

# The end of antiquity in two illuminated manuscripts

Anthony Cutler

K. WEITZMANN AND H. L. KESSLER, *THE COTTON GENESIS. BRITISH LIBRARY CODEX COTTON OTHO B.VI* (The Illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint, I. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N. J. 1986). Pp. 250, 8 colour pls, 539 figs. \$150. ISBN 0-691-04031-1.

*CODEX PURPUREUS ROSSANENSIS. MUSEO DELL' ARCIVESCOVADO, ROSSANO CALABRIA* (Codices selecti phototypice impressi, LXXXI\*) *COMMENTARIUM* a cura di G. CAVALLO, J. GRIBOMONT e W. C. LOERKE (Salerno Editrice, Roma; Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, Graz 1987). Pp. 213, 51 figs. ISBN 88-85026-92-3.

One incontestable way in which mediaeval culture differed from that of antiquity is the importance that it attached to the art of the book. The traces that we have of the codex in its first few centuries of existence witness to major changes in the ways in which ideas and pictures were stored and transmitted; in the ways that written records, once the repositories of legal and other useful but often ephemeral information, were transformed into treasures. The change is not so much one from an oral to a written culture, or from a worldly to an unworldly ethos (all co-existed in antiquity) as it is the new functions that books came to assume — as prized possessions of the mighty few and as stimuli to private intellectual development, memorization and delectation. It is inconceivable that the attribute of Jahweh, or of an antique god or hero, could have been a book. Yet less than three hundred years after Chrysostom's spoken words had stirred his audiences in Antioch and Constantinople, not one but two religions of the book had been largely disseminated. By this time, too, the illustrated book was well established, testifying not only to the fact that the mental processes just described were well advanced but that another — central to the concerns of this review — was already widespread: while religious structures in their decoration perpetuated the ancient tradition of a *kosmesis* lavished on huge assemblies in streets, squares and public buildings, relatively vast amounts of time were already being devoted to the preparation of series of pictures and pages of text that would be seen by comparatively few eyes.

The most elaborately miniated book, of course, cost far less than a building; even so, in terms of durability and a return on investment calculated in terms of the number of human experiences that it could occasion, it was absurdly 'uneconomical'. Yet evidently such calculations were made, considered justified, and put into effect. Such decisions define a new culture, one that devised its own ways of representing what it perceived to be reality. Given the length and variety of picture-series in books, they offer the richest surviving account of these transformations. In the texts under review, both sets of authors claim a transitional position for the manuscripts they present. These claims are correct — from this distance *any* picture can be seen in some way both to inherit the past and to predict the future. Interest lies not in challenging these positions but in scrutinizing the very different material that gives rise to them and the ways in which their authors confront it. We do not know how many books were illuminated in late antiquity; the only certainty is that these are outnumbered by the approaches of modern scholarship, faced with the problem that most of the evidence is lost and that that which is preserved survives only in tatters. (The Milan Iliad and the Quedlinburg Itala are in far worse shape than the Rossano Gospels.)

Scholarly investigations (primarily of its text) were already in full swing<sup>1</sup> by the time the Cotton Genesis was burned in 1731. The Rossano, on the other hand, was a relative latecomer to the scientific track. Unknown until 1845, it was not seriously studied until 1879.<sup>2</sup> This slow starter has had nonetheless most of the running: two or three facsimiles (depending on how one understands the term) and a body of secondary literature which grossly exceeds the 86 items that Loerke sees fit to include in his

1 For what is known of the Cotton Genesis (hereafter CG) before 1731, and what conflicting traditions suggest of its earlier provenance, see Weitzmann and Kessler 3-6.

2 O. von Gebhardt and A. Harnack, *Evangeliorum Codex Graecus Purpureus Rossanensis ...* (Leipzig 1880). The original MS will henceforth be referred to as Ross., its various commentators by their names.