

# Interpreting Genesis. A note on artistic invention and the Byzantine illuminated letter

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*The article explores iconography of the illuminated initial letters in the Byzantine tenth century Homilies of John Chrysostom and other authors with special reference to Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. T. 3.3. It is argued that pictorial initials composed of human figures and human-animal combats function as detailed visual interpretations of the written text, displaying at the same time artistic uniqueness and imagination.*

*Keywords: illuminated initial letters, homilies, John Chrysostom, Genesis, artist-scribe, Byzantine art*

Among the various illuminated manuscripts which appeared in Byzantium after the end of the iconoclastic controversy the presence of the illuminated homilies of various authors is especially remarkable. By the ninth century, compilations of homilies by different early Fathers had appeared. They served liturgical needs, and were arranged according to the Church calendar.<sup>1</sup> Among the most illustrated post-iconoclastic homilies, those of the two Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom, stand out. Their illustrated copies might have been in use even before the Iconoclastic period.<sup>2</sup>

Gregory's sermons were extremely popular. Three richly decorated manuscripts from between the last quarter of the ninth century and the first half of the tenth survive: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, *gr. 510*, of 879–882;<sup>3</sup> Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, *E. 49/50 inf.*, of the ninth century;<sup>4</sup> and Patmos, Monastery of St. John the Theologian, *cod. 33* (made in Calabria, Italy), of 941. Their decorative program is based on full-page narrative illustrations (Paris), on marginal images (Milan), or almost exclusively on decorated initials and headpieces (Patmos). During the tenth century an edition of sixteen of Gregory's homilies for liturgical purposes appeared:<sup>5</sup> they were selected to supplement the readings on different feast days, following Gospel readings as in lectionaries, and corresponding to the Ecclesiastical calendar.<sup>6</sup> The first illustrated edition of these liturgical homilies is known only from the middle of the eleventh century; its presumed archetype and most of the copies were done in Constantinople. The illuminations in such manuscripts, influenced in many cases by liturgy, were borrowed from various sources, including lectionaries, menologies, and the Old and the New Testament.<sup>7</sup> The initial letters are one of the main features of the decorative program of this group. Many of them composed of saintly figures and

Christological scenes derive from the nearly contemporary full-page framed narratives, preserving the liturgical significance of the enclosed scenes and figures.<sup>8</sup> In many cases the initials appear alongside of such text illustrations. In this way, their meaning remains clear. Like other religious images, these initials, whether complemented by framed narratives and marginal images or not, have strict rules: the figures are clearly visible, the scenes easily recognizable.

The illuminated Chrysostom homilies, especially where their decorative program is based on pictorial initial letters, present a different picture. A large corpus of Chrysostom homilies is known from the ninth to the eleventh century.<sup>9</sup> The manuscripts are of various content; some are anthologies, others contain homilies on specific biblical books.<sup>10</sup> Only one manuscript (Athens, National library, *gr.*

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<sup>1</sup> R. F. Taft, *Sermon*, in: *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, III, ed. A. Kazhdan, New York — Oxford 1991, 1881.

<sup>2</sup> G. Galavaris, *Manuscripts and Liturgy*, in: *Illuminated Greek Manuscripts from American Collections: An Exhibition in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann*, ed. G. Vikan, Princeton 1973, 23.

<sup>3</sup> S. Der Nersessian, *The Illustrations of the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus*, *Paris gr. 510*, DOP 16 (1962) 196–228; L. Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium*, Cambridge 1999. Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, *E. 49–50 inf.* is included in the same category. The ninth-century *Paris. gr. 510* is an exceptional example of a luxury manuscript, made in Constantinople, and containing a complete edition of the forty five homilies. Its program of full-page scenes and golden and decorated initial letters is particularly rich. Its decorative program may be linked to a powerful patron and scholar, the Patriarch Photius. Cf. Brubaker, *op. cit.*, especially 201–238, 412–414.

<sup>4</sup> A. Grabar, *Les miniatures du Gregoire de Nazianze de l'Ambrosienne*, Paris 1943.

<sup>5</sup> G. Galavaris, *The Illustrations of the Homilies of Gregory Nazianzenus*, Princeton 1969, 4. Galavaris also lists the third category which contains commentaries on the sixteen homilies (Jerusalem, Greek Patriarchy, *Taphou 44*, eleventh century; Universitätsbibliothek Basel, *AN 18*, twelfth–thirteenth century; Paris, BnF, *gr. 541*, late fourteenth century).

<sup>6</sup> Galavaris, *op. cit.*, 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>8</sup> E.g., *Sinai 339*, fol. 5, 197v, 341v; Mount Athos, Monastery of Dionysiou, *cod. 587m*, fol. 66.

<sup>9</sup> Madigan lists twenty nine manuscripts of the illuminated sermons of John Chrysostom. Cf. S. P. Madigan, *Athens 211 and the Illustrated Homilies of John Chrysostom* (unpublished PhD thesis; University of Chicago), Chicago 1984, 183–184, and Appendix IV.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, 184–185. Madigan lists general contents of each manuscript in Appendix IV; some of them (e.g. Vatican library, *Ottob. 14* and *Paris. gr. 654*) are listed incorrectly.



