

BOOK REVIEW

Cosmos and Community in Early Medieval Art. By BENJAMIN ANDERSON. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp. vii + 204. Hardcover, \$65.00. ISBN 978-0-300-21916-6.

S ometime in the late eighth or early ninth century a scriptorium, probably in imperial Constantinople, produced the illuminated manuscript now known as the Vatican Ptolemy (Vaticanus graecus 1291). The codex contains a collection of astronomical and computistical tables enlivened with various zodiacal and astral miniatures and five large painted diagrams. One of the latter, a full-page “solar diagram,” embellishes the dust jacket of *Cosmos and Community* and is the subject of extended discussion (114–126) in the book’s fourth chapter.

The pages that Benjamin Anderson devotes to the Vatican Ptolemy’s solar diagram exemplify his approach throughout this wide-ranging study of early mediaeval visual culture. A review of codicological, dating, and provenance issues gives way to a fine-grained analysis of the solar diagram’s data and organizational schemata (concentric rings that expand from a central medallion containing a personification of Helios to an outside ring containing the twelve signs of the zodiac) and to a sensitive assessment of the diagram’s artistic qualities (originality, variety, and playfulness). The solar diagram, Anderson concludes, is “an image of a cosmos ruled by rational and predictable laws but tempered by grace,” wherein “moments of freedom within order” play out across a multi-colored surface (123). Anderson’s higher aim here, however—as is the case with all the objects and images he considers—is to determine what the Vatican Ptolemy and its solar diagram can tell us about contemporary social and political relations in Byzantium and the surrounding Frankish and Islamic worlds. In the relative abundance and consistency of cosmological imagery preserved from these three post-Roman and post-Sassanian polities, he has sensed an opportunity to observe how, between 700 and 1000 CE, each society reconfigured the ancient Greco-Roman cosmological legacy, bending it to its own ends in ways that adumbrate deeper historical currents.

Anderson’s project requires a good deal of comparative thinking, and his four primary chapters are built up by juxtaposing objects, fitting them (and their histories) together to find where they harmonize and where they clash. In chapter four

(“Byzantine Dissensus”) the primary foil to the Vatican Ptolemy is another Constantinopolitan codex preserved in Rome, the Vatican Kosmas (Vaticanus graecus 699), a ninth-century codex devoted solely to Kosmas Indikoplustes’ sixth-century *Christian Topography*. In contrast to the widely heralded system of Ptolemy, Kosmas championed an idiosyncratic “non-spherical cosmology” (127–138). While the cosmological debate implicit in these two codices can be aligned along lines that separate rationalist and Biblical perspectives or can even be made to reflect the positions of the two parties to the iconoclastic controversy, it is the debate itself that interests Anderson. The dissension epitomized by these two Constantinopolitan texts, whose audience was socially and geographically restricted, suggests to Anderson the failure of the Byzantine emperor and city’s secular and clerical elites to generate consensus through a shared vision of imperial authority expressed in cosmological imagery. Moreover, this Byzantine “dissensus” is all the more evident when contrasted with the cosmological “consensus” Anderson identifies in the contemporary Frankish realm. This “Carolingian Consensus” (chapter three) is manifest in the much more widely shared and homogenized cosmological imagery of the contemporary Frankish realm. Here the “shared visual culture” (78–79), manifest in cosmological handbooks, encyclopedias, and compendia, is understood to have expressed and forged a “common identity” that spanned lay, clerical, and imperial circles and overreached parochial boundaries.

In short, it is the primary aim of *Cosmos and Community*, as expressed in the book’s Introduction (“Solitude and Community”), to explore “the nexus of political community, sovereign rule, and the depiction of the cosmos” especially as it was shaped by the breadth or narrowness of the “communities of knowledge” that imagery engaged (2). Hence Anderson places emphasis not on traditional art historical categories of inquiry but on the ways in which images functioned to establish and articulate social and epistemological relationships, especially as these relations might be ranged along an axis of inclusion and exclusion. Chapters three and four pursue this investigation primarily by interrogating cosmological data and visual imagery from Francia and Byzantium in a single medium: illuminated manuscripts.

Chapters one (“Splendor and Tyranny”) and two (“Declaration and Transaction”), which like three and four also function as a diptych, embrace a much wider range of evidence. In the first chapter Anderson focuses upon the (semi-legendary) Throne of Khosrow, the Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, and the Carolingian Cathedra Petri to explore how rulers in the Persian, Arabic, and Frankish

worlds deployed cosmocratic imagery in order to “project splendor without lapsing into tyranny” (28). In each case, Anderson asserts, the potentially autocratic edge of cosmic iconography was deftly blunted to allow it better to express relations “between peers” (43). In chapter two Anderson foregrounds the political “transactions” of gift-giving, circulation, and networking that swept the Star Mantel of Henry II, a Carolingian silver table with cosmological imagery, and the celestial frescoes of Jordan’s Qusayr ‘Amra bathing complex into on-going mediations of imperial, aristocratic, and clerical authority. Such objects, Anderson argues, spoke most effectively not as bold declarations of “cosmic kingship” but as voices in a dialogue negotiating the authority claims of “itinerant” Carolingian kings, Ottonian monarchs, and Umayyad caliphs (69-71).

Cosmos and Community is a thoughtful and thought-provoking study. It is also a beautifully illustrated volume whose detailed reproductions repay the lingering eye. Perhaps because of its ambition, ranging from Aachen to Damascus and embracing multiple media, its primary argument is more impressionistic than linear. Many claims remain more speculative than demonstrated. The approach, however, is welcome. Anderson’s willingness to cross so many evidential and academic boundaries is refreshing as well as enlightening and should encourage others to undertake similar adventures.

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