new covenant. The single surviving full-page evangelist portrait, that of Mark, is thought to be a later addition, but one of the prefatory pages arranges all four evangelists together in medallion busts within a circular configuration. This is one of the earliest attempts to visually indicate the harmony of the four gospels, which often contain discrepancies in the story of Christ’s life and ministry. The narrative scenes are gathered together in the front of the gospels with selections from the liturgical readings for passion week.

The scene of the wise and foolish virgins, a parable of the last judgment, contains elaborations of the allegorical story that direct the viewer to the correct understanding of the story (Figure 16.5). The women are aligned in a row: the five wise carrying flaming torches are

Figure 16.5  The wise and foolish virgins, Rossano Gospels. Constantinople or Syria, 6th century. Wikimedia Commons.
dressed in white robes signifying their purity; the five foolish, locked outside the golden gate of the marriage chamber, are attired in colorful robes indicating their more worldly behavior. The bridegroom’s house is depicted as a lush orchard recalling the Garden of Eden, with the four rivers of Paradise flowing from the base of the trees. The bridegroom, with a cruciform halo, indicates that he is Christ who gathers his faithful into Paradise. The Rossano Gospels adds an unusual scene as a full-page illustration. It depicts the high priests Annas and Caiaphas bringing Christ before Pilate (Figure 16.6). The monumentally conceived composition with Pilate seated on a throne complete with flanking standards bearing the portraits of Roman emperors has prompted scholars to suggest that the departure from the book’s design is the influence of a wall painting that was well known and depicted this scene.7 The relationship between wall painting and book illustration has been discussed for decades, but there is no consensus on the topic to date. Like the Sinope Gospels, there is also no consensus on the place of origin for the Rossano Gospels, though there is general agreement that they are both from the Christian East, perhaps Syria or Constantinople.

Figure 16.6 Christ before Pilate, Rossano Gospels. Constantinople or Syria, 6th century. Wikimedia Commons.
The provenance and date of the *Rabbula Gospels* are not contested since it contains a colophon that states that the monk Rabbula, in the year 586, wrote the manuscript at the monastery of Saint John of Beth Zagba, which was located somewhere between Antioch and Damascus. The text is written from right to left in a Syriac Peshitta version of the gospels. The illustrations thus are also in a sequence that is the reverse of those in Latin or Greek. In the *Rabbula Gospels*, particular attention was paid to the Eusebian Canon tables, which are diagrams drawn up to assist the reader in cross-referencing between numbered passages in the text. Eusebius was a scholar and bishop who lived in Caesarea around 300 (260/265–339/340), who recognized that each gospel writer told the story through his unique perspective; thus, there were some small discrepancies in the gospel accounts. By emphasizing the harmony of the gospels, he compared the same story from different gospels to obtain a greater understanding of its significance. The canon tables are depicted as an arcaded arch, with vegetation sprouting from the arches and birds perched along the roofline (Figure 16.7). In the margins are figures of Old Testament prophets.
and scenes from the New Testament that start with the annunciation to Zacharias and culminate in the scene of Christ before Pilate. Again, this arrangement is another strategy to stress the unity of the Old and the New Testaments.

The series of canon tables ends in the double opening of the four gospel writers seated under two arches, similar in style to the previous canon tables. Other “portraits” include Eusebius and Ammonius, who created the canon table and verse numbering system. In addition to the smaller vignettes, there is a full-page illustration of Crucifixion and the three Marys at the empty tomb that gives prominence to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. The story continues with three full-page miniatures depicting scenes from the Book of Acts: the Ascension, Pentecost, and the choosing of Matthias, who replaced Judas as the twelfth apostle. Non-narrative scenes include the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child, and a scene of Christ Enthroned surrounded by monks who offer him the manuscript. The curious choice of the Matthias scene, which is a relatively obscure text, and the inclusion of the monks giving Christ the manuscript is one of the earliest examples of contemporary patrons linking themselves as the successors of the Apostles. The Syriac Peshitta text, which means simple or plain, and the canon tables for cross-referencing, suggest that the book was meant for accessible and serious study of the gospels. The lavish illustrations, some of which show later alterations, indicate the wealth of talent in the monastery of Beth Zagba.