Fig. 1. Vatican Library, Ottob. gr. 14, fol. 238  
(after Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs*, pl. 50, fig. 195)

211), attributed to the late ninth or early tenth century and presumably executed in Constantinople,<sup>11</sup> contains marginal illustrations, inspired by the text of the homilies. Others might contain the author's and the imperial portraits, and some miniatures.<sup>12</sup>

The so-called expanded Chrysostom group is of special interest. It consists of five manuscripts, four of which contain mainly diverse homilies of John Chrysostom (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 654, Vatican library, Ottob. gr. 14, Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, gr. II. 179, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. T. 3.3),<sup>13</sup> while the last is varia of Basil the Great (Patmos, Monastery of St. John the Theologian, cod. 29). The first three manuscripts, probably executed in Constantinople, are attributed to the second quarter of the tenth century.<sup>14</sup> The other two are slightly later but nevertheless reveal a close stylistic affinity with the first three and share with them the vocabulary of motifs.<sup>15</sup> Illuminated initials inserted at the beginning of each homily play a central role in the decorative program of this group. They were planned and in most cases even executed by scribes,<sup>16</sup> in the ink of the text, and painted in a limited number of colors; they involve floral and geometrical designs, as well as zoomorphic and anthropomorphic motifs.

This group identifies the scribe-artist as the maker of the illuminated initials. This is borne out by the close formal connection between the illuminated initial and the letters of the text, and also by the heavy dependence of the enclosed motif on the words of the specific text, showing the complexity of the text-image connection. Their zoomorphic and especially anthropomorphic initials, usually modest in shape and number of motifs involved, vary from the literal illustration of the specific word or phrase to the allegorical, didactic and even typological interpretation of the sermon's text. The purpose of this paper is to show that the initials of this group of

homilies are highly original, invented specifically for the given text, and may well represent the scribe-artist's personal visual commentary on it.

The initials composed of human figures or animal-human combat are especially scrutinized here, and their relation to the homily text is examined. We will not deal with purely zoomorphic initials which, regardless of the obvious symbolic level of understanding of certain animals, may be highly ambiguous and therefore should be discussed separately and in a much wider context.

Two initials composed of human figures appear in the Vatican *Homilies of Various Authors for Various Occasions* (Vatican library, Ottob. gr. 14).<sup>17</sup> On fol. 2, two male figures, wearing bishop's vestments and holding books, substitute the vertical stem of the initial *Eta*.<sup>18</sup> These figures appear to be related to the Lent liturgy mentioned in the title (*Sermon on Genesis*)<sup>19</sup>. On fol. 238, another bishop's figure, his right hand in a Greek blessing, pointing to the text (fig. 1),<sup>20</sup> represents Epiphanius the bishop preaching on the burial of Christ on Great Saturday.<sup>21</sup> An interesting detail is a chalice set on the bishop's head in such a way that his entire figure merges with the chalice stem. Its appearance may be connected to the symbolic representation of Christ's body, implied by the text, for this is one of the most significant liturgical objects, containing the wine in the liturgy of the Sacramental Eucharist in the Church. Such a chalice is usually depicted on the

<sup>11</sup> Madigan, *Athens 211*, 75–93, 227; *Catalogue of the illuminated Byzantine manuscripts of the National Library of Greece*, vol. 3, ed. A. Marava-Chatzinicolaou, Ch. Toufexi-Paschou, Athens 1997, no. 2 (with bibliography). Grabar attributes this manuscript to southern Italy. Cf. A. Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs enlumines de provenance italienne (IXe – XIe siècles)*, Paris 1972, no. 6.

<sup>12</sup> A few eleventh-century manuscripts contain frontispieces with imperial portraits (Paris, BnF, *Coislin 79*; Paris, BnF, *Coislin 193*, *Sinai gr. 364*); Madigan, *Athens 211*, Appendix IV, also 190–235 (on the iconography of the genre). On the eleventh–twelfth century Chrysostom manuscripts v. K. Krause, *Die illustrierten Homilien des Johannes Chrysostomos in Byzanz*, Wiesbaden 2004.

<sup>13</sup> I. Hutter, *Corpus der byzantinischen Miniaturenhandschriften I*, Stuttgart 1977 (hereinafter *Corpus I*), 18–19.

<sup>14</sup> S. P. Madigan, *Three Manuscripts by the 'Chrysostom Initialer': The Scribe as Artist in Tenth Century Constantinople*, *Scriptorium* 41 (1987) 82. V. also discussion on this subject in E. Maayan Fanar, *Byzantine Pictorial Initials of the Post-Iconoclastic Period (From the End of the 9th Century to the Early 11th century)*, Jerusalem 2003 (PhD thesis, the Hebrew University in Jerusalem), 120–134.

<sup>15</sup> Maayan Fanar, *Byzantine Pictorial Initials*, 134–139.

<sup>16</sup> Many of the tenth-century initials were executed by the scribe [I. Hutter, *Decorative Systems in Byzantine Manuscripts, and the Scribe as Artist: Evidence from Manuscripts in Oxford*, *Word and Image* 12/1 (1996) 15]. Venice Chrysostom is an exceptional manuscript of the group. Its text and initials were probably made by two different hands. On this subject v. E. Maayan Fanar, *The Scribe as Artist in the Chrysostom Manuscript in Venice: Reconsideration*, *Scriptorium* 25/2 (2005) 119–131.

<sup>17</sup> The full contents of this manuscript are given in: E. Feron, F. Battaglini, *Codices manuscripti graeci Ottobiani Bibliothecae Vaticanae*, Rome 1893, 16–18.

<sup>18</sup> Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs*, pl. 50, fig. 187

<sup>19</sup> PG 114, 2062.

<sup>20</sup> Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs*, pl. 50, fig. 195.

