

Assessment 4: Image Commentary
The Portrait of Ezra from the Codex Amiatinus



Florence
Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana
MS. Am. 1, fol.Vr

The Codex Amiatinus is the oldest surviving manuscript of the entire Latin Vulgate Bible in existence. An appreciation of its history and context is essential to understanding the place of the Ezra image within its pages. The Codex was produced at the twin monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow during the abbacy of Ceolfrith, sometime between 690 and 716¹. We know from the writings of Bede in his '*Historia Abbatum*' that Ceolfrith brought a pandect of the 'old translation' of the Bible from Rome and commissioned three copies of it to be made. Bede also records that the old text was substituted with the more 'modern' Vulgate version of St. Jerome. The author of the anonymous *Vita Ceolfrida* confirms that three copies were made: one for the monastery of Wearmouth, one for Jarrow and a third which was taken by Ceolfrith in June 716 when he set off to Rome, intending it as a gift to Pope Gregory. However, Ceolfrith died en route in Langres in central France that same year and the fate of the Bible thereafter was not recorded.²

In 1886 G.B. de Rossi examined a Latin Bible, the Codex Amiatinus, in the Laurentian Library in Florence. This pandect had been in the abbey of Monte Amiata from 1036 until the abbey's suppression in 1782, when the manuscript was moved to Florence.³ It had been assumed that it was an Italian work as it contained a presentation inscription from a 'Petrus Langobardum', but de Rossi observed that this was written over an earlier dedication, and that the original donor had actually been 'Ceolfridus Anglorum'.⁴ It was realised that the newly discovered dedication now matched exactly the words which the anonymous *Vita Ceolfrida* records were written in the pandect which Ceolfrid took to Rome in 716. This could now be confidently identified as Ceolfrid's third pandect, produced in Wearmouth between the late seventh century and early eighth centuries.

¹ Christopher de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts* (Great Britain: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 60.

² Ibid, p. 59-60.

³ Ibid p.65

⁴ Christopher de Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, 2nd edn (Hong Kong: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1994), p. 19.

The folios of the Codex are made from high quality vellum and are unusually large, each measuring 33.5 by 50cm.⁵ The portrait of Ezra can be found in the first quire of the Codex on folio 5r. The first quire is made up of eight leaves and also contains the dedicatory verse, a plan of the temple of Jerusalem, a contents page and several diagrams setting out different ways of grouping the books of the Bible.⁶ The Ezra portrait is a frontispiece to the Old Testament books in much the same way as the 'Christ in Majesty' illumination prefaces the New Testament in the Codex. However, inspection of the impressions left on pages from long contact with markings on their opposite pages has shown that the folios have at some point been rearranged and that originally the Ezra portrait was likely to have been on folio 2r, facing the dedication page.⁷ This positioning appears to raise its status from frontispiece of the Old Testament to frontispiece of the whole pandect.

The Ezra miniature presents the seated figure of a scribe, haloed and bearing the insignia of an Old Testament high priest (the cloth, or tallith, and the jewelled breast plate). He has an open book on his knee and one hand holds a pen while the other holds the book open. Another book lies open on the floor amongst tools of scribal art: dividers, ink pot, stylus and what is probably a pot of pigment on a table. Behind him is an open cupboard with five sloping shelves, on which are placed nine books. A heavy frame surrounds the portrait, decorated with white spots and squares of gold leaf, giving the impression that one is viewing the scribe through a window.⁸ The background to the portrait is covered in gold leaf, whilst the rest of the palette comprises mainly brown, red and deep blue shades of paint with fine white decorations. A couplet written above the frame at the top of the page identifies the figure as Ezra,

‘Codicibus sacris hostile clade perustis

Esdra deo fervens hoc reparavit opus’

This translates as ‘The holy books having been destroyed by hostile disaster, Ezra, committed to God, restored this work.’⁹ Bede’s echoing of the same words in his book ‘In Ezram et Neemiam’ led Paul Meyvaert to believe that Bede himself probably composed these words.¹⁰

There is no doubt that in terms of technique, style and content the Ezra portrait belongs to the late-Antique, Sub-Classical tradition. Bruce-Mitford points out that the “naturalistically rendered subject and unfamiliar palette”, the use of shadows and highlights, washes and a three dimensional perspective are all typically Mediterranean in style¹¹, leading many to suspect that Ezra was meticulously copied from a classical work. The shape of the cupboard, or ‘armarium’ closely resembles one depicted in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, dated 430 – 450AD¹² [fig.1] and the scattering of scribal instruments around the floor is also characteristic of Roman art.¹³



