

# THE MINIATURES OF THE ROSSANO GOSPELS

(Codex Purpureus Rossanensis)



An extract from the book of  
**Antonio MUÑOZ**  
published in Rome in 1907

*edited by* Martino A. Rizzo  
*translated by* Francesca Rizzo Benvenuti



[www.CodicePurpureoRossanese.it](http://www.CodicePurpureoRossanese.it)  
[www.AnticaBibliotecaCoriglianoRossano.it](http://www.AnticaBibliotecaCoriglianoRossano.it)

# THE MINIATURES OF THE ROSSANO GOSPELS

(Codex Purpureus Rossanensis)

An extract from the book of

Antonio MUÑOZ

published in Rome in 1907

*edited by* Martino A. Rizzo

*translated by* Francesca Rizzo Benvenuti

*The work of Prof. Antonio MUÑOZ, published  
in Rome in 1907, is reproduced here in a  
current form and without annotations.*

Copia cartacea  
ISBN 9791220078351

E-book  
ISBN 9791220078368

© 2021 Martino A. Rizzo  
[www.AnticaBibliotecaCoriglianoRossano.it](http://www.AnticaBibliotecaCoriglianoRossano.it)

Tipografia Coppini - Firenze, febbraio 2021

## INTRODUCTION

The Codex Purpureus Rossanensis, commonly known as the “Rossano Gospels” is an illuminated Greek evangeliary, of uncertain origin and date, currently kept in the Diocesan Museum of Rossano, in the municipality of Corigliano-Rossano in Calabria.

In 2015 the international UNESCO Committee granted the Codex world heritage status, inscribing it in its Memory of the World Register. Researchers believe that the Codex was created between the fifth and seventh centuries, most likely in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This has been established by comparing it with other gospel manuscripts, indicating Syrian Antioch as its possible origin.

How the manuscript got to Rossano is unknown, possibly it was brought to Rossano by monks, or by some member of the imperial family of Byzantium, who for a period, designated Rossano as the centre of their Italian possessions.

Only 188 of the original 400 sheets of finely worked parchment remain today, describing the entire gospel of Matthew, almost all of Mark’s and a part of Eusebius’s letter to Copiano about the concordance of the gospels.

The Codex’s sheets are purple, an imperial colour, that suggests the high lineage of the owners of the piece. The first three lines, constituting the “incipit” of each gospel, are written in gold while the rest of the texts are in silver.

The miniatures contained in the Gospel Book are splendid. Twelve depict episodes from Jesus’ life, a further one is composed of four medallions in a round frame depicting the Evangelists, another one decorates the Eusebio Epistle, while the last is a portrait of St. Mark.

The great art historian Antonio Muñoz in 1907, in his work “The purple code of Rossano and the Sinopense fragment”, conducted a detailed study of the Codex and particularly of the miniatures, revealing their value, studying their style and retracing their history. Having had the opportunity to analyse and photograph the Codex at the Byzantine Exhibition in Grotta Ferrata in 1905-6, he included in his work the

trichromatic images of the Codex (which was still to be restored at that time).

He therefore left a precise, detailed, exhaustive description of the miniatures, which he compared with those of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Codex Sinopensis, which is currently preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Muñoz's work is now revived in this booklet. We have excluded the paragraphs related to the comparison with the Codex Sinopensis and the very technical ones, (being those parts more appropriate for the specialists in the field) and restructured it, so as to make it available to a non-specialist public.

In addition, each description, unlike the original version, has been preceded by the corresponding miniature, and accompanied by detailed images that highlight the most significant details.

We acknowledge the central importance of Professor Muñoz's work. Those who wish to make a further study, without our changes to the original text should refer to the integral version "Il Codice Purpureo di Rossano e il frammento sinopense" which is now been made available through the portal Antica Biblioteca Corigliano-Rossano at the following web addresses:

[www.CodicePurpureoRossanese.it](http://www.CodicePurpureoRossanese.it)  
[www.CodexPurpureusRossanensis.eu](http://www.CodexPurpureusRossanensis.eu)  
[www.CodexRossanensis.eu](http://www.CodexRossanensis.eu)

*Martino A. Rizzo*

Note: Prof. Muñoz often mentions Oscar Leopold VON GEBHARDT, Adolf VON HARNACK, Arthur HASELOFF, German Alekseevich USOV, Nikolaj POKROVSKIJ, Franz Xaver KRAUS, Nicodemo KONDAKOV, Hans GRAEVEN, Georg STUHLFAUTH, Franz Xaver VON FUNK.