<sup>21</sup> *Homilia in divini corporis sepulturam*, PG 43, 440–464 “Logos of our Saint Father Epiphanius, bishop of Cyprus, on the burial of the divine body of our Savior Jesus Christ and on Joseph from Aremathea and on the descent to hell of the Lord, which took place in a paradoxical way after the suffering of the Savior. The Saint and Great Saturday, what is it? Today there is vast silence on earth, that is, vast silence and quiet. Vast silence, because the Emperor sleeps, the earth was fearful (anxious) and it became quiet, because incarnate God was asleep; and because He, i.e., God, let these, who have been asleep since eternal times, rise. The incarnate God died and Hades was shocked...” (the translation from the original was accomplished with the generous help of Jonathan Cahana, a PhD student at the History of Religions Department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem).

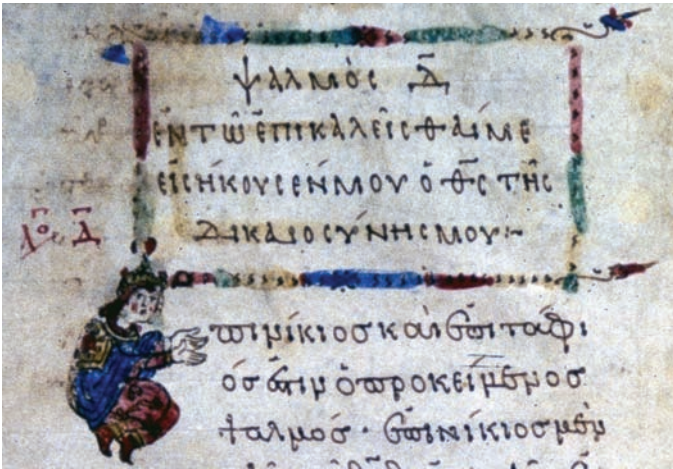


Fig. 2. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 654, fol. 9  
(Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France)



Fig. 3. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 654, fol. 18  
(Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France)



Fig. 4. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 654, fol. 71v  
(Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France)

table of the Last Supper, symbolizing Jesus' body and blood. The distribution of the Eucharist by Christ among the Apostles features, for example, in the ninth-century marginal Psal-

ters (e.g., the Chludov Psalter, Moscow, State Historical Museum, Ms. D.29, fol. 115). The chalice, as an allusion to Christ's sacrificial death, appears as the illustration to Chrysostom's homily 20 in Athens gr. 211. There, Christ is represented standing in prayer before the chalice, which is held by a huge hand (*dextera domini*?) descending from heaven.<sup>22</sup>

Bread and wine as Jesus' flesh and blood are mentioned in Luke 22:19–20. Paul refers to this symbolism in 1 Cor. 11:23–26: "... This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes". Accordingly, this initial points up an act of preaching, but also represents in a most symbolical way the homily's central theme, the death of Christ.

More examples of initials composed of human figures showing different levels of text-image connection come from Paris, BnF, gr. 654, which contains commentaries on Psalms 2–9 and 37–47 by John Chrysostom, Theodoret of Cyrus, Hesychius of Jerusalem, and Asterius.<sup>23</sup> Many initials display a more or less direct link to the text. Asterius' commentary to Psalm 4 begins with the figure of King David kneeling in prayer and forming the initial *Epsilon* (fol. 9) (fig. 2)<sup>24</sup> in reference to David's prayer over Absalom's grave, while Chrysostom's commentary to the same psalm starts with two anonymous young men in prayer, composing the letter *Omicron* (fol. 18) (fig. 3).<sup>25</sup> These two initials show different modes of prayer, corresponding to the different commentaries: that of Asterius emphasizes the prayer of King David (a specific person); the other, of Chrysostom, portrays anonymous rejoicing people, whose prayer has been answered.<sup>26</sup>

Chrysostom's commentary to Psalm 7 (fol. 71v) opens with the initial *Epsilon*, depicted as a youth emerging from within the decorative frame, holding a culmus and writing a book (fig. 4). The motif corresponds directly to the first line of the commentary, concerning knowledge of Scripture. "It would be good for you to have such a precise knowledge of the Scriptures and the stories you tell as to make unnecessary for us a longer sermon in explaining their teaching".<sup>27</sup>

On fol. 159v, a commentary by Chrysostom to Psalm 44, a young barefoot girl with long hair and earrings forms the round shape the *Epsilon*, while her hand, stretched out and holding a scroll, substitutes the letter's horizontal bar (fig. 5).<sup>28</sup> A direct relation is evident to the second verse of

<sup>22</sup> Madigan, *Athens 211*, 153–155.

<sup>23</sup> M.-J. Rondeau, *Les commentaires patristiques du Psautier (IIIe – Ve siècles)*, I, Roma 1982, 76–78 (Asterius); 126–130 (Chrysostom); 134–137 (Theodoret); 137–143 (Hesychius). The commentaries of Asterius appear under Chrysostom's authorship in the Catalogue of Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The correct contents of the manuscript are listed in M. Richard, *Une ancienne collection d'homélies grecques sur les psaumes I–XV*, Symbolae Osloenses 25 (1947) 54–58.

<sup>24</sup> Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs*, pl. 47, fig. 171.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, pl. 48, fig. 173.

<sup>26</sup> "...someone might say, that petitioner was heard, because he was David, but I am not hearkened to because I am insignificant and paltry, he demonstrates that he does not hear him simply for what he is nor does he eavesdrop on you by chance. Rather, in every instance he gives close scrutiny to our behavior. If yours is such as to plead in your favor, you will be heard in every respect". Cf. PG 55, 39–40; *St. John Chrysostom commentary on the Psalms*, I, Brookline 1998, 45 (Ps. 4). Here, the decorated initial seems to match the didactic character of Chrysostom's commentary.

<sup>27</sup> PG 55, 80; the translation is cited after R. C. Hill, in: *St. John Chrysostom commentary on the Psalms*, I, 111 (Ps. 7).

