

Finding Charlemagne's Ambition Behind the Godescalc Evangelistary

When Charlemagne was granted the title Patrician of Rome by Pope Hadrian I, he could rightfully boast that his empire rivaled Trajan's of some 700 years before, as well as the contemporary Byzantine Empire to the east. During the next decade, lands and peoples from the Iberian Peninsula, Lombard Italy, the Saxon North, and the Slavic countries all came under his sovereignty. Although militarily mastered, control of the linguistically and culturally diverse realm was problematic. Following his father's lead, he pushed to make the Latin language, culture and arts a prize to energize his people. They would attempt their own *Romani Imperii* with renovations of common law, ecclesiastical and economic practice. He put himself forth as the figurehead guiding the initiative. One key to realizing the reforms was to standardize scriptoria output.

The Godescalc Evangelistary was the first of such products executed by the new Palace School in Aachen. It outlines prayer services and contains the writings of the Gospels. It commences with portraits of the four evangelists. Each evangelist is seated on at least one large, round cushion embroidered with a variety of shapes and colors. These opulent cushions are posed upon on a simple wooden bench, all of which is raised slightly on a platform whose front edge is painted with flora filigree. Such a setup was indicative of the sacred cell wherein the sage pondered life. But it equally evoked the scholar's *cabinet d'études* where arguments over logic, rhetoric and geometry, and conversations in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, might elucidate Christian reality. The evangelist/scholar embodied this image of an active agent ushering in the *renovatio*.

The tool of this Christian advocate is the stylus, which is featured prominently in the four portraits of the evangelists. The power of god working its way through the evangelist's stylus is shown in this moment of mighty creation, either writing, dipping into the inkwell, or being held up in review of the freshly written words. By enrobing the religiously significant message within the scholarly context, the artist shows how the codex transmits god-infused messages, powerfully augmenting the oratory of the basilica as it dispenses revelation and salvation. The codex brings other bounty as well.

According to Tromph, Charlemagne takes cues from Israel and Greece in the way he envisions his position vis-à-vis Christianity and his kingdom. Disimilar to theocracy of Byzantium, he grafts on to his rule distinct traits of the King David of the Old Testament. He will embody "...the truest earthly personification of kingly and imperial values."¹ Basing his argument on Augustine's *Civitas Dei*, Tromph goes on to suggest equality between King David and Jesus since David is his representative "to rule the new Israel." To this can be added the Greek notion of special awareness of divine and human knowledge coming from a plurality of sources. The search for wisdom doesn't therefore stop at the end of the New Testament lecture. If pagan classics enabled a better understanding of scripture, so be it. This is then a king who would tolerate all his subjects the better to unify them.

St. Mark's [1] and St. Luke's [2] miniatures are framed with borders that move in segments around the portrait area. The corners are symmetric curlicues of golden vegetable on purple. The sides show undulating fern leaves of gold on rust while the top and bottom are festooned with an elaborate parquetry pattern. These shapes don't necessarily complement one another, but they do point to a sensitivity to both natural and man-made forms, which could be understood as a call to include that which exceeds boundaries. The dimension of the border is broken by superposed titles and lectern bases. Luke's cushion and Mark's tetramorph move beyond as well. In other words, the message within cannot be corralled. The saint doesn't remain unto himself — he injects himself upon the world in an active manner.

Both Luke and Mark's miniatures situate each saint in a garden fringed by sparsely-set flowers. Beyond that there is no illusionistic space indicated as if to say they have transcended physical space and time. Their garden – Eden – is replete with godly elements that inspire them to set down their insights. The space immediately behind them is a warm grayish color that terminates in the exciting and graphically flat purple band upon which their names are painted in large gold capitals amidst a forest of glyph-like marks. The artist finds it compelling to paint the letters large enough to require abbreviating their names. The letters then, tall

as the saints' heads, become imbued with oratorical meaning. Furthermore, the gold letters equate visually with the saints' halos and build up iconic stature, as if mouthing the names invokes the message. Above the title band is flat area of dark beige inside of which is each saint's symbol, along with its own halo. The four evangelists simultaneously enlist our attention with their bulbous eyes and visually embrace their tetramorphs. The gaze is an investiture: Matthew receives sacred knowledge from the angel; Mark receives courage and majesty from the lion; Luke receives strength and service from the bull; John receives heavenly vision from the eagle. Inscribed in parchment, these extraordinary bequests are therefore enshrined for the ages by the action of writing. This is the signal event of the miniatures and we can be sure that the Latin of Charlemagne's New Rome is the language that captures it.

