

Nees, Lawrence. 2023. *Illuminating the Word in the Early Middle Ages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xxx + 558. ISBN 9781009193863.

Reviewed by James T. Palmer 
University of St. Andrews

How, asks Professor Nees, did early medieval books come to be formatted in such a way that their influence remains ubiquitous to the present day? Few scholars necessarily believe the old view that Roman traditions were spliced with “barbarian” visual tastes in those allegedly bleak centuries between the late Roman Empire of the fifth century and the Carolingian world of the ninth. Yet frequently many underlying assumptions persevere, especially with regard to how artistic streams of influence supposedly work along ethnic lines and how grim and uncreative culture must have been. Nees has long been judiciously suspicious of such tendencies. In *Illuminating the Word*, he seeks to set out a new model for understanding the evolution of manuscript production, illustration, and illumination. Readers may also wish to consult his wonderful two-volume catalogue, Nees (2022), alongside some of this study, but it is by no means necessary to do so.

Most of Nees’s study spirals outwards in a gloriously creative manner from a single case study: a copy of Gregory the Great’s *Homilies on Ezekiel* written in the distinctive seventh-century script of Luxeuil minuscule, either in Luxeuil itself or in Corbie, and now in St. Petersburg (National Library of Russia, MS lat. Q.v.I.14). Nees provides a great service with his description and analysis of this key example alone given that there is no facsimile or digital reproduction of it and future study of it, at least at the time of writing, might be tricky. What is crucial about this manuscript is how it confidently deploys illumination, hierarchies of script, punctuation, and more, in ways that seem a radical departure from the typically dourer books of Late Antiquity. When he studied it closely in person, he felt he could not simply write up its imaginative decorative style in terms of the near-passive reception of Roman and Insular influences, as previous commentators had done. Explaining how and why is the book’s mission.

Chapter 2 takes us through the breathtaking mixture of artistic styles evident in the codex’s pages accompanied by full (if unfortunately, also slightly murky) photos. By the end of this chapter alone, we have been treated to analogues in fabrics, mosaics, sculpture, and other books, with origins from Visigothic Spain to Persia—all again with a good selection of (much clearer) photographic support. Charting direct flows of specific cultural influences in such a vibrant heterogeneous context seems conceptually weak. What we seem to be looking at are examples of shared artistic traditions and repertoires that people actively turned to their own needs.

The next two chapters build up a smorgasbord of ideas that may have shaped elements of the St. Petersburg Gregory’s vivid style. Chapter 3 pursues this mostly through ways in which text and images were structured. There is a lot to digest here about shifts in how Latin grammar was deployed (especially with the creative seventh-century Irish writer Virgilius Maro), experiments with Optatianus Porfyrius-style acrostic poems, how changing from papyrus to parchment affected production and page layout,

and just simply how the act of reading—aloud or silently—varied. Thinking about it all as “grammar” allows us to see not one decisive process of change but ways in which elements of visual style could be combined and therefore read in new ways. Chapter 4 follows this up by looking for more elements in late-antique illustration (where images show the text) and illumination (where they are integrated into the writing). Again, this is quickly not just about comparison with decorated books like the Vienna Dioscorides with its pictures of useful herbs. To understand hierarchies of script, framing devices, and uses of colour, we need to consider epigraphy, strategies for incipits and explicits, and animal motifs. Nees perceptively surveys examples not only from Latin but also Greek and even Arab sources. He is sceptical that lost ancient exemplars tie all these similar examples together because, first, there isn’t a lot of evidence for them and, second and crucially, scribes and artists were likely addressing similar challenges in their work. Maybe the artists involved in the making of surviving manuscripts were good at their job rather than hacks poorly rehashing derivative themes.

With Chapter 5 it is high time to get to the more immediate contexts for the St. Petersburg Gregory: the monastery of Luxeuil in Burgundy (and to a lesser extent its relative Bobbio in Piacenza). In terms of palaeography, this is ground well-covered. Luxeuil minuscule is famous as probably the first widely-used calligraphic minuscule script used in book production in Francia in the Middle Ages. It also embraced features such as word separation and punctuation we take for granted but which was almost unheard of in Latin written culture before the seventh century. Anticipating arguments later in the book, Nees notes that Luxeuil minuscule might have been influenced by Insular scripts, especially given that the monastery was founded by the Irishman Columbanus at the end of the sixth century; but he is also drawn to the idea defended recently by Tewes (2011), that it owes much to late Roman notarial scripts used in the Frankish world. Nees gives a survey of key manuscripts associated with Luxeuil and Bobbio to highlight some shared concerns with impressive introductory pages (mostly with framed crosses), imaginatively illuminated incipits and explicits (mostly with fish and birds), and an understated *diminuendo* effect bridging large capital letters and the smaller body text thereafter. Illuminated Bobbio manuscripts share some features but understandably in many others seem more in keeping with late-antique Italian practices. In both centres, we see a distinctive, bold vision of what a book should look like.