<sup>28</sup> Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs*, pl. 48, fig. 179.



Fig. 5. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 654, fol. 159v (after Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs*, pl. 48, fig. 179)



Fig. 6. Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, gr. II. 179, fol. 92 (after Madigan, *Three Manuscripts*, Pl. 16b)

the psalm and to the title of the commentary: “My heart overflows with a goodly theme’. Another version, ‘crept out’, another, ‘My heart was moved with good news’.”<sup>29</sup> The word of God (“Goodly theme”) is depicted as a scroll, while the young person holds it in his/her hand extending directly from the heart. A flower, seen near the figure’s legs, may be interpreted as a decorative motif; yet this motif breaks the shape of the letter, and is thus unnecessary, unless it corresponds to the title of the psalm: “To the author of victory on the lilies of the sons of Kore”.

Opening Theodoret’s commentary to Psalm 46 (fol. 189v) are two youths raising their hands and turning to each other to form the letter *Pi*.<sup>30</sup> The image corresponds to the second verse of the psalm, “All the nations, clap your hands. Shout to God in a voice of happiness”.<sup>31</sup> The idea of the clapping of hands has been discussed by various Church Fathers. On the one hand, the “clapping of hands” was a sign of God being praised, an interpretation based on Ps. 46:1 and 97:8 and Is 55:12. On the other hand, it was understood as a remnant of a pagan tradition, and was condemned.<sup>32</sup> In this context, the particular biblical verses were understood as enjoyment and gladness, rejoicing both in voice and in deeds. Chrysostom treats this verse as an expression of joy caused by the Lord’s victory over enemies.<sup>33</sup>

Another manuscript of this small group, *Chrysostom Homilies on I Corinthians* (Venice II, 179), goes even further, expressing a mixture of moral message and humor in some of its initial letters. Thus, illustrating Homily 15 are two figures, depicted in profile, standing inside an arch, embracing and kissing, to constitute the initial *Omicron*; a small bird sits in its center (fol. 92) (fig. 6).<sup>34</sup> It is hard to recognize the sex of the depicted figures because of their similar dress (albeit each differently colored), but presumably they are a man and a woman. Their protruding lips are clearly emphasized, almost touching, stressing the motif of kissing. According to the verse of Paul (1 Cor. 5:1) and the homily’s text, the scene is related to the representation of lust and fornication

(πορνεία): “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you...for a man is living with his father’s wife”.<sup>35</sup> Emphasis on the physical act of bodily love through kissing and embracing suggests this interpretation.

All these images have a connection to the adjacent text, not just highlighting the literal connection between the image and the text but seemingly representing visually the homily’s idea, suggesting the scribe-artist’s intimate acquaintance with the text.

Initial letters in the Oxford Chrysostom (Oxford, Bodleian Library, *Auct. T. 3.3*), which contains the homilies on Genesis, emphasize still more its artist-scribe’s inven-

<sup>29</sup> PG 55, 183.

<sup>30</sup> Grabar, *Les manuscrits grecs*, pl. 48, fig. 181.

<sup>31</sup> PG 80, 1208. Theodoret stresses the acclamation of victory through gestures and the prophecy that was understood by the whole human race: “While the prophetic word predicted this, it gave a glimpse of the apostolic choir urging all the nations to hymn singing. Now, clapping is typical of victory, and shouting the sound of victors... He is revealed to you all, he says, as king most high and handsome. While in ancient times this was known to Jews alone, in the present time it has been made clear also to the whole human race”. Cf. *Theodoret of Cyrus. Commentary on the Psalms*, transl. R. C. Hill, I, Washington 2000, 273 [Ps. 46 (47)]. This verse was interpreted by Eusebius as a joy because of Christ’s victory over the devil, and also as an invitation to the marriage feast of Christ with his bride, the Church (PG 23, 415); H. F. Stander, *The Clapping of Hands in the Early Church*, *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993) 78. People clapping their hands as an illustration to the same Psalm appear also the illuminated ninth century Latin (Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek, *MS Bibl. Rhenotraiectinae I Nr 32*, Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Stuttgart, *Bibl. Fol. 23*) and Greek (the Chludov Psalter, Moscow, State Historical Museum, *Ms. D.29*) Psalters, and the eleventh century Greek successors of the Chludov Psalter: London, British Library, *Add. 19352*, Vatican library, *Barberini gr. 372*. Cf. S. Dufrenne, *Tableaux synoptiques de 15 psautiers médiévaux à illustrations intégrales issues du texte*, Paris 1978.

<sup>32</sup> Stander, *The Clapping of Hands in the Early Church*, 74–80.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, 78.

<sup>34</sup> Madigan, *Three Manuscripts*, Pl. 16b.

<sup>35</sup> PG 61, 121–122; *Nicene and post-Nicene fathers. First series*, ed. Ph. Schaff, vol. 12, Peabody 1994, 83.

tiveness.<sup>36</sup> Composed of a limited number of motifs, the initials function as a detailed visual interpretation of the written text, displaying at the same time artistic uniqueness and imagination.

The Oxford Chrysostom is probably from the third quarter of the tenth century, and has been attributed to the province of Constantinople or to Asia Minor.<sup>37</sup> As in the other manuscripts of the aforementioned group, decorated initials exist only at the beginning of each homily. Here, the initials appear in the margins, and were probably executed after the main text was written. All the initials were first drawn in red and then painted, not very carefully. The red ink of the initials and headpieces looks very similar in color to that of the headings, which in this case were probably executed by the same scribe-artist.<sup>38</sup>

Pictorial initial letters, which appear at the beginning of certain homilies, are very compressed and consist of one or at most two figures. However, their correspondence to the text is surprisingly complex and not always obvious at first sight.