In the St. John [3] and St. Matthew [4] miniatures there is also an illusionistic space that puts them squarely in the foreground. Behind are the walls, arches and bricks of the city. They are, in other words, working in the urban and divine context of Jerusalem, where the great stories they bring to light will culminate. This city, controlled and exploited by the Romans as it was, becomes a larger symbol of martyrdom and salvation. It is the seat of the Old Testament prophecies and the birthplace of New Testament fulfillment, whence their faith takes root. The battlements of the old fort painted in abstracted, architectonic tiles make a reference to the gates of heaven as well, through which their saintly stature will afford them entrée, and point to the treasured goal of their followers. The walls topped by battlements indicate the urgency and difficulty of accessing that realm. The Gospel show the way in.

The Christ in Majesty [5] miniature recapitulates themes established earlier: thick frames housing symmetric sequences of Insular-style braids that proliferate wildly until they are met by vegetable tendrils; corners composed of perpendicular orbs pierced by a brilliant white hairline. These corners, it should be noted, run opposite to those of St. John, wherein is revealed a familiar dialectic. Namely, that the evangelist's authority correlated to a mission whose divinity was on a par with Jesus, which explains the absence of a

throne for Jesus to sit on. St. John, moreover, sits on a throne-like chair, the largest of all, covered with gold quatrefoils that echo the primacy of the four evangelists. But the throne doubles also as a veiled proxy for imperial authority and yields the allusion of Charlemagne in comparison with Christ.

The Majesty in this miniature is proforma. Jesus faces the viewer squarely with unbearded face and unblinking gaze. His cruciform halo make this center, top third of the tableau the focal point of the miniature, setting up the gold-emblazened monogram that bestrides it. Like the miniatures of St. Matthew and St. John, we see the ancient fortress behind him built upon flat, abstracted lines and spaces. The figure of Jesus, like the other evangelists, is nevertheless richly volumetric, featuring naturalistic proportions and nuanced gradations of colors. One example of this would be the gently modeled clavicles that reveal his neck. Another would be the folds of the tunic below his right knee. The lack of abstraction in the figure of Jesus suggests that Christ moves in this world like the evangelists and thus finds his stature in rough equality with them. Oddly, he makes no benediction: his two fingers of his right hand pointed toward himself as he clasps with the other the closed book tightly to his breast. And one is tempted by this closed book that suggests he, in his life and passion, adds little creative content, and merely conveys the message written by the evangelists.

The title, *INVIGILIA NATALIS*, the Fountain of Life [6], crowns the last miniature of the codex. As such it is a visual summation of that which preceded it. The fountain itself is mentioned in a number of biblical passages as the place where the “soul thirsting for God”² will find satiation. This fountain is then the baptismal fount where penitents are born again in the healing waters of the lord. Yet, there are no people here in this picture represented in anthropomorphic terms. And no human sign of the Son of God either, interestingly.

There is, however, panoply of bird pairs set out symmetrically to each side of the fountain. The birds float in space, untied to any physical reference save for the acanthus leaves on which they nibble. This suggests that the garden is symbolically charged. At the top, the crow of cocks³ announces the end to enchantment and

evil and the start of a new day filled with hope. Turtledoves reputedly mate for life and are representative of fidelity to god. It was said that the flesh of peacocks didn't decay and was thus incorruptible: they figure most prominently around the dome of the fountain as a symbol of Jesus Christ and resurrection in general. The stag, the sole animal in the painting, stands next to the fountain peacefully eating, indicating that he has already quenched his thirst – the seeker has found his prize.

