



FIG. 1. CHRISTINA SVENSSON, BOOKBINDER, NATIONAL LIBRARY OF SWEDEN

*Excerpt from the periodical Biblis no 38*

## The Codex Gigas

A revised version of the George Svensson lecture delivered at  
The National Library of Sweden, Stockholm, November 2006

**T**he medieval manuscript known as the Codex Gigas in the National Library of Sweden (its call number is A 148) is famous for two features. First, it is very large with a page size that was originally about 900 × 460 mm, although it is now a little smaller due to retrimming when rebound in the early nineteenth century (fig. 1). Secondly, it contains a full-page portrait of the Devil that has led to the name ‘Devil’s Bible’ as an alternative to Codex Gigas. (Gigas means literally gigantic or enormous.) These two features have long been known, and the manuscript is one of the largest, if not the largest, European medieval manuscript to have survived into modern times.

There are three fundamental questions that need to be asked of any medieval manuscript: When was it made, where was it made and who made it? These questions have been asked again recently as the entire manuscript is to be put onto the world wide web, and the following observations are based upon a re-examination and re-evaluation of the manuscript by myself and others that will be incorporated into the web site as an introduction and commentary.

Despite the name ‘Devil’s Bible’, the manuscript contains a number of texts in addition to a complete Bible. The manuscript opens with the Old Testament, and this is followed by two histories by the late Antique author, Flavius Josephus. Next is a universal encyclopedia by Isidore of Spain, who wrote in the seventh century but whose work circulated widely throughout the middle ages. This is followed by a collection of short medical texts (both practical and theoretical), and after these is the New Testament. After this there is a short text concerning the confession of sins followed by two full page pictures on facing pages show-



FIG. 2. THE HOLY CITY (FOL. 289v)

ing, on the left, the Holy City of Jerusalem (fig. 2), and, on the right, the famous portrait of the Devil (fig. 3). These are followed by a very short text containing exorcisms (an aid to get rid of evil spirits). Next comes a chronicle (or history) of Bohemia by a late eleventh- and early twelfth-century writer, Cosmas of Prague, and this was once followed by the Rule of St Benedict, the standard medieval guide to monastic life. Unfortunately, the leaves with the Rule have been cut out, the only major loss that the manuscript has suffered. The manuscript ends with



FIG. 3. THE DEVIL'S PORTRAIT (FOL. 29OR)

a Calendar (a guide to the liturgical year) combined with a Necrology (a record of the names of important and some not so important people who have died). This is preceded by a list of names, probably a list of benefactors to a particular monastery, whose heading is now lost.

The list of names and the Calendar + Necrology contain Bohemian saints and many Bohemian names, and these, together with the Bohemian chronicle, point clearly to the part of Europe where the manuscript was made. Furthermore, some of the names show that the manu-

script must have been written in the early thirteenth century, certainly before about 1230.

The manuscript contains a little over 300 leaves (600 pages), and each page has two columns of 106 lines (fig. 3). This means that the script is quite small, and sitting in front of the manuscript on a lectern it is impossible to read the top and bottom lines without standing up to read the lines at the top of a column and then sitting down bent over to read the lines at the foot of a column (fig. 4). I have no doubt that the whole manuscript was written by one scribe, and it is also likely that this scribe also made all of the initials. This was a remarkable achievement. A medieval scribe could write about 100 lines a day and this might mean that the whole manuscript was written within about five years. I think it took much longer. The scribe probably ruled all the lines to guide his writing on each leaf (a slow procedure), for there is a striking consistency to the arrangement of the lines on each leaf throughout the manuscript, suggesting it was done by one person. The scribe almost certainly did all of the initials, all the minor ones in red, as well as major ones, sometimes very large and very elaborate. And I also suspect that the scribe also made the two full-page illustrations, one of them the Devil's portrait. It is much more likely that the manuscript took twenty or even thirty years to produce or, put another way, it appears to be the work of a lifetime.

What is curious and even unique about the Codex Gigas is why its texts were written in one volume instead of several that could have been smaller and more practical to use. However, it does seem almost certain that the texts in the manuscript were carefully chosen, and perhaps even chosen before work on the manuscript was begun. There is history (much of the Old Testament is history, supplemented

by the work of Josephus), an encyclopaedia, a storehouse of universal knowledge (Isidore), and medicine, a guide to maintaining good physical health. Then there is the New Testament with its message of hope and salvation, local history (Cosmas of Prague) and the fundamental guide to monastic life (Rule of St Benedict), a practical and spiritual aid for life within an enclosed community. And



FIG. 4.