Thus, on fol. 37v the vertical stem of the initial *Iota* is a naked man standing, stretching his hands upwards.<sup>39</sup> The commentary to Gen 1:20–21 [Homily 7(5)] goes: “Yesterday we sufficiently upbraided those who deserted us for the horse racing. We showed them how great was the harm they suffered, and how in one fell swoop they had squandered the spiritual riches accruing to them from fasting, and how from great wealth they had at one stroke cast themselves into utter indigence. Come now, then, today let us make use of a milder remedy, and bind up the wounds of their souls just as if they were our own limbs...”<sup>40</sup> It is not certain if the human figure represents a martyr or a sinner. The nude figure with emphasized limbs might be a literal illustration to the above verse, because the commentary wholly deals with sinning through the body instead of fasting.

The choice of all the initials listed below reflects the artist’s originality. He seems to have invented them especially, finding a unique way to condense a visual explanation of the text into one or two figures. A crowned human head tops the vertical stem of the initial *Phi* [fol. 45v, Homily 8(6)], where the relevant verse Gen 1:26 is: “Let us make a human being in our image and likeness. Let them have control of the fish of the sea and the birds of heaven, the cattle and the wild beasts, all the earth and all the reptiles creeping upon the earth”. The crowned head probably illustrates this verse, stressing the notion of man’s role as a ruler over the created earth. In his homily, Chrysostom interprets this role in that way: “...the Creator, as though on the point of installing some king and ruler over everything on earth, first erected the whole of this scenery, and then brought forth the one destined to preside over it, showing us through the created things themselves what importance he gave to this creature”.<sup>41</sup>

On fol. 57v, the initial *Epsilon* is composed of an angel with enlarged hands in a blessing gesture, appearing out of a cloud [Homily 10 (8)].<sup>42</sup> The passage relates to the verse (Gen 1:27) telling of the creation of male and female. No angel is mentioned in any part of the text; its appearance in the initial might have to do with the visual appearance of the Creator accompanied by angels in a Creation scene found already in early Byzantine art [e.g., the Cotton Genesis (London, British Library, *MS Cotton Otho B VI*), fol. 32; Venice, St. Marco, Creation cycle].<sup>43</sup>

Another angel appears on fol. 141v [Homily 20 (18)] (fig. 8). His half figure appears inside the round contour of

the initial *Phi*, shaped as four wings, holding the rim with his hands. As in the foregoing case (fol. 57v), an angel may appear symbolizing God’s presence, since God the Father himself was not painted in the Byzantine tradition except in the form of Christ incarnate. “...let us deliver the customary discourse to you from the book of blessed Moses — or, rather, from the sayings of the Spirit which the Divine grace has taught us through the mouth of Moses”.<sup>44</sup> This homily especially deals with the concept of God’s presence: “What does that mean, ‘He left God’s presence?’ In other words, on account of that abominable crime he was stripped of the patronage God afforded”. The figure also resembles Cherubim, which equally indicate God’s presence.

The initial on fol. 112 [Homily 17 (15)] represents a complex idea (fig. 7). The initial *Iota* is made of a dragon twisted around a naked human body (Adam?),<sup>45</sup> which emerges from the dragon’s open mouth (Gen 3:8). The homily deals with the expulsion from Eden, stressing the theme of Original Sin procured by Satan through the serpent. The connection between serpent and dragon can be seen in different visual and literal sources.<sup>46</sup> The homily also stresses the idea of the serpent–Satan connection: “...the good God, too, have pity on man for the plot to which he fell victim with his wife after being deceived and accepting the devil’s advice through the serpent”.<sup>47</sup> In another Chrysostom manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, *Auct. T. 3.1*,<sup>48</sup> a snake twisted around the vertical stem of the letter illustrates the same homily. This is the only initial that appears in the same passage and has a connection to it in both manuscripts.

Sin is the central theme of this homily. The image signifies expulsion from Eden in the form of a serpent (as in *Auct. T. 3.1*), but also stresses the idea of man’s sin. Adam’s nakedness, which he was ashamed of, is also a concern of the

<sup>36</sup> PG 53, 21–54; *Saint John Chrysostom. Homilies on Genesis*, III, red. R. Ch. Hill, Washington 1992.

<sup>37</sup> On this manuscript v. M. L. Agati, *La minuscola “bouletée”*, Città del Vaticano 1992, 116–117; Hutter, *Corpus I*, 18–19, no. 12, pl. 62–67.

<sup>38</sup> The text in red ink might have been written after the first drawing of the initial. The main text is written in brown ink and probably by another hand. Some of the initials look very simplified and probably were drawn by this scribe, e.g., fols. 139v, 143v, 146v.

<sup>39</sup> Hutter, *Corpus I*, fig. 63.

<sup>40</sup> PG 53, 61–62; *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis*, I, red. R. Ch. Hill, Washington 1986, 91 (Homily 7).

<sup>41</sup> PG 53, 69; *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis*, I, 107 (Homily 8).

<sup>42</sup> Hutter, *Corpus I*, fig. 68.

<sup>43</sup> K. Weitzmann, H. L. Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis: British Library, Codex Cotton Otho B VI*, Princeton 1986.

<sup>44</sup> PG 53, 166; *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis*, II, red. R. Ch. Hill, Washington 1990, 35 (Homily 20).

