

The Miniatures of the Southampton Psalter

Video transcripts

1. The Miniatures of the Southampton Psalter

In medieval Ireland, the psalms were traditionally grouped into three sets of fifty. Each set of fifty psalms was often introduced by a miniature that highlighted the message of the following or preceding psalm. According to Christian and Jewish belief, the psalms themselves were originally composed by David, who was king of Israel and Judah. David was an accomplished musician and the psalms were intended to be sung or recited aloud. Stories about David from the Old Testament of the Christian Bible were popular subjects for miniatures and Christian psalters. There are three miniatures in the Southampton Psalter, one for each set of fifty psalms.

2. David and the Lion

The first miniature shows David rescuing a sheep from a lion. At first glance, this miniature looks confused. David appears to be in two places at once, but look again. This miniature is, in fact, made up of two separate parts. The top half shows David defeating the lion, which lies on the ground before David. The bottom half shows David rescuing the sheep, leading it to safety. The artist is working within two panels on one page, just like the layout of a modern day comic book. In this one miniature, we follow David's defeat of the lion through to his rescue of the sheep. Miniatures have symbolic, as well as literal, meaning and meditation on the psalms was an important part of daily life in the medieval period. Viewers of this miniature would be reminded of the belief that God protects the innocent, here, embodied by the sheep.

3. The Crucifixion of Christ

The second miniature, which follows Psalm 50, is a representation of the Crucifixion. The Crucifixion is one of the most important events in the New Testament. The figure being crucified is Jesus of Nazareth who, according to Christian belief, is the son of God. According to the New Testament, Jesus allows himself to be crucified in order to absolve humankind of their sins. He dies upon the cross and he ascends into heaven. For a western medieval audience, the Crucifixion symbolised the act of suffering, self-sacrifice and the triumph of life over death. In the Southampton Psalter miniature, the central figure is Jesus. He looks steadily out at the viewer, his arms outstretched on the cross. Notice the red dots in his palms and ankles. These are the nails binding him to the cross.

Three angelic figures rest to his side and above him, who also look calmly out at the viewer, hands outstretched and welcoming. Below the crossbeam of the crucifix,

symbolising the mortal world, are two larger figures. These are two soldiers, who were present at the Crucifixion. On the left is Stephaton, holding a reed and a sponge. According to one version, Stephaton tries to alleviate Jesus' suffering by giving him vinegar and hyssop to drink from the sponge. On the right is Longinus. He was said to have thrust a spear into Jesus' side. In this one miniature, the artist takes the viewer through the story of Jesus' mortal suffering to his subsequent ascension into heaven. Even the most seemingly simplistic detail could have many layers of meaning. The sponge in Stephaton's hand is unadorned but, to a medieval audience, this simple illustration was a reminder of the message of spiritual cleansing in Psalm 50: "purge me with hyssop and I shall be clean". Although the Crucifixion takes place in the New Testament, a long time after the events of the Old Testament, its place in a psalter is not unusual. There was a growing tendency in the early medieval period to illustrate psalters with scenes from the life of Christ. Medieval scribes saw the connection between the need for repentance, expressed in the psalms, and Jesus' self-sacrifice, which implores the reader to meditate on the dangers of arrogance and importance of humility before God. For the viewer, it was a reminder of the inner strength needed to face challenges in everyday life.

4. David and Goliath

The final miniature in the Southampton Psalter introduces the final set of the psalms. In this miniature, we see the fight between David and the giant Goliath. In the Old Testament, the future King David is a young shepherd boy in Israel. War breaks out and the giant Goliath demands single combat from the Israelites. Saul, king of the Israelites, is afraid to challenge Goliath. Instead, the boy David volunteers. He declines armour or weapons, taking only his shepherd's staff and his slingshot, used for defending sheep. Goliath wears full armour and carries a javelin. Goliath mocks David but David replies, "this day the Lord will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down". David hurls a stone from his slingshot and hits Goliath in the centre of his forehead. Goliath collapses. The shepherd boy has defeated the giant and saved Israel. It is from this biblical battle that we have the phrase 'David and Goliath' to describe the success of an underdog over a much stronger adversary. On the left hand side, David stands triumphant, his shepherd's staff in his right hand. On the right hand side is the defeated Goliath. Goliath has his hand to his head, where David's slingshot has wounded him. At first glance, Goliath looks upside down, but look again. David has felled the giant and the giant now lies flat at the hero's feet. The viewer moves from the perspective of an outsider to David's perspective as the giant falls before him. This is an immersive, almost cinematographic, representation of David's victory. The fight between David and Goliath was a common miniature in medieval psalters, highlighting David's power and his faith in God. For those using the Psalter, it was a reminder of the divine power of God, the triumph of good over evil and the importance of keeping faith, even when the odds seem against you.