These German and Russian scholars between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century wrote about the Codex; their works are cited in the bibliography.

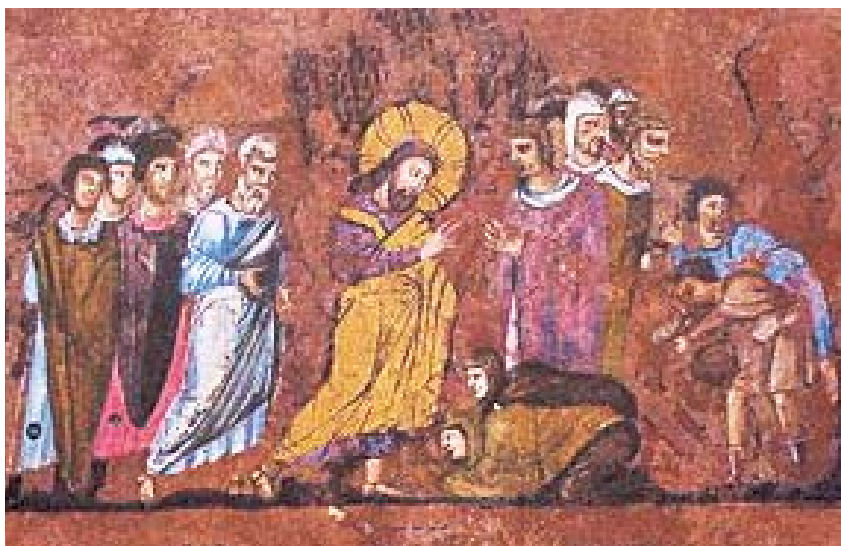
Translator's Note [t/n]: The citations from the Bible have been translated using NIV, the New International Version translation.

Figure 1  
The raising of Lazarus



The scene is represented on a uneven floor as are all the following miniatures. In the middle, further to the left, Christ is standing with a long tunic and himation which leaves his right arm uncovered; he's wearing sandals and has a large cruciform halo around his head. He is not motionless: indeed, his right foot is raised as in the act of stepping forward. Christ is followed by a group of people, in front of whom stand two apostles, both old and recognizable by their costumes (tunic, himation and sandals) which differ from the others who just wear high footwear, tunic and paenula.

The first of the two old men, who looks amazed judging by his hand gestures, is recognized by Arthur Haseloff as the Apostle Peter while he identifies the other figure as the Apostle Andrew, although his

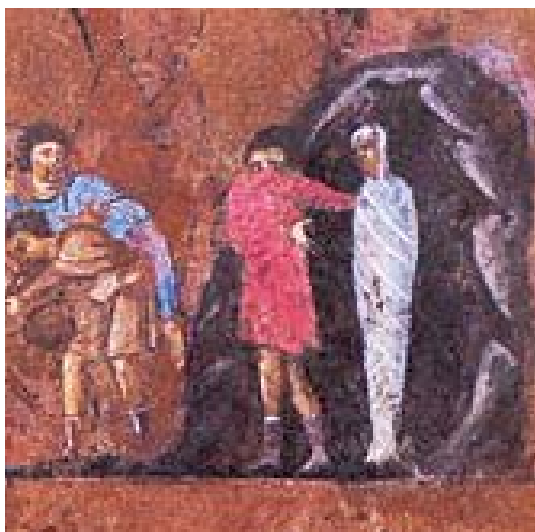


head is the only visible part (further details will be addressed later in the iconographic analysis).

Two women are kneeling before Christ: Martha and Mary, they are wrapped in their robes and wearing capes which cover their outstretched arms. In the background, behind the women, is depicted a group of spectators of different ages. The closest figure to Christ is turned towards him, moving his right hand in a gesture of wonder; the others are looking to the right, in the direction of Lazarus' sepulchre. In the middle of the cave stands Lazarus wrapped in swaddling bands of cloth leaving just his face visible. A servant dressed in a short tunic stands by Lazarus' side, holding the mummy upright with his left arm and gesturing in wonder with the right. He is wearing a short tunic which is raised to cover half of his face, to protect the nose and mouth from the stench of the corpse. Two other servants, dressed in the same way, stand turning their back to the cave and seem to be moving away from the scene; one of them is moving left, his chest bent forward and his right hand is leaning on his head, expressing suffering or pain; the second ser-

vant, is also slightly bent and opens his hands in a gesture of wonder as he looks towards Lazarus.