Figure 1: Mosaic from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna, showing similar armarium, AD450

⁵ R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford (M.A., D.LITT., F.S.A.) (1969) *The Art of the Codex Amiatinus*: Jarrow Lecture 1967, Journal of the British Archaeological Association, 32:1, 1-25

⁶ Ibid p.2

⁷ Paul Meyvaert, *Bede, Cassiodorus and the Codex Amiatinus*, *Speculum*, 71.4, (1996), p.865

⁸ Bruce-Mitford, *The Art of the Codex Amiatinus* p.11

⁹ de Hamel, *Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts*, p.78

¹⁰ Meyvaert 'Bede, Cassiodorus and the Codex Amiatinus', p.877

¹¹ Bruce-Mitford, *The Art of the Codex Amiatinus* p.12

¹² Janina Ramirez, 'Sub culmine gazas: The Iconography of the Armarium on the Ezra Page of the Codex Amiatinus*', *Gesta*, 48.1, (2009), 1-18 (p. 3).

¹³ Meyvaert, *Bede, Cassiodorus and the Codex Amiatinus*, p.870

Close parallels can be drawn between the Ezra miniature and the tradition of evangelist portraits with which the Wearmouth scribes would have been familiar. 'Evangelist portraits' were pictures placed as a frontispiece to a gospel, depicting the evangelist seated and writing, and usually incorporating the distinctive emblem of the evangelist. Comparison has been made between Ezra and the Matthew 'evangelist' portrait from the Lindisfarne Gospels of a similar date [fig.2]. Like many British works of this period, the Lindisfarne miniature uses a classical model but incorporates elements of Hiberno-Saxon decoration in an attempt to translate the style into the native Insular idiom. Uniquely, the Ezra portrait is entirely classical in its style and makes no apparent concession to Insular style.¹⁴ Figures 3 and 4 below highlight the differences in decorative detail: the intricate Insular patterns on the stool of the Matthew portrait and the Classical symbols on the Ezra armarium.



Figure 2: The miniature of St. Matthew from the Lindisfarne Gospels.



Figure 3: 'Insular' detail on stool in the Matthew miniature.



Figure 4: 'Classical' urns, peacocks and animals on the armarium in the Ezra image.

Much of the scholarly debate surrounding the Ezra miniature is concerned with the identification of the exemplar used for the portrait. We know from Bede that the three Bibles commissioned by Ceolfrid were copies made from a pandect brought back to Wearmouth and Jarrow by Ceolfrid from Rome in 680. It is generally accepted that this pandect was Cassiodorus' *Codex Grandior*. The senator Cassiodorus founded two monasteries at Vivarium in southern Italy c. 560. Here he produced an instructional work, his *Institutiones*, in which he described a single volume Bible named the 'Codex Grandior', written in the 'old Latin' and including a diagram of the Tabernacle. Since five of the ten illustrated pages in the first quire of the *Codex Amiatinus* correspond to diagrams which Cassiodorus, writing in the *Institutiones*, said were in the *Codex Grandior*, it has been generally accepted that these pages were direct copies from the *Codex Grandior*.¹⁵ After the closure of the monasteries at Vivarium, it is likely that Ceolfrid brought back several of their books, including the *Codex Grandior*, when he returned to Northumbria from Rome in 680. However, Cassiodorus makes no mention of a portrait of Ezra and the *Codex Grandior* has been lost.

One popular theory is that a portrait of Cassiodorus had been included in the *Codex Grandior* and that the Ezra portrait was a copy of this. There is some evidence to support this. Ezra is positioned in front of a cupboard containing nine volumes; Cassiodorus himself in his *Institutiones* describes a way of dividing the Bible into nine sections and he produced a Bible made up of nine separate books, the *Novem Codices*. A portrait of Cassiodorus sitting in front of his nine codices fits well, whereas a picture of Ezra with books of the New Testament would be anachronistic.¹⁶ Paul Meyvaert points out that the monks at Wearmouth were probably not aware of the *Institutiones*, or of Cassiodorus himself, so if his portrait had existed in the *Codex Grandior* they may have interpreted it as a portrait of Ezra without understanding the significance of the nine codices in the cupboard,¹⁷ making their own addition of the halo, title verses and insignia of a high priest.