The two folios of the *Golden Canon Tables* (late sixth or early seventh century; London, Brit. Lib., Add. MS 5111) are all that remains of what must have been a truly luxurious gospel book (Figure 16.8). Written in Greek, the first fragment includes the letter of Eusebius to Carpianus

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*Figure 16.8* Golden Canon Tables from a gospel book, late 6th/early 7th century. Wikimedia Commons.
that explains his work and the first canon table; the second fragment continues with the eighth and tenth canons. The pages are permeated with gold dust, making them even more rare and sumptuous than the purple-dyed books. As with the Rabbula Gospels, the cross-references are framed by elaborate architectural columns ornamented with stylized vegetation and birds. Within the arch of the canon table are bust-length portraits, no doubt depicting the gospel writers. The original pages were larger than what survives since they were cut down and bound up into a twelfth-century Latin gospel book.

The Corpus Christi Gospels (late sixth-century; Cambridge, Corpus Christi Coll. Lib., MS. 286) is one of the earliest surviving gospels known to have been used in the British Isles. It is believed to have been made in Italy since scholars generally agree on a sixth-century Italian script. This Vulgate Latin book was arranged in a completely different format from the other extant gospels, though a lot has to be reconstructed since only two illuminated pages survive. Before St Luke’s Gospel, there is a single page with twelve small framed scenes illustrating the life of Christ from the entry into Jerusalem up to Christ carrying the cross (see Figure 18.11). On the reverse of this page, facing the start of the Gospel, St Luke is seated like a philosopher, holding an open codex, with his symbol of the ox above (Figure 16.9). On either side of St Luke, within the columns of

Figure 16.9 Evangelist Luke and scenes from the life of Christ (Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 286, f. 125r). Italy, 6th century. Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.
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the architectural frame, are an additional 12 scenes from the life of Christ from the annunciation to the Virgin Mary to Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree.

Unlike the style of illustration found in manuscripts such as the Rabbula Gospels, which are still tethered to the classical style, the Corpus Christi artist relied on a more linear technique with thin washes of color. The scenes emphasize the human figure with limited references to landscape features. Trees, for example, are stylized as to resemble the charming drawings of childhood. The scenes are simplified and abridged, relying on the viewer’s knowledge of the biblical stories to identify the scenes. This may not have been as strategic an approach since a later scribe has penned in captions to identify the scenes. It is assumed that the full-page scenes followed by an evangelist portrait would have also prefaced the other three gospels.

Legend has it that St Augustine of Canterbury, by order of Pope Gregory the Great, brought the gospel book with him from Rome in 597 to aid in his mission to the British Isles. The connection to St Augustine was an early one since the codex was initially kept at St Augustine’s abbey in Canterbury and venerated as a relic of the saint. The manuscript remained at Canterbury until the Dissolution of the Monasteries (1535–1540) and seemed to have been consulted by Insular and Romanesque artists. In January of 2016 the Corpus Christi Gospels once again revisited Canterbury to preside over the enthronement of the new Archbishop of Canterbury. This is a venerable tradition since it is well known that gospel books were placed on an altar or a throne during early Christian synods to remind the participants of Christ’s presence.

Extra-biblical manuscripts

A small number of disparate codices raise the question of the range of manuscript types that were illustrated in the fourth to the seventh century. The most intriguing is the handsomely illustrated Calendar of the year 354 (Calendar of Filocalus), known principally through a 17th-century copy (Rome, Vatican, Bib. Apostolica, MS. Barb. lat. 2154). The dedication asks the patron, Valentinus, to flourish in God and names the scribe/illustrator as Filocalus. The full-page illustrations were portraits of emperors, zodiac signs, and personifications of months and cities, making it more of an almanac than a calendar. To some degree, all medieval calendar illustrations with their interest in Labors of the Months, zodiac signs, and personifications, can be seen to have developed from books such as the Calendar.