<sup>45</sup> Adam’s nakedness was understood by Greek fathers as “the symbol of his physical weakness, of his bodily needs, due to the fact that, for example, he will be cold if he does not cover himself. The discovery of his ‘nakedness’ is the conscious understanding of human needs which will lead to the invention of sciences and techniques, necessary to life”. Translated from M. Harl, *La prise de conscience de la “nudité” d’Adam. Une interprétation de Genèse 3,7 chez les Pères Grecs*, *Studia Patristica* 7 (1966) 486.

<sup>46</sup> Ps. 73:13–14 (LXX); Apoc. 12:9; “Thou, o Belial, dragon, apostate, crooked serpent, rebel against God...” (*Ignatius, Epistle to the Philippians*, ch. 11; <http://www.pseudepigrapha.com/LostBooks/ignatius2philippians.htm>); v., also, M. Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature*, Chicago — London 1931, 98; H. Kelly, *The Devil at Baptism, Ritual, Theology, and Drama*, Ithaca — London, 1985, 71, note 46.

<sup>47</sup> *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies on Genesis*, I, 222 (Homily 17).

<sup>48</sup> Hutter, *Corpus I*, 17–18, no. 17, pls. 101–104. Agati, *op. cit.*, 115–116; the manuscript is ascribed to southern Italy, late tenth or early eleventh century.



Fig. 7. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. T. 3.3, fol. 141v  
(Photo: Bodleian Library, Oxford)



Fig. 8. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. T. 3.3, fol. 112  
(Photo: Bodleian Library, Oxford)

homily. The human figure is shown swallowed by a snake and at the same time bound by it.

A parallel is the scene of Jonah swallowed by a sea monster.<sup>49</sup> Depictions of Jonah appear in early Christian art in catacombs and sarcophagi, where he, like Adam, is shown naked. As a part of a narrative representation, the upper part of Jonah's naked body appears when the monster spews him out, as an illustration to the last part of the story. However, the symbolic portrayal of Jonah usually shows him in this position. The scene appears as a symbol of Christ's resurrection according to Matthew 12:39, 40; 16:4. Jonah's nakedness represents the idea of a naked soul emerging from the "belly of hell",<sup>50</sup> while the association between the monster and death appears from Jonah's statement: "I cried in my affliction to the Lord, and he hearkened to me, even to my cry out of the belly of hell: thou heardest my voice..." (2:2–3).

A similar type of dragon–human combat is depicted twice in another manuscript from the Chrysostom group, the Venice Chrysostom, which contains *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*. On fol. 155v, the initial *Epsilon* (Homily 24) is composed of two youths emerging from dragons' mouths; the creatures' twisted tails form the letter's central bar.<sup>51</sup> One of the tails ends in a snake's head with a venomous tongue protruding.

A connection may be made with the heading of the homily (1 Cor 10:13): "There hath no temptation (πειρασμός) taken<sup>52</sup> you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to es-

cape, that ye may be able to bear it".<sup>53</sup> The dragons and the serpent represent temptation, while salvation is portrayed as the two youths, their hands clasped in prayer, protruding from dragons' mouths. In the Old Testament and the New Testament, the snake and the dragon appear in the same negative sense, substituting each other. This is seen in the picto-

<sup>49</sup> On classical sources for the sea monster v. J. Boardman, 'Very Like a Whale' — *Classical Sea Monsters*, in: *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*. Papers presented in honor of Edith Porada, ed. A. E. Farkas et al., Mainz on Rhine 1987, 73–84.

<sup>50</sup> B. Narkiss, *The Sign of Jonah*, *Gesta* 18/1 (1979) 65–66.

<sup>51</sup> I. Furlan, *Codici greci illustrati della Biblioteca Marciana*, I–VI, Milano 1978–1997, II, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Basil applies this text to persecution (Epp. 139, 219, 256): A. Robertson, A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, Edinburgh 1971 (first ed. 1911), 209.

<sup>53</sup> Chrysostom explains in the homily: "Thus, because he terrified them greatly, relating the ancient examples, and threw them into an agony, saying, 'Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall'; 'though they had borne many temptations, and had exercised themselves many times therein'; for 'I was with you', saith he, 'in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling': (1 Cor. 2: 3) lest they should say, 'Why terrify and alarm us? We are not unexercised in these troubles, for we have been both driven and persecuted, and many and continual dangers have we endured': repressing again their pride, he says, 'there hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear', i.e., small, brief, moderate. For he uses the expression 'man can bear', in respect of what is small; as when he says, 'I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh' (Romans 6:19). 'Think not then great things', saith he, 'as though ye had overcome the storm. For never have ye seen a danger threatening death nor a temptation intending slaughter': which also he said to the Hebrews, 'ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin' (Hebrews 12:4)". PG 61, 197–198; *Nicene and post-Nicene fathers*, vol. 12, 138.



Fig. 9. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Auct. T. 3.3, fol. 134v  
(after Hutter, *Corpus*, I, fig. 69)

rial representation of the motif, where the snake and the dragon appear alternately.

Another representation of a combat theme appears in the same manuscript on fol. 177v, opening Homily 27. The initial *Alpha* is composed of a youth caught by a dragon-headed serpent, twisted around him.<sup>54</sup> The youth struggles with the serpent with a stick held in his left hand. Here, the motif seems to relate to the subject of corruption.<sup>55</sup> Probably relating to the theme of temptation, sin, and corruption, these two initials are based on the combat between the human figure and personified evil forces, a snake and a dragon. The first initial visually represents overcoming temptation through prayer, while the second stresses the combat itself. The figure is engaged with the dragon, and it is not entirely evident who will win and who will lose the contest.