FIG. 5. PAGE WITH INITIAL TO DANIEL (FOL. 52R)

Excerpt from the periodical *Biblis* no 38

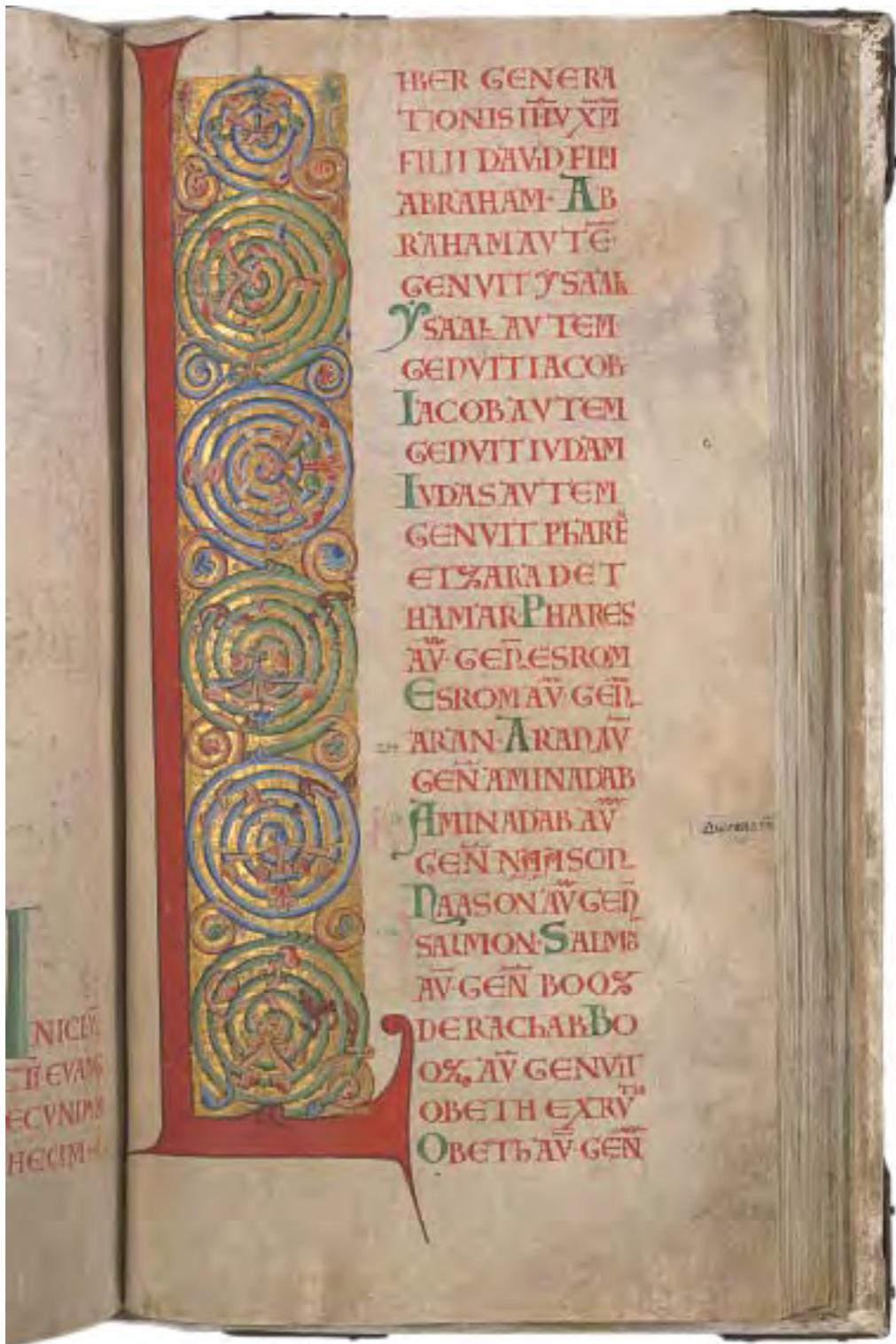


FIG. 6. PAGE WITH INITIAL TO MATTHEW (FOL. 254R)

then finally there are further texts for practical and spiritual guidance, including the Calendar for help in ordering the liturgical year. (Notable by their absence are any fundamental theological works by either Augustine, Gregory, Ambrose or Jerome.)

