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God's work

Illuminated bibles reveal the strange world of early Christianity, writes Helen Elliott

In the Beginning was the Word

Edited by Andreas Fingernagel, Christian Gastgeber, Stephan Füssel and others – Taschen, \$110
 Long ago, well before the industrial age, in the days when the Christian world was absolutely known to have been created by God and hung suspended on a golden chain from heaven, there was a factory. In this factory men, and often women, toiled every daylight hour of their lives in a production line to produce something exquisite for the glory of God.



The factory was a religious institution and the toilers were the monks and nuns who worked as scribes and the finished article was an illuminated manuscript. The work was physically hard, and sometimes crippling, and the scribe reaped no benefit while on earth. He/she had to wait for paradise for that.

For 1000 years, between the fall of the Roman Empire around 500 AD and the discovery and general use of the printing press in the 16th century, monasteries and convents across Europe were the libraries of all the knowledge of the western world. They held secular manuscripts from ancient times but they were primarily focused on spreading the word of God.

This fine, and extremely well-priced, book from Taschen concentrates exclusively on some of the extant bibles and fragments in the great collection of the Austrian National Library. The production coincides with a rare exhibition of the library's sacred manuscripts. It is a paradox that these often breathtakingly individual and original works were produced on a production line by men or women who knew nothing of the outside world and who often knew nothing of the work except the miniature piece they contributed.

The earliest surviving illumination in Greek is called the *Vienna Genesis*, probably from before 600AD. It is from around Syrian Antioch. It's a lavish work of gold and silver ink on a purple parchment – purple parchment being the rarest. The lavishness suggests a member of the nobility commissioned it.

Aristocrats commissioned many of the bibles in the collection, initially as an act of devotion, but such piety increasingly became tied to worldliness and the illuminations became even more extravagantly adorned.

They also became more textual as learning slowly spread, so the later bibles rely more on the gorgeously inked initial and decorative margins and borders.

The monasteries were responsible for the spread of learning, and every religious house worth anything had a library, or scriptorium. The Benedictines and the Carthusians rivalled each other in their collections. The words, "A monastery without books is like a community without wealth" were taken to heart.

This book has expert, if rather dry and occasionally oddly formal English, but the detailed and scholarly information about this practical trade of illumination, about the hard lives of these skilled workers, the architecture of the monasteries, the snobberies of the enclosed world, the differences between parchment, papyrus and paper – a codex of 400 pages required the skins of about 400 sheep – surmounts any quibbles.

Then there are the reproductions themselves, often crude, generally naïve, drenched with superstitions but nevertheless ravishing and splendid insights into minds we can scarcely imagine. This book suggests different uses for the word "reverence".

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