**CHAPTER 1**

**The Use and Function of Illustrated Books in Byzantine Society**

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The abundantly illustrated book developed in the late antique world when the codex replaced the scroll. Although the oldest preserved copies are Latin manuscripts, the illustrated book became an essential element in Byzantine civilization, in which the importance of books in general and the regard they enjoyed are well known. While the place of illustrated books, in comparison with the total number of manuscripts produced in the Byzantine world, is of relatively little importance from the standpoint of quantity, many pieces of evidence show how much they were appreciated. Few estimates of the proportion of these books relative to the entirety of manuscripts have been made. One may draw upon an attempt made by J. Lowden based on the manuscripts preserved in Great Britain. An estimate for the Bodleian Library at Oxford permits us to think – allowing perhaps a considerable margin for error – that a little less than 18% of Byzantine manuscripts contains at least some decorative elements. If limited to what are more restrictively known as illustrated manuscripts, that is to say ones with human figures and not merely decoration, Lowden concludes that 3.7% of Byzantine manuscripts preserved in Great Britain are illustrated. These numbers are not yet compared with those of other collections, but whatever might be their degree of uncertainty, they suffice to show that such manuscripts represent a small minority of Byzantine production. This proportion must be further diminished if one acknowledges

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1 There are basically two manuscripts of Virgil that one can cite: *Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. lat. 3225* and *Vat. lat. 3867*; see Wright, *Vatican Vergil*; id., *Vergilius Romanus*, as well as a few preserved leaves from a manuscript known as “the Itala of Quedlinburg” (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Ms. theol. lat. fol. 485), which, in any case, contains a Book of Kings: Lowden, “Beginnings of Biblical Illustration”, pp. 40-3 along with previous references. See also chapter 14 in this volume.


that illustrated copies, especially those which are richly illustrated, were pre-
served in a greater proportion than those which contained only texts. In the
preserved documents from Byzantine archives, many books are listed in inven-
tories, wills, or other documents, but only three manuscripts explicitly men-
tion miniatures.4 In his will, dated to 1059, Eustathios Boilas emphasizes the
pleasure he took in having an illustrated gospel book in his library.5 One can-
not, of course, draw precise conclusions from this small number: the invento-
ries of monasteries did not necessarily specify that certain manuscripts had
miniatures, and even less so that they contained geometric decoration. The
sumptuousness of a great number of bindings which, for their part, are often
described with great precision, suggests the presence of additional illuminated
manuscripts. Just as there are only a few systematic catalogues of illustrated
manuscripts which would permit a general overview,6 the specific use of these
manuscripts has elicited hardly an interest. One finds only a few suggestions
that allow reflection on this question, apart from a few recent examples to
which we shall return. It is striking to consider that K. Weitzmann, when he
makes an assessment of the study of miniatures, attributes to it seven goals,
which he calls seven circles. Its objectives, defined according to the methods of
textual criticism, move from the publication of catalogues to the discovery of
narrative illustration in Greco-Roman art, but he does not at all refer to the use
of illustrated books or the impact they might have on the reader.7 The same old
indifference is found in the contrast between two publications which touch on
similar themes. In 1969, when G. Galavaris, under the direction of Weitzmann,
studied the illustrations of the liturgical homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, his
entire consideration bore on the miniatures themselves, on their origin, on
their possible passage from one text to another, on the reconstruction of an
archetype, even from a stylistic point of view.8 But one does not find there any
reflection on the use of these manuscripts, any comparison between manu-
scripts with regard to that which, precisely from this point of view, could be
implied by the quality and richness of the illustrations. A different approach

4 ByzAD, Synthèse, s.v. Biblion.
5 Ibid., artefact #344. The two other examples are, in the library of Patmos, a manuscript con-
taining the Ethics of St. Basil, doubtlessly along with a portrait of Basil, ibid., artefact #3556;
and a gospel book listed in the inventory of Eleousa monastery in Stroumitza (presentday
Veljusa) with portraits of the four evangelists, ibid., artefact #2026.
6 Weitzmann, “The Study of Byzantine Book Illumination”, pp. 9–10. But the new catalogue of
manuscripts of Princeton takes into account both the description of texts and that of illustra-
tions: Kotzabassi/Patterson Ševčenko, Greek Manuscripts at Princeton.
7 Weitzmann, “The Study of Byzantine Book Illumination”.
8 Galavaris, Liturgical Homilies. For some supplementary remarks, see below.