The visual representation of such combat scenes is also closely associated with the idea of the Last Judgment. The iconographic scheme of a figure emerging from a monster's jaws is commonly used in the Middle Byzantine scenes of the Last Judgment from the eleventh century on, concerning the theme of earth, sea, and air yielding their dead; various animals are shown giving back parts of human bodies. Sinners, by contrast, appear in the midst of hell in the mouth only of dragons, the monster associated with Satan and sin. A snake symbolizing Hell and twined around a group of sinners is depicted as early as the ninth century, in the *Sacra Parallela* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, gr. 923, fol. 68v).<sup>56</sup> Thus, figures trussed in snakes may represent sin and punishment together.

Figures entwined with snakes also appear outside Hell, their evil character usually being highlighted. In Byzantine examples of the so-called "revenge-initials" wicked emper-

ors are depicted encircled or attacked by snakes.<sup>57</sup> Such figures are mostly known from the Metaphrastes menologies, and can be dated to around 1060. The names of the wicked emperors represented in such initials figure in the text in connection with particular saints and martyrs. Here, the idea of punishment is combined with the personification of evil.

These parallels may indicate that the Genesis narrative is not the only source of the figural initial in the Oxford Chrysostom. A second level of interpretation can be found in the idea of death as brought upon humanity by Original Sin. This idea is stressed through the words of the homily: "...even if they (Adam and Eve) lived a long time, nevertheless from the time they heard the words: 'Dust you are, and to dust you are to return', and received the sentence of death, they became liable to death and you would say from that moment they were dead".<sup>58</sup>

A very unusual and curious figure appears on fol. 134v, Homily 19 (17). It is a hybrid, with a human head and a bird's legs, and it is enclosed in the vertical stem of the initial *Kapa* (fig. 9).<sup>59</sup> The hybrid holds the letter's ascending diagonal bar in its right hand, while its left hand stretches upwards. Its body constitutes the vertical stem. It is highly geometrical, enclosed within the parallel lines of the letter stem. Head and hands preserve the human form. The image as a whole gives the impression of the figure at once being a part of the letter and hiding behind it.

The motif relates to Gen 4:8: "And Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Come now, let us go out into the open country'". According to the text of the homily, the hybrid probably represents Cain's wild and sinful nature: "He hastens the process of bringing his own destruction into effect, beginning with cunning and trickery and by deceiving his brother with beguiling words. Such is the condition of a human being turned animal who goes downhill into wickedness; just as this rational creature enjoys a wonderful status, especially when it makes rapid progress in the practice of virtue, so when it goes downhill into wickedness, it takes on the character of a wild beast".<sup>60</sup>

The Church Fathers argued about the sign that Cain received from God after Abel's murder, that he be recognized and not killed, but the specific nature of this sign was uncertain.<sup>61</sup> It was mostly understood as a mark made by God on

<sup>54</sup> Furlan, *op. cit.*, fig. 27.

<sup>55</sup> In this case the motif seems to appear as an allegorical interpretation of the homily. The heading of the homily says: "But in giving you this charge, I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse" (1Cor. 11:17) (PG 61, 223; *Nicene and post-Nicene fathers*, vol. 12, 157). Chrysostom speaks of the corruption of the custom of rich and poor sharing a meal on feast days. "This verse concerns proper behavior at public worship. What was intended for their wealth they had made an occasion of falling. These gatherings, instead of quickening their spiritual life, had led to grievous misconduct and consequent suffering". Cf. Robertson, Plummer, *op. cit.*, 238–239.

<sup>56</sup> Y. Christe, *Jugements derniers*, Paris 2000, fig. 7.

<sup>57</sup> For example, in Moscow, State Historical Museum, gr. 9 (Vlad. 382), fol. 28v "O" is composed of a snake coiled around a figure of a man, indicated as [Julian] the Apostate. In Mount Athos, *Dochiarion* 5, fol. 117, initial "B" consists of a crowned figure (the emperor Maxentios) encircled by a snake, and initial "E" (fol. 205) of a crowned figure (Diocletian) encircled by a snake. In Venice, Biblioteca Marciana, gr. Z 586, fol. 117, the emperor Diocletian encircled by a snake forms initial "B". Cf. N. P. Ševčenko, *Illustrated Manuscripts of the Metaphrastian Menologion*, Chicago 1990, 2A5; 2G8, 2G12; 4A4; 5A7.

<sup>58</sup> *Saint John Chrysostom. Homilies on Genesis*, I, 244 (Homily 17).

<sup>59</sup> Hutter, *Corpus* I, fig. 69.

<sup>60</sup> *Saint John Chrysostom. Homilies on Genesis*, II, 22 (Homily 19).

<sup>61</sup> R. Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain*, Berkeley 1981 (especially page 98, where the author summarizes all possible interpretations of the mark).

Cain's forehead.<sup>62</sup> Other frequent interpretations include the trembling of his body<sup>63</sup> and the appearance of a horn (or horns) on his head.<sup>64</sup> None of these appear in Byzantine iconography. In the *Sacra Parallela*, Cain is depicted twice: killing Abel (fol. 355) and being questioned by God (fol. 69). None of his images bears any sort of mark.<sup>65</sup> The connection between Cain and Satan was made early. Cain has been seen as Satan's offspring; or Satan entered into him and caused him to kill Abel.<sup>66</sup> Satan is usually represented in Byzantine art as a black anthropomorphic shadow with his hair standing on end,<sup>67</sup> but this characteristic too is absent from Cain's visual representations.

Cain's transformation in the Oxford Chrysostom – quite unique, as far as I know not to be found in Byzantine or Western contemporary examples,<sup>68</sup> seems to represent the evil and satanic character of the particular biblical figure, but also to deliver a more general moral message, literally illustrating the words of the homily quoted above: “it takes on the character of a wild beast”.