Perhaps the choice of the texts is reflected or even made explicit in the only two full-page illustrations in the manuscript. The Heavenly City can be seen as the desirable goal of life and the portrait of the Devil as a warning or reminder of the perils of leading a dissolute life (figs. 2 and 3). A visual contrast between good and bad must have been the purpose behind putting the two illustrations on facing pages. The texts in the book could be viewed as a help to achieving the Heavenly City.

Whoever decided that the Codex Gigas was a desirable book to make, perhaps the scribe, must have had access to other books to copy from (exemplars). It would also have been necessary to be assured of a steady supply of parchment. The manuscript used more than 150 calfskins (one skin for two leaves or four pages), and these would almost certainly have been chosen from a far greater number. (Despite the large size of the manuscript, I am fairly sure that the parchment was made from calfskin, and at least one thirteenth-century world map, the one now at Hereford Cathedral in England, was also almost certainly made on a calfskin a little bigger than the ones in Codex Gigas.)

If the texts and the full-page illustrations were carefully planned, there are other features of the manuscript that also appear to reflect careful planning. There are many large, elaborately decorated initials in the manuscript, but, with one exception to be noted below, these only appear at the beginning of the books of the Bible (fig. 5). However, gold was not used in the manuscript until the opening initial for Matthew, the first of the Gospels, and this must have been deliberate, a reflection of the light and optimism offered by the New Testament



FIG. 7. DETAIL OF A PAGE WITH AN INITIAL TO JOSEPHUS (FOL. 121R)



FIG. 9. DETAIL OF A PAGE WITH THE OPENING INITIAL TO THE MEDICAL TEXTS (FOL. 240R)

(fig. 6). A curious feature of these decorated initials is that they look very old-fashioned. Without knowing the date of the manuscript, these initials could easily be dated to the middle or second half of the twelfth century, not the early thirteenth. The initials marking the opening and divisions of the other texts are never as elaborate as the Bible initials. The initials in the Josephus texts (second in the manuscript) are all plain (fig. 7), the initials in the Isidore (third) are modestly decorated (known as ‘arabesque’ initials (fig. 8), and initials to the medical material (fourth) are essentially plain (fig. 9). The opening initial to the work by Cosmas of Prague is elaborately decorated in the same manner as the Bible initials, but the other two major initials in the text are both plain. (The decorated opening initial must be a reflection of the importance given to this local text.) Finally, the Calendar-Martyrology has a large, more or less plain **KL** (for Necrology ‘Kalendarium’) monograms and arabesque initials (fig. 10).

The most peculiar treatment given to any of the texts is that for the Confessional text between the New Testament and Cosmas of Prague. Two purple panels were made on each page, corresponding in area to the two columns elsewhere in the manuscript, and the text was written

in coloured capital letters (fig. 11). Painted or dyed leaves occur in ninth-century and earlier manuscripts, but in the thirteenth they are very rare. Why this text was given this treatment in the Codex Gigas is not yet entirely clear.

One other peculiar feature of the manuscript is a free standing portrait of the author Josephus in the margin adjacent to the beginning of one of his histories (fig. 12). It is the only such portrait in the book. Whereas author portraits (including evangelists) are quite common in medieval manuscripts, they are usually within frames or initials and the authors are often shown at work or with their books. Although the figure in the Codex Gigas is not identified with an inscription, its position and the pointed hat worn by the figure (commonly used in medieval art to distinguish Jews) make the identification certain.

There is one other feature of the manuscript that appears to represent careful planning. This is rather a subtle detail, but it is noticeable that the Bible text (Old and New Testament) was written in letters very slightly taller, and therefore slightly larger, than the letters for all the other texts. (In technical terms this means that the minim height, or to use a printing term, the x-height, is slightly bigger in the Bible text than elsewhere.) However, it should be admitted that this difference might represent a change in plan after the manuscript had been partly written and a decision made to either enlarge or reduce the height of the letters. Unfortunately, it is not yet entirely clear which parts of the manuscript were written first and which last.