The fountain dominates the scene and features eight columns with Corinthian capitals set in rigid verticals. The front four columns lunge forward in the only reference to dimensional space of the composition. This singular arrangement references the four Gospels. Another strong analogy of this image would be the Garden of Eden. This paradise was described in Genesis as having four great rivers that are again associated with the four Gospels. These rivers are both the beginning and end of the faithful's journey to salvation. It is important to note that Christ's cross and his martyrdom occupy relatively empty space at the top of the miniature, which means of course that salvation comes with acceptance of him. But the reference to the evangelists' Gospels is likewise strong and that the everlasting life that comes from the waters is supplied in the message of the evangelists. This is a hefty allusion to the recent baptism of Charlemagne's son Pepin by Pope Hadrian at the Lateran Baptistery in Rome. This supreme moment powerfully endows the boy with sacred credentials he will need when he too is king. It is also indirectly confers the same blessing on his father, the king, as well.

All the pages of the Gospel book were written on purple-dyed vellum with gold and silver ink. The color, reserved both in contemporary Byzantium and ancient Rome for royal use, invests the Lectionary with noble purpose, thus eliciting the role of the emperor as commissioner of the work.⁴ The letters [7] used in the document were crucial in marking Alcuin's program of stabilizing "a national Frankish script."⁵ Uncials from Alcuin's native country, like many codices of the period, served to write the main text. These letters are rounded in the extreme. With few exceptions, most letters never rise above the mean line, leaving consistent

negative space between lines, facilitating legibility and giving the dense text visual breathing room. The whole effect is dignified and authoritative. However, the Square Roman Capitals in the Gregorian Style indicate an execution not by Godescalc the scribe, but by the illuminator or painter of the tableau. This assessment is predicated on the less than precise, and often inconsistent, rendering of stroke weights and basic letter proportions. One striking example of this can be seen in the St. Mark title. The two S's have significantly different stroke weights and the E features a middle cross arm much shorter than what should normally be presented. Despite the rampant technical flaws of the Evangelists' titles, they were, after all, illuminated in gold and therefore impressive, and further inferred a connection to the new Rome Charlemagne hoped to build.⁶ "The dedicatory verses, however, are in a Miniscule of fine formation."⁷ The Carolingian Miniscule [8] used much less space than its predecessors. It had elongated ascenders and descenders as well as rounded and open counters within its design, all of which facilitated a quick read. It consumed less ink and its slightly oblique stress meant that more letters could get on a page, which also saved on parchment. The Carolingian Miniscule is personal and intimate, well suited for the nature of the dedication poem to the royal commissioner of the Lectionary.