Another type of manuscript, the Notitia dignitatum, is a register of late Roman military and civil officials, with about 100 full-page illustrations of their insignia. Its existence is also known only through medieval copies (Codex Spirensis; Speyer Cathedral) and post-medieval copies (Munich, Bayer. Staatsbib., Clm. 10291; Oxford, Bodleian Lib., Canonici Miscell. 378). Its images were remarkably varied in compositional terms, including ships, chariots, townscapes and landscapes, and figures in a medallion, bust, or full-length formats. It is thought to be based on an original made around 400. The Notitia Dignitatum has preserved for us, as no other document has done, a complete outline view of the Roman administrative system in the early fifth century.

If the Notitia Dignitatum gives a picture of Roman organization, the Corpus agrimensorum gives a glimpse into the more pedestrian life of the countryside. A land-surveying treatise, it survives in an early sixth-century manuscript from northern Italy (Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bib., Cod. Guelph. 36. 23A, ‘Codex Arcerianus A’). In addition to geometric diagrams and schematic views of town and countryside, the codex contains a fine full-page drawing of a seated author. The text is written in an uncial script, with red letters indicating the beginnings of paragraphs. Breaks in the single column of text allowed unframed illustrations to be inserted. The book gives instructions on how to divide a land properly for taxation, or how to find the best access
route into a city for the design of a new road. The condition of the manuscript and the hand- 
someness of the illustrations suggest that this was a manuscript an affluent patron may have used 
to consult on judicial matters concerning land or property rights and not a handbook that would 
have been used in the field.

Early Christian patrons were also interested in herbals, which are directories of plants, their 
properties, and their medicinal uses. Herbals most likely were at first not illustrated, but in Late 
Antiquity they acquired illustrations. The Johnson Papyrus (London, Well. Lib. MS 5753), dated 
to 400, is thought to be the earliest surviving example of an illustrated herbal, though a mere 
five fragments currently exist. One of these fragments of a page from the illustrated herbal from 
Egypt shows a plant that is possibly Symphytum officinale, or comfrey. The herbal was made of 
papyrus, a plant that flourished in the valley of the Nile, and the text is in Greek, the language 
of science throughout the eastern Mediterranean at this time. The fragment is probably from 
a copy of the herbal of Dioscorides of Anazarbus, a first-century Greek physician born in Asia 
Minor whose work became the foundation text of medieval botany. The date of the fragment 
suggests that most likely it was from a codex, as does the fact that it is written and illuminated 
on both sides, which would have made it difficult to consult in roll form.

Dioscorides' De materia medica (the Vienna Dioskurides, c. 512; Vienna, Österreich. Nbib., 
Cod. med. gr. 1), is justifiably one of the most famous herbals. It is an extensive compendium 
of almost 1,000 pages dealing with medicinal plants, drugs of animal origin (e.g., birds, earth- 
worms, fish, and jellyfish), paraphrases of treatises on birds, and antidotes to venomous bites and 
other types of poisoning, attributed to Euteknios after Nicander's Theriaka and Alexipharmaka of 
the second century. Its predominant illustration consists of 383 full-page illustrations of plants, 
painted with an extraordinary naturalism and botanical accuracy. There are also full-page fron- 
tispieces of a peacock; a group of doctors around the centaur Cheiron, who was noted for 
educating youth, medicine, music, archery, hunting, and prophecy; and a second group around 
Galen (129–c. 200), the Greek physician, surgeon and philosopher. Personifications are used 
throughout such as Discovery displaying a mandrake to Dioscorides, and Thought holding a 
mandrake while an artist paints it on a sheet pinned to an easel and Dioscorides writes about it in 
a book on his knee. Anicia Juliana, the owner of the manuscript, is shown enthroned between 
Magnanimity and Prudence, and receiving the book from Gratitude of the Arts.