A significant argument had been building slowly in plain sight and in Chapter 6 it is let loose: it doesn’t make a lot of sense to talk about the creative way the St. Petersburg Gregory was made in terms of “Irish,” “Roman,” or “Germanic” ideas. A problem Nees notes in much work on stylistic influence is that, a century ago, many Insular works were commonly dated earlier than they are now, with the effect that it was easier to identify something like the features of Luxeuil-type books as being dependent on them. That becomes much more problematic if almost all our key examples on either side of the Channel crowd around the same small window of time (c. 670–720) with no precise chronology possible. Moreover, the issue can be complicated by the very issue of cultural exchange. Jonathan Alexander and others, he points out, counted many manuscripts as “Insular” for being written in particular style regardless of where they were written or by whom. Nees follows Netzer (1994) in looking at the case of the monastery of Echternach, where it is clear Irish, Frankish, and other influences were blended together. This was, he argues, a world of entanglements where it was just as easy for continental practices to

inspire Insular ones *as vice versa* given the regular and well-documented cross-regional traffic.

Chapter 7 dives deeper into the historiographical baggage of the “Ethnic Paradigm.” In distilled form, this paradigm explained the rise of manuscript illumination as a product of dialectic between the whimsy romanticism of the Insular world—and especially the Irish as the English were supposedly stiffer by character—and the more functional approach of the Romans. It implies ethnically-specific artistic forms. This naturally had much to do with notions of “race” that Nees reasonably suggests were not always properly deconstructed after World War II with the adoption of “ethnicity” as a supposedly neutral term to evoke culture over biology as a determinant of identity. There was room here for an “oriental influence hypothesis,” notably by Nordenfalk (though he later abandoned it), in which it was suggested so-called “carpet pages” in Insular illuminated manuscripts took their inspiration from lost Coptic or other eastern imports. Nees is unmoved. There is not much evidence for East-West influences even if there is some—but more importantly it is an interpretative move that seems to do little more than reinforce the distance between the Insular and continental.

In the end, the argument of the book comes down to Nees being unconvinced that the unprecedented flourishing of manuscript illumination in the orbit of Luxeuil in the seventh century must reflect Insular practice. Both the conceptualisation and chronology of such an interpretation is problematic. The artist-scribe of the St. Petersburg Gregory does not seem narrowly in debt to such putative influences. Instead, Nees invites us to see continental Columbanian scriptoria such as Luxeuil and Bobbio working with a new creativity and intensity, drawing broadly on existing repertoires of motifs, developing new ones, and defining a manuscript culture that marked a break with that of Late Antiquity. He sensibly argues that this is just one of many processes of transformation around the same time rather than a specific rupture. It is, however, one that is typically little considered.

As a Merovingianist who is fascinated by manuscripts, I find Nees’s study compelling and convincing. Early medieval manuscript studies have been dominated by scholars working on Insular or the more voluminous post-751 Carolingian material. Accidents of survival mean there are maybe only a couple of hundred Merovingian manuscripts extant. A recent-ish effort by the doyen of Merovingian studies Ian Wood (2016) to appreciate the culture of the period through these manuscripts was distinctly downbeat. Nees, however, joins the small ranks of scholars such as Yaniv Fox or myself who wonder if there was more creativity and life than has been appreciated. I would be more optimistic than Nees perhaps about the productivity of Merovingian scriptoria given that there is demonstrable but really unquantifiable loss of books from the period (Nees notes the importance of the switch from papyrus to parchment but we could also add changes in legal and religious practices, shifting cultural sensibilities, linguistic change, and actually just how hard everyone found it to read Luxeuil minuscule). The involvement of more art historians in assessing the transformation of the late Roman world would certainly be very welcome indeed.

Where Nees’s study will clearly be controversial is in its reassessment of how lines of cultural influence work. He makes it explicit that he does not wish to return to games of Iromania vs Irophobia in his critique of how Insular illuminations have been discussed with regards to continental evidence. Intention and reception are different issues of course, as some of the reception of Roy Flechner and Sven Meeder (2016) might suggest. But there is no foul in highlighting the limitations of what evidence can and cannot say

within different interpretative models. More to the point, Nees retains a substantial role for Irish influences in his story, just as part of a more substantial melting pot of ideas and impulses within the Luxeuil orbit. As in Echternach, that multiculturalism was probably essential for driving creative leaps. One hopes if Nees develops this model further he gets to do so in a positive creative manner rather than locked into a negative game of critique and counter-critique.

Illuminating the Word in the Early Middle Ages is a magisterial and provocative book by one of the leading medieval art historians—full of ideas, original, crisply written, and sumptuously illustrated. Its implications will no doubt productively fuel debate for a long time. For this early medievalist at least, it was a study to savour.

References

- Flechner, Roy, and Sven Meeder, eds. 2016. *The Irish in Medieval Europe: Identity, Culture and Religion*. London: Palgrave.
- Nees, Lawrence. 2002. *Frankish Manuscripts: The Seventh to the Tenth Century*. 2 vols. Turnhout: Brepols.
- Netzer, Nancy. 1994. *Cultural Interplay in the Eighth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tewes, Babette. 2011. *Die Handschriften der Schule von Luxeuil*. Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz.
- Wood, Ian. 2016. "The Problem of late Merovingian Culture." In *Exzerpieren—Kompilieren—Tradieren: Transformationen des Wissens zwischen Spätantike und Frühmittelalter*, edited by Stephan Dusil, Gerald Schwendler, and Raphael Schwitter, 199–222. Berlin: De Gruyter.

(Received 23/05/2024)