Psalters and Books of Hours (Horologia)

Georgi R. Parpulov

Text and Illustrations

A Psalter (Ψαλτήριον) contains 151 biblical psalms, always in the same sequence, plus nine or more poetic excerpts (canticles, or odes/ᾠδαί) from other books of the Bible.¹ A Book of Hours (Ὡρολόγιον) contains those same odes and select psalms, re-ordered for prayer at set times of the day and night² and intermixed with short non-biblical prayers and hymns. Additional, private prayers are sometimes appended to an Horologion or Psalter. A Psalter may also contain explanatory prefaces (such as Athanasios of Alexandria’s “Letter to Marcellinus”) and/or theological commentary running parallel to the biblical text.

Images may illustrate individual psalm verses and be, by way of explanation, placed close to them. In most illustrated Psalters and Horologia, however, the figural miniatures subdivide the text – just like titles do – and thus facilitate paging through it. In principle, each ode and sometimes even each psalm can be marked with a picture, but typically pictures precede the often-used Psalm 50,³ the beginning and middle of the Psalter (Ps 1 and 77), and/or the initial ode (Gen. 15:1-19) (Figs. 107-111).

The illustrations can be painted with tempera or simply drawn in ink – and in the latter case, sometimes tinted with wash. They alternatively form self-contained, often framed compositions (which may or may not fill a whole

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² Nocturns (μεσονυκτικόν), Matins (δρόμος), Prime, Terce, Sext, Typika (τυπικά), None, Compline (ἀπόδειπνον).

³ In current usage, Psalm 50 is recited during Nocturns, Terce, and Compline, and before Communion.
page), 4 vignettes in the page’s margin (Fig. 106), 5 or “historiated” initial letters incorporating one or more figures. 6

Types of Illustration

Author Portraits

Regardless of the miniatures’ format, the persons whom they most frequently portray are those identified in the title of the adjacent text: the Sons of Kore (Ps 41, 43, etc.), Asaph (Ps 49, 72, etc.), Moses (Exodus 15:1-19, Deuteronomy 32:1-43), the Virgin Mary (Lk 1:46-55), etc. King David is very often depicted in this context, since most Psalms are associated with his name. He can be shown standing (in some cases facing the viewer, in others turned to the sky in prayer), kneeling, playing the psaltery (under whose accompaniment psalms were originally sung), or writing psalms. His image frequently forms a frontispiece to Psalm 1 and thus, to the Psalter as a whole (Fig. 107). 7 Portraits can mark prefaces and appendices, too: Athanasios is occasionally painted before his “Letter to Marcellinus”; 8 John Chrysostom or Basil of Caesarea, before prayers attributed to them. 9 When the Psalms have commentary, the Church Fathers who wrote it may be collectively portrayed on the volume’s opening page. 10

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4 E.g., *Washington DC, Dumbarton Oaks, MS 3, fols. 5r-6r (AD 1083); *Philadelphia, Free Library, Lewis E M 44:28, front (12th century).
5 E.g., *Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum, W. 733, fols. 9r-12r (13th century). Psalters illustrated in this manner are termed “marginal”.
6 E.g., *Dumbarton Oaks 3, fols. 79r-81v.
7 E.g., *Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Reg. gr. 1 (the “Leo Bible”), fol. 487v (10th century); Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 1747, fol. 11r (10th century); *Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 15, fol. 39v (AD 1104); *Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional, Vitr. 26-5, fol. 11v (14th century); Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, gr. 4, fol. 1r (14th century); *Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Laur. Plut. 5, fol. 11v (AD 1403).
8 Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchal Library, Taphou 53, fol. 8r (AD 1053); *Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 752, fol. 12r (AD 1058); Athos, Pantokrator Monastery, cod. 234, fol. 258r (12th century). See also Athens, National Library of Greece, cod. 7, fol. 2v (12th century).
9 Taphou 53, fol. 226r (AD 1053); Saint Petersburg, National Library of Russia, gr. 266, fol. 4r (AD 1053); New York Public Library, Spencer MS 1, fols. 398v, 403r (12th century).
10 Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, M 47 sup., fols. IV-IIIr (10th century).