¹⁴ Bruce-Mitford, *The Art of the Codex Amiatinus*, p.13)

¹⁵ Karen Corsano, 'The First Quire of the Codex Amiatinus and the Institutiones of Cassiodorus', *Scriptorium*, 41.1, (1987), 3-34 (p. 7).

¹⁶ Ibid p.15

¹⁷ Meyvaert, *Bede, Cassiodorus and the Codex Amiatinus*, p.872)

However, the order of the codices on the shelves is not the order given in the *'Institutiones'*¹⁸ and doubts as to whether Cassiodorus would have seen it as fitting to include a portrait of himself in a Bible have raised doubts as to this interpretation. Steven Wander argues that the depiction of garments in the Ezra illumination closely matches clothing described in the *Antiquitates Judaicae* of Flavius Josephus, particularly the unusual chalice-shaped headgear, which is described by Josephus but not included in the Old Testament.¹⁹ Josephus also describes Ezra as 'chief priest', a title not given to him in scripture. We know from Bede that a copy of this book had been brought to Wearmouth, therefore the model for the Amiatinus Ezra could have derived from passages in the *Antiquitates*.

Without discovering the original Codex Grandior, it will never be possible to state with certainty whether the Ezra miniature was a direct copy from a page in that pandect, or whether it was produced from an amalgam of other sources. Karen Corsano thinks it likely that the idea for the page was exclusively Northumbrian in origin, using several classical models including Josephus and the evangelist portrait tradition to create the image.²⁰ Certainly, the libraries at Wearmouth and Jarrow contained a huge number of books brought from abroad (Bede names 80 sources²¹) and would have had no shortage of classical pictorial models to draw upon.

Although it has been noted that Bede is likely to have written the title above the portrait,²² it is entirely plausible that the influence of Bede over the depiction and identity of the figure is much further reaching than previously argued. Bede wrote a Bible commentary on the Book of Ezra shortly after the Codex was produced²³ The Book of Ezra describes the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem after the return of the Jewish people from exile. Living amongst a pagan people, their work is opposed and resisted by many, but Ezra sparks a spiritual revival by preaching and teaching the law. This must have had enormous resonance with the early Christians of Northumbria, struggling to establish the church in a landscape often pagan and antagonistic. Scott deGregorio²⁴ argues that Bede's commentary on the book of Ezra has a reformist agenda, drawing parallels between Ezra's work to restore the spiritual life of the Israelites, and the church's need to bring about a revival of Northumbrian spirituality. DeGregorio goes as far as to say that Ezra "was a figure with whom Bede identified personally in utilizing exegesis as a means to reform."²⁵ Through the miniature, Bede may well have been making a symbolic connection between the teaching, reformist agenda of the Biblical Ezra and the mission of the Church in Northumbria.

In conclusion, it seems this portrait was intended to send two messages to Rome, messages concerning identity and mission. Whatever the exemplar for the Ezra portrait may have been, this is a clear statement of identity. The Roman church was still forging its identity or, to use a modern word, its 'branding' in the furthest reaches of Britain. Northumbria was very much 'border country' – on the border between Christian and pagan and between Celtic and Roman Christianity. The artist working on Ezra made a deliberate decision not to include elements of Insular decoration in the portrait, and in doing so made a statement that the communities of Jarrow and Wearmouth aligned themselves wholeheartedly with the Roman church culturally and theologically. It seems quite plausible that Bede himself intended to express to Pope Gregory his monastic communities' zeal for teaching and spiritual reform. By placing the portrait at the beginning of the book facing the dedication, it is not so much a frontispiece to the Old Testament as it is an author signature - the signature of the scribes and community who produced this Bible.

¹⁸ Corsano, *'The First Quire of the Codex Amiatinus'*, p.16

¹⁹ Steven H. Wander, 'Illuminations of the Tabernacle of Moses and of Ezra in the Codex Amiatinus: Bede, Cassiodorus and the *Antiquitates Judaicae* of Flavius Josephus', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 46, (2017), 1-29.

²⁰ Corsano, *'The First Quire of the Codex Amiatinus'*, p.20

²¹ De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, p.18

²² Meyvaert, *'Bede, Cassiodorus and the Codex Amiatinus'*, p.877

²³ Ibid p.21

²⁴ Scott deGregorio, 'Bede's "In Ezram et Neemiam" and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church', *Speculum*, 79.1, (2004), 1-25.

²⁵ Ibid Scott, p.18

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