The inscription around the dedication portrait (f. 6v) of Anicia Juliana states that the book 
was a gift from the people of Constantinople for her gift, in 512/13, of a church dedicated to 
the Virgin. An extremely wealthy member of the imperial family, Anicia Juliana's use of ancient 
Greek knowledge and mythology, coupled with her patronage of church building, shows how 
the Hellenistic world and the Christian world were blended. The Vienna Dioskurides is thus an 
early example of how the knowledge and learning of the classical world would be preserved and 
passed on through Christian patrons and their books.

The advent of Christianity did not mean the cessation of interest in the classics. The principal 
direct evidence for the illustration of the Latin literary classics is provided by two manuscripts of 
Vergil. Other texts, such as an illustrated selection of Comedies of Terence, or the Psychomachia of 
Prudentius (d. 410), both well known through Carolingian (e.g., 9th century; Rome, Vatican, 
Bib. Apostolica, MS. lat. 3868) and later copies, may also be derived from books that are now 
lost. The Vatican Vergil and the Roman Vergil (Rome, Vatican, Bib. Apostolica, MSS lat. 3225 
and 3867 respectively) provide a sharp contrast in the format and style of the illustrations. The 
Vatican Vergil is dated, like the Quedlinburg Itala, within a couple of decades of the year 400 and 
is thought to have been made in Rome. The original codex may have had as many as 280 
illustrations, of which some 50 have survived. The remaining pictures illustrate passages of the
Aeneid (41) and the Georgics (9). The illustrations are framed by a thin black line and then again in a thicker red line, a technique that enhances the illusion of looking into a window to a seascape or a landscape.

The capital script is written in one column in a manner that was typical of fine books; the scribe left two-thirds or sometimes an entire page for the insertion of illustrations, making the original a picture book rivaling the Quedlinburg Itala or the Vienna Genesis. The Vatican Vergil is painted in a convincing illusionistic style, with figures carefully modelled and placed within interiors, or in landscapes that recede into the distance. Like the biblical manuscripts, later centuries collected and studied the Vatican Vergil; for example, it was known to have been in the monastery of Saint-Martin in Tours by the ninth century where two of its figures were copied for a Bible illustration. The book then traveled to Rome where it was studied by artists and antiquarians in the sixteenth century before finally finding its way to the Vatican Library.

The Roman Vergil is dated toward the end of the fifth century and is also thought to have been made in Rome for a wealthy patron. Originally, this exceptionally large book would have been composed of 410 pages of all Vergil’s known writings and was intended to be placed on a stand as a display copy to impress visitors with the owner’s taste and wealth. Today, about a quarter of the text is lost, and the prefatory illustrations have also been lost: three of the ten illustrations to the Eclogues; six of the eight Georgics illustrations, and fourteen of the original twenty-four Aeneid illustrations. The style of the figures, unlike the Vatican Vergil, anticipates the medieval aesthetic that will often exaggerate gestures and scale to bring out the expressive features of the narrative. A notable difference between the two Vergil manuscripts is how the frames around the pictures are used: in the Vatican example, the frame serves to increase the illusion of depth; in the Roman Vergil, the frame is often used as a ground line or is even ignored as objects and figures transgress its borders. These two Vergil codices and their illustrations are indicative of the trend away from the Classical style of the Roman Empire and the move toward the more expressive style of the early Medieval period.

Final thoughts

In this brief survey of illuminated manuscripts from the early Christian period, some general observations can be made. The challenge for artists illustrating the biblical text was twofold: how to fill in the visual information lacking in the text to make a reasonable representation of the narrative and, secondly, how to make the illustration theologically aligned with Church teaching. In the Cotton Genesis, for example, there is an attempt to insert the concept of the Trinity lacking in the Genesis text. By the sixth century, there is a growing boldness with how images could be manipulated to bring out the correct Christian understanding of the biblical stories from Jewish history, as in the Ashburnham Pentateuch. And finally, there was experimentation with emphasizing the unity not only of the Old and New Testaments, but also the unity of the four Gospels. What is remarkable is how these books were studied, collected, and copied in the following centuries, no doubt because they were understood to be “ancient” and a tangible link to the early Christians.

Notes


**Further reading**

Early Christian illuminated manuscripts


