

The St Albans Psalter Web Project

www.abdn.ac.uk/stalbanspsalter

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The St Albans Psalter, which is owned by St Godehard's Church, Hildesheim, and whose scholarly use is regulated by the Dombibliothek Hildesheim is one of the finest examples of English Romanesque art. It also contains the *Alexiuslied* which is the earliest surviving example of French literature. Lastly it is connected historically to Christina of Markyate, a hermitess living near St Albans in the early part of the twelfth century. Christina, aided by a monk from the abbey, collaborated in the production of her own biography, a remarkable and vivid document which recounts the dramatic events of her life. Several episodes in her life can be connected with the psalter. These features alone make the manuscript worthy of full publication, but its physical circumstances are also a consideration. As it is one of the greatest treasures of the diocese, use of the manuscript is very restricted and must take place under close supervision in the reading room of the Dombibliothek. And of course, for English and American scholars, it is also long way to travel.

All these reasons made the Psalter the obvious candidate for a prestigious academic award. The Arts and Humanities Research Board of Great Britain provides a generous 'resource enhancement' scheme, to make rare source material more easily available to the general public, and the St Albans Psalter project won £ 57,000, with additional funds from Aberdeen University, to be digitised and put on the web. Permission to proceed was kindly provided by Pastor Henze and the parish community at St Godehard's. All along, the kindly help and cooperation from the Dombibliothek enabled the work to make progress.

Aberdeen University had previously undertaken similar manuscript web projects, notably with the Aberdeen Bestiary (www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary) so the expertise was available to try the much more ambitious project with the psalter. It was decided that Dr. Ulrich Knapp, an art historian and photographer, who was already familiar with handling the psalter, would photograph the entire book (418 pages) in large format Ektachrome film in the Dombibliothek and then his images would be scanned at a high resolution. Once the digital images could be distributed, the team got to work. Dr Kristine Haney from Massachusetts University transcribed the Latin psalm text. Dr Sue Niebrzydowski from Warwick University transcribed the complicated calendar and the rest of the Latin, and then translated the entire Latin contents into English. Dr Margaret Jubb from Aberdeen University transcribed and translated the *Alexiuslied*. Dr Jane Geddes, from Aberdeen University, project director, provided commentary on the images, and essays about the manuscript. Lastly, Dr Gundula Sharman from Aberdeen University, translated the entire site (apart from the essays) into German. As a result, this manuscript is equally accessible to both German and English readers.

A classic monograph, *The St Albans Psalter* was written in 1960 by Otto Pächt, Francis Wormald and Charles Dodwell. This book provided a complete set of the



Albani-Psalter (Psalter der Christina von Markyate). Handschrift auf Pergament, 209 Bl. (418 S.) mit 42 ganzseitigen Miniaturen, 211 Initialen in Deckfarbenmalerei und 17 farbig lavierten Federzeichnungen, entstanden 1123-1135 in St. Albans/ England. Dombibliothek Hildesheim, HS St. God. 1

images in black and white, and a very learned discussion, particularly about the iconographic sources and calendar. However, it was being produced at the same time as the first edition of Christina's *Life*, (*The Life of Christina of Markyate*, ed. C.H.Talbot, 1959, new edition 1998) so the authors were not fully aware of the detailed connections between the two works. Also, for a book whose astounding beauty derives significantly from the use of colour, new technology was needed to deliver this to a better standard than the old photos. The present study aims to take full advantage to both the meaning and use of colour, and the connections with Christina.

For example, colour emphasises the writing of the so-called Scribe 3, who may be identified with Abbot Geoffrey of St Albans himself. He was a former school master who had a scandalously intimate relationship with Christina and commissioned the book. Scribe 3 contributes so much which suggests the hand of an ardent teacher, and the authority of someone who can over-rule the fine design of the text. His writing is in vivid alternating colours of ink, clamouring for attention. He writes equally in French and Latin, composing as well as copying, providing parallel texts in both languages to assist a struggling reader. His impassioned introduction to the psalms, hinting at the malicious gossip about his relationship, turns the beautifully planned frontispiece into a crowded mess. In the later section of the psalms, he asks the artist to draw attention to his handwriting: the busy characters who inhabit the initials point frantically to his own lettering.

Scribe 3 also reminds the viewer, that looking at pictures is a good way for the illiterate to understand scripture. Christina may not have read the book much. Its pages are still pristine. She was a famed embroiderer and someone stitched little silk curtains to protect many of the images. However, the embroiderer did not care that the stitches and curtains covered up the writing, making several psalms impossible to read. A powerful aspect of the iconography is the way in which it is tailored for a single female reader. For instance, the numerous images of the Life of Christ cycle emphasise the importance of women. Mary at the Annunciation holds a book open on her lap, in the same way Christina recounts about herself. The women at the Massacre of the Innocents fight back against the soldiers, one of the earliest examples of female defiance. Christina spent most of her early years fighting back against the physical onslaughts of men. The Passion is particularly poignant. It begins with Mary Magdalene washing Christ's feet and ends with her announcing the Resurrection to the Apostles. In the centre, the Last Supper becomes merely a disastrous men's meal where Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial begin. The sacred moment representing the Eucharist instead takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ is alone with the chalice, in the same way that an anchoress would be alone.

This project has already stimulated more research into the subject. A multi-disciplinary conference was recently held at St Albans Abbey where, both the manuscript and Christina were placed under the spot light. A book of essays from the conference, edited by Henrietta Leyser and Samule Fanous (published by Routledge) is due in 2004. It is hoped that the German version of the site will stimulate new interest among scholars in Germany who, after all, produced the first major publications on the book, namely W. Müller, T. Vatke on the *Alexiuslied*, Adolf Goldschmidt, and Otto Pächt.