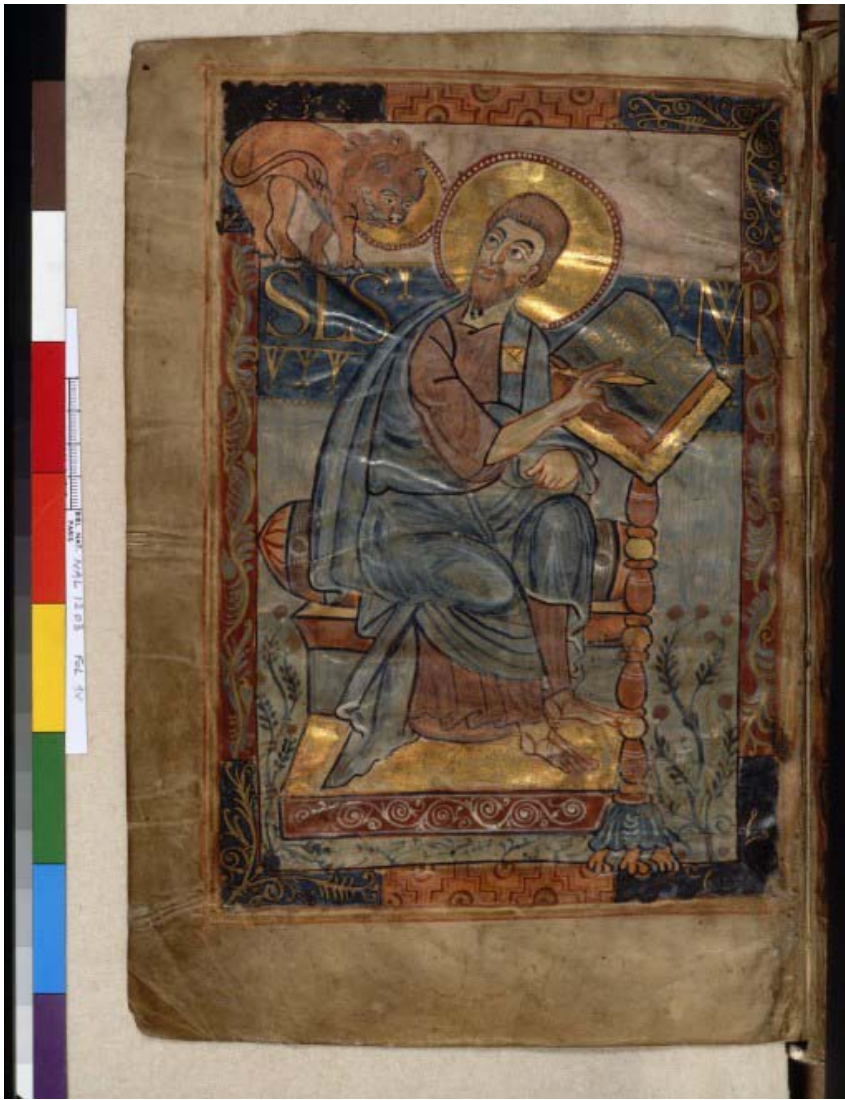
The production of the Godescalc Evangelistary involved a team of professionals: writers and editors, a poet who was also its scribe, an illuminator, a painter, parchment makers and book binders. It was a production whose scope matched the aspirations of its kingly commissioner. Charlemagne's council, led by Alcuin of York devised the codex to articulate the plan of *renovatio* with a view to transform the Frankish kingdom into a new Rome. The Evangelistary was therefore a significant part of the program to spread the Gospel of the Evangelists while making the argument for Charles' primacy as king over his sprawling lands.

References

- Bullough, Donald A. "Alcuin: Achievement and Reputation." Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2003.
- "Christian Symbols." Fish Eaters. Web 10 November 2010. <<http://www.fisheaters.com/symbols.html>>
- Morison, Stanley. "Politics and Script: Aspects of Authority and Freedom in the Development of Graeco Latin Script from the Sixth Century BC." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Petrucci, Armando and Radding, Charles. "Writers and readers in medieval Italy: studies in the history of written culture." New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Schutz, Herbert, "The Carolingians in Central Europe, their history, arts, and architecture: cultural history of Central Europe, 750-900." Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004.
- The Complete Artscroll Siddur page 525.
- "Trésors Carolingiens." Bibliothèque nationale de France. Web. 10 November 2010. <<http://expositions.bnf.fr/carolingiens/index.htm>>
- Tromph, G. W. "The Concept of the Carolingian Renaissance." Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 34, No. 1, Jan. - Mar., 1973, pp. 3-26, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Notes

- ¹ Tromph, p23
- ² Psalm 36
- ³ Fish Eaters.com
- ⁴ Petrucci, p121
- ⁵ Morison, p131
- ⁶ It is worth noting that the programmatical concept for the capitals was revised in later years when Alcuin realized the power vacuum in Byzantium had tarnished the reputation of its *Imperialis dignitas*. Going forward, he would espouse the notion of *Regalis dignitas* for its inherent strength and ability to exercise real temporal power. All of that to say that by 799 the court had evicted the papal capitals in favor of the Augustans. It is not surprising that the soon-to-be Holy Roman Emperor would appropriate the Imperial lettering style of a pagan emperor.
- ⁷ Morison, p135