To sum up, although most of the initial letters are shaped by a limited number of figures, they express a complex relationship between the motif and the homiletic text, functioning as a visual commentary to it. The interpretive and moral character of the homilies most probably influenced the illuminated initials, many of which are also interpretive in nature. Many of these initials are unique in their appearance, do not have exact parallels, and seem to have been invented especially for the specific texts concerned. They offer an intellectual interplay between the visual motif and the text, serving as a pictorial sign, as *memoria* to the words of the text but also to its moral exegesis.

This group of tenth-century manuscripts represents the earliest steps in the development of the post-iconoclastic, hu-

man-figured Byzantine initial letters. Motivated by the flexible structure of the letters and by the lack of pictorial doctrines concerning initial letter illumination, the artist-scribe visually interprets the written text, on the one hand exposing its deep meaning, but on the other, feeling free to invent new motifs. This freedom and inventiveness would later become limited. By the eleventh century, the Christological figures and scenes were finally introduced into illuminated initial letters, opening another level of reading the initial letter as text illustration with strict iconography, which was to develop and change more slowly and under careful supervision.

<sup>62</sup> In Jewish sources this mark was interpreted as a letter of God's name (Pseudo-Jonathan Targum to Genesis 4:15) or a letter from the Torah (*Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, 156). Cf. *ibidem*, 27–29.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*, 40–57.

<sup>64</sup> One of the early sources which specify the mark as a horn is the Midrash *Bereshit Rabbah*. Interpreting Genesis 22:12, it lists seven different interpretations of the mark, among them a horn: “...He caused the orb of the sun to shine on his account ...He caused leprosy to break out of him... He gave him a dog. ...He made a horn grow out of him... He made him an example for murderers... He made him an example for penitents... He suspended judgment until the Flood came and swept him away...” (*Bereshit Rabbah* 1:191). Cited after Mellinkoff, *ibidem*, 20; on horns as the mark of Cain and their depiction in medieval art v. *ibidem*, 59–75.

<sup>65</sup> K. Weitzmann, *The Miniatures of the Sacra Parallela. Parisinus Graecus 923*, Princeton 1979, pl. 4, figs. 11–12. This mark does not appear in the other Byzantine representations of Cain either (e.g., the Cotton Genesis and the Octateuchs), cf. E. Revel-Neher, *The Image of the Jew in Byzantine Art*, Oxford – New York 1992, 78–79.

<sup>66</sup> J. B. Glenthøj, *Cain and Abel in Syriac and Greek writers (4th–6th centuries)*, Louvain 1997, 279–282.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, numerous appearances of satanic figures in the Chludov Psalter (e.g., fols. 35v, 67v, 113, etc.).

<sup>68</sup> The bestial nature of Cain is highlighted by means of horns on two twelfth-century capitals in France depicting the legend of Lamech, at Vézelay and at Autun. Cf. Mellinkoff, *op. cit.*, 62–63.



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## Прилог тумачењу Књиге постања. Белешка о уметничкој инвенцији и византијском илуминираном иницијалу

Ема Мајан-Фанар

У чланку се истражују илуминирани иницијали у хомилијама светог Јована Златоустог и других писаца чије беседе улазе у рукописне зборнике познате под именом *златоустии* (Париз, Национална библиотека, *gr. 654*; Ватиканска библиотека, *Ottob. gr. 14*; Венеција, Библиотека Марћана, *gr. II. 179*; Оксфорд, Библиотека Бодлејана, *Auct. T. 3.3*; Патмос, Манастир светог Јована Богослова, *cod. 29*). Рукописи највероватније потичу из Цариграда, а датовани су у X век.

Наведена група рукописа открива писара-уметника као творца илуминираних иницијала. Упркос њиховој скромној форми, зооморфни и нарочито атропоморфни иницијали уметнути на почетку сваке хомилије варирају од дословне илустрације одређене речи или реченице до алегориских, дидактичких и чак типолошких тумачења текста. Иницијали ове групе хомилија крајње су оригинални и добро репрезентују уметников визуални коментар текста.

Иницијали у Оксфордском златоусту (Бодлејана, *Auct. T. 3.3*), који садржи хомилије на Генезу, представљају један од најбољих примера оригиналности писара-уметника. Он је, чини се, иницијале креирао специјално за тај рукопис, налазећи јединствен начин да сведе

визуално објашњење текста на једну или две фигуре. Тако на fol. 45v [Хомилија 8(6)] једна крунисана људска глава надвишава вертикално стабло иницијала *Phi* наглашавајући улогу човека као владара над створеном Земљом, док је у другом случају Каин, који формира слово *Kapa*, насликан као хибридно биће, са људском главом и птичјим ногама, које обележавају његов чудовишни карактер [fol. 134v; Хомилија 19 (17)].

Још сложенија идеја јавља се на иницијалу *Iota* (fol. 112), компонованом од змаја који се увија око голог Адамовог тела, које излази из змајевих отворених уста (Ген 3:8). Реч је о Хомилији 17 (15), која се бави изгоном из Раја наглашавајући тему првобитног греха изазваног од стране Сатане, посредством змије. Уз то, исти иницијал наглашава још један ниво тумачења — идеју о смрти коју је човечанству донео првобитни грех.

Објашњавајући и морализаторски карактер хомилија највероватније је утицао на илуминиране иницијале. Многи од њих изгледа да су креирани специјално за специфичне текстове на које се односе. Они показују узајамно деловање визуалног мотива и текста, служећи као пикторални знак, као *memoria* за речи текста, али и за његово тумачење.