FIG. 8. DETAIL OF A PAGE WITH THE OPENING INITIAL TO ISIDORE (FOL. 201V)



FIG. 10. DETAIL OF A PAGE WITH INITIALS TO A CALENDAR PAGE (FOL. 310V)



FIG. 11. PAGE WITH THE CONFESSIONAL TEXT (FOL. 287V)

I now return to the three questions that need to be asked of all medieval manuscripts. Two have been answered. It does appear that the manuscript was written and decorated by one scribe-artist in the early thirteenth century, and it also appears that the content and decoration of the manuscript was carefully planned. Whoever this scribe-artist was, he (unlikely to be a she) was clearly a remarkable person. The impractical aspect of the manuscript has been touched upon, that is to say it is not an easy book to consult for its size. It is far from clear, but might the manuscript be an attempt by one man to achieve salvation by a self-imposed lifetime task? The work of monastic scribes was regarded as important within enclosed communities and it was seen as very appropriate as a means of personal salvation. Perhaps the Codex Gigas is only peculiar for its size, not for the motives that led to its being made.

But where was the manuscript made and how did it end up in Stockholm? The texts point to a Benedictine monastic community somewhere in Bohemia. According to a note in the manuscript dating from the end of the thirteenth century the Codex Gigas was pawned in the Cistercian monastery of Sedlec by the Benedictines of Podlažice who were suffering economic difficulties. The Benedictine

monastery was small and very little is known about it during the medieval period. Might the Codex Gigas have been written there, or did the monks acquire the manuscript from elsewhere. At present we simply do not know. (Nevertheless, this information is more than we know about most medieval manuscripts, for the note clearly shows that within a hundred years of its completion the Codex Gigas was indeed in Bohemia.) The same thirteenth-century note in the manuscript states that an archbishop of Prague helped to acquire the Codex Gigas for the Benedictine monastery of Břevnov, near Prague, as he believed that such an extraordinary book should belong to a Benedictine house.

In 1594 the Codex Gigas was acquired by Rudolf II, who placed it in his castle in Prague, where it remained until the Swedish occupation in the seventeenth century during the Thirty Years' War. The manuscript, with many other manuscripts, books and treasures, was taken back to Sweden, and the Codex Gigas was acquired by Queen Christina and placed in the royal library in her castle at Stockholm. Modern interest in the manuscript dates from the nineteenth century. There is a wonderful picture of the manuscript on a table surrounded by scholars, one bent over the manuscript making notes. Immediately behind the manuscript, a closed book in his hand, is the famous royal librarian, Gustaf Klemming, who held office from 1865 to 1890 (fig. 13).

The manuscript even became an object of attention for tourists. A collection of stereoscopic images made by an American company in 1906 (recently discovered in The National Library) and showing local attractions includes an image showing a member of staff of the library leaning (rather dangerously) over the Codex Gigas (fig. 14). It is appropriate that the first serious monograph devoted to the dec-



FIG. 12. DETAIL OF A PAGE WITH A PORTRAIT OF JOSEPHUS (FOL. 118V)



FIG. 13. NINETEENTH-CENTURY WOODCUT, NY ILLUSTRERAD TIDNING 15/12 1877



FIG. 14. FROM A STEREOSCOPIC VIEW TAKEN IN 1906

oration of the manuscript was by a Czech art historian, Antonín Friedl, published in Prague in 1929. It has a dramatic frontispiece owing a great deal to contemporary Expressionist Art (fig. 15). The scribe, pen in hand, is shown prostrate on two open pages of his manuscript looking up at a fierce Devil. And in the background is clearly a representation of part of the Holy City illustration in the manuscript itself. The frontispiece alludes to an old legend (whose origin is uncertain) about the Codex Gigas relating that the manuscript was written by a monk put into his cell for one night in order to produce it to expiate his sins. Unable to complete his task in time, the monk enlisted the help of the Devil to complete the work.



FIG. 15. FRONTISPIECE TO THE 1929 MONOGRAPH ON THE CODEX GIGAS

Clearly the legend has no basis in truth, but it is a reflection of attempts to explain the extraordinary size and diverse content of the manuscript. Modern scholarship has nothing to match this legend, and is much more sober in its contributions to unravelling the history of the Codex Gigas. However, the sheer size and weight of the book (it requires at least two people to lift and move it), have meant that the authorities at The National Library have not often allowed it to be consulted. Now, for the first time, every page will soon be easily accessible via the web to anyone who logs onto the Codex Gigas site. A new era in studies devoted to the manuscript is only a few months away, and as more people are able to consult the pages of the manuscript, more will be learnt about them.

I am deeply grateful to Anna Wolodarski of The National Library, Stockholm, who will be the principal contributor to the commentary accompanying the web presentation of the Codex Gigas, for allowing me to incorporate some of her discoveries and observations concerning the manuscript in this paper. I am also deeply grateful to the authorities of The National Library for inviting me to contribute to the commentary.