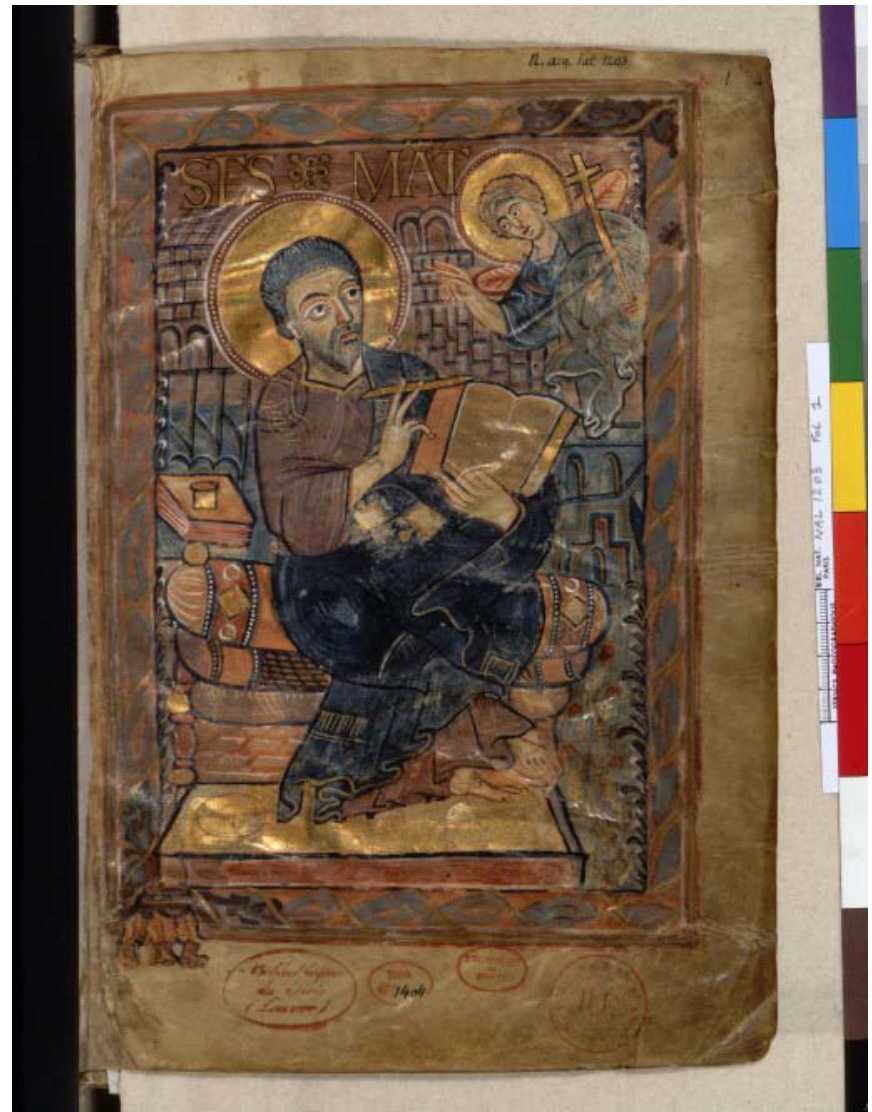
[1] St. Mark



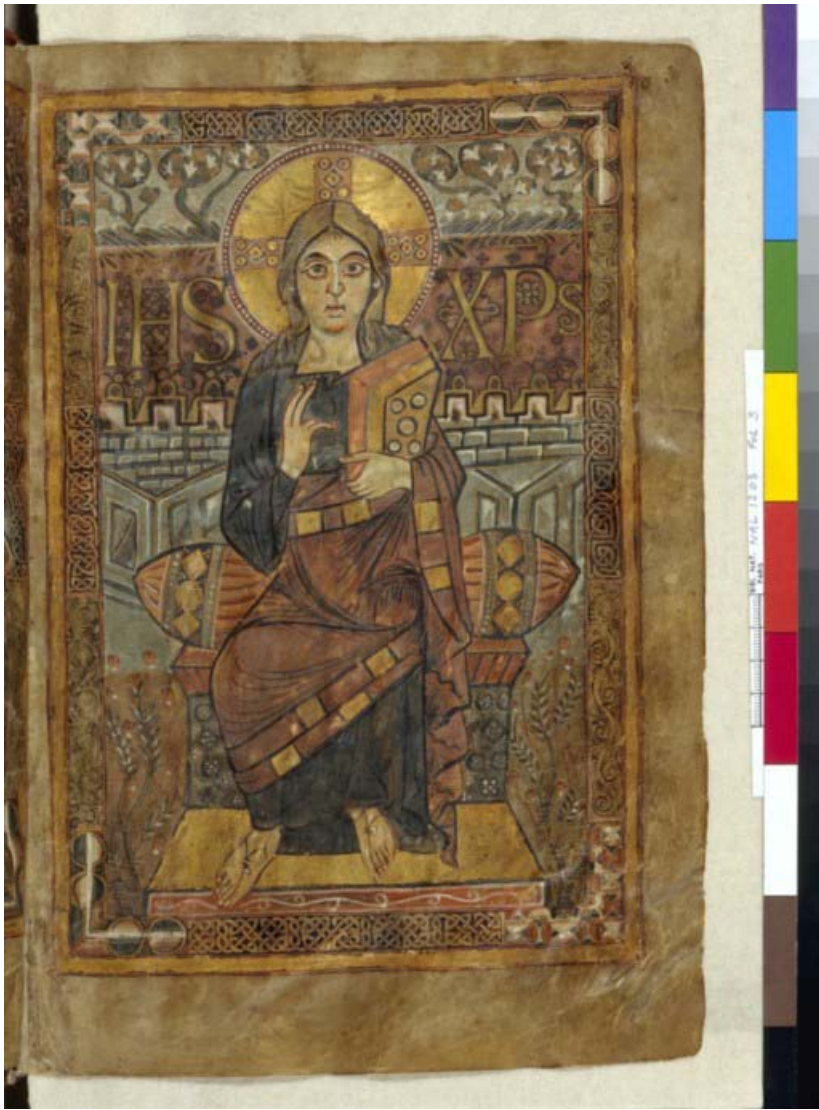
[2] St. Luke



[3] St. John



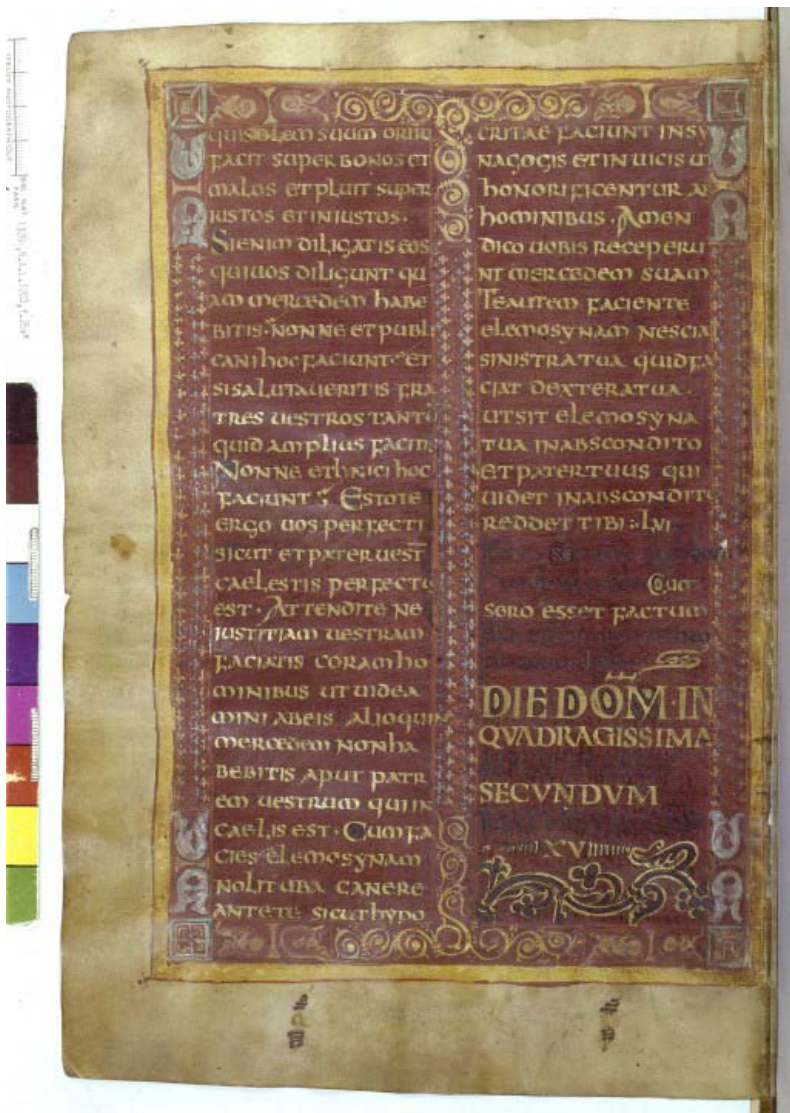
[4] St. Matthew



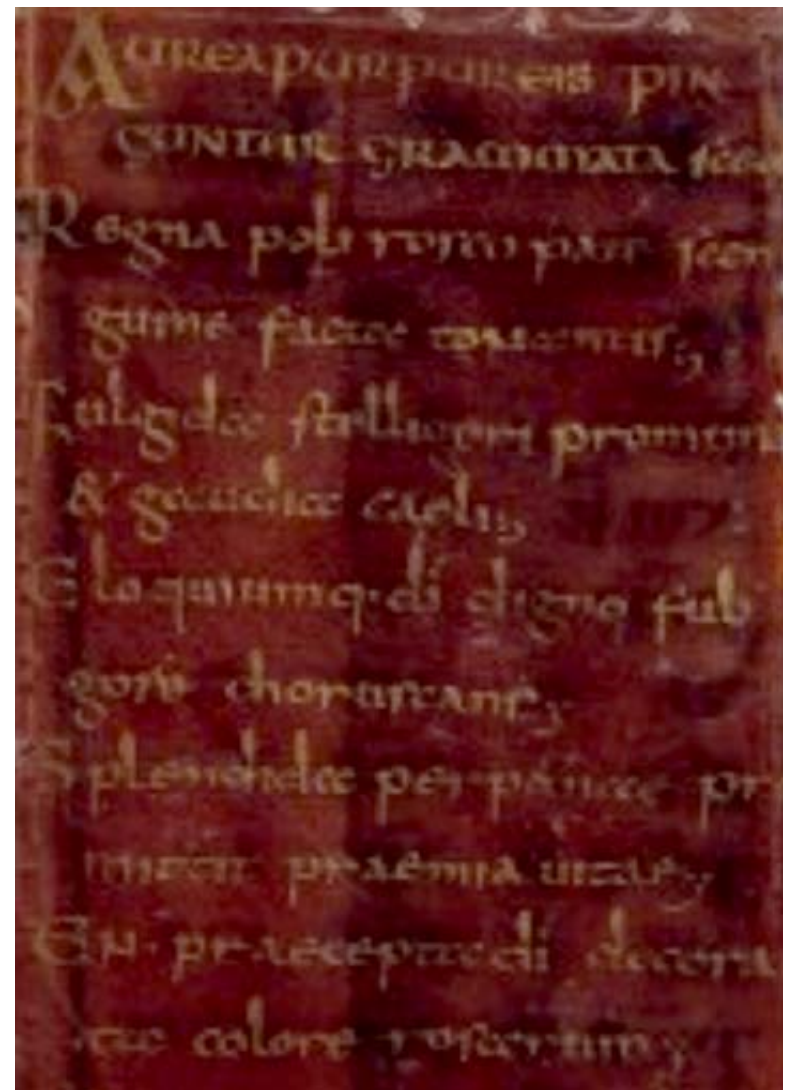
[5] Christ in Majesty



[6] Fountain of Life



[7] Mise en page, Matthew, VI



[8] Detail of dedication poem with Caroline Miniscules