In Haseloff's opinion this miniature represents two sequences: in the first one the two sisters call Christ for help and in the second one Lazarus resurrects. This representation would not match exactly the narrative



of the Gospel (John 11, 1-45) which recounts Mary alone throwing herself at the feet of Christ before the miracle happens.

In fact, the artist didn't combine two sequences in a single image. He depicted the moment just after the resurrection. A further analysis of the left side of the miniature supports this hypothesis: the scene to Christ's left is closely connected with the resurrection of Lazarus, since the people following the Master (Peter especially) look towards the cave from which the mummy appears; Lazarus has already risen and therefore Christ is no longer looking at him but at the women prostrating at his feet.

## Iconographic analysis

In the Resurrection of Lazarus miniature, the difference between the Occidental and Oriental monuments is immediately visible: while in the first the tombs are aediculae, in the Oriental world are caves, as in this Rossano Gospels illustration.

Actually, aediculae can also be found in the Oriental tradition, though rarely and only before the 9<sup>th</sup> century. One can therefore wonder whether the representation of a cave in the place of an aedicula indicates a specific location: Georg Stuhlfauth believes



that the type of cave represented originated in Syria-Palestine, but this opinion is not yet confirmed.

Such a richly developed representation of the raising of Lazarus is found for the first time ever in the Codex and then reproduced in later centuries. The general composition of the scene is very reminiscent of the paintings that can be found in Sant'Angelo in Formis abbey [Capua - t/n], and in Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella church [Roma - t/n].

## Figure 2

### The triumphal entry into Jerusalem



On the right is depicted the city of Jerusalem, with ash-coloured crenellated walls, two square towers surmounted by terraces and an open city gate under a round arch. The folds of a curtain can be seen attached to a beam crossing the arch. Inside the walls stand two houses and a building that resembles a tower with a triangular pediment and a turquoise scaled dome; the body of the tower is wrapped in red bands crossing each other, the door is open and a blue curtain is pinned on one side. Three children wearing red and blue tunics are protruding from the windows of the tallest building; the top half of another child in a blue tunic is leaning out above the city gate from which three more children emerge, holding a palm branch. In front of the gates there are four blond children wearing short tunics and

raising some palm branches (one of them is inciting his neighbour with a perky gesture); further to the left stand a group of men of different ages, all carrying a palm branch, except the first on the right. In front of this group two young men



bend down to lay two tunics on the ground, just in front of Christ's donkey.

The donkey has a golden cloth as a saddle; Jesus sits in a female posture, with both legs on one side, and looks to the right; he holds a closed roll in his left hand and raises his right hand as if speaking; the reins rest on the donkey's neck. The quadruped lifts the left front leg and right back leg, giving the idea of movement. Behind, two children perched on a thin tree with a large crown of leaves are ripping branches. At the bottom, behind Christ, a beardless young man and a bald and bearded old man, walk to the right, looking and talking to each other: they certainly are two disciples, perhaps Peter – the bearded one – with John the other.

The image confirms the version recounted by Matthew and Mark although only John describes the detail of the crowd holding palm branches; the presence of the children indeed is mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew (21, 15-16):

But when the chief priests and scribes saw the wonderful things that He did, and the children crying out in the temple and saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" they were indignant and said to Him, "Do You hear what these are saying?" And Jesus said to them, "Yes. Have you never read 'Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants you have perfected praise'?"



## Iconographic analysis

This image shows no major differences between Western and Eastern art traditions, but in the details; the major one is the way in which Christ sits on the donkey: in the Oriental representations he is portrayed with two legs on one side, in the way women used to sit.

A representation of the scene can also be found in later times but the extraordinary richness of the details makes this piece of art so finished that later representations do not add anything new.

The scene recalls the frescoes that can be found in Sant'Angelo in Formis abbey [Capua t/n], and in Sant'Urbano alla Caffarella church [Roma - t/n].



### Figure 3

## The cleansing of the temple



On the left there is a door supported by two pillars, surmounted by a tiled triangular roof; a short fringed and decorated curtain hangs from the tympanum.

At the door's right stands a portico supported by three columns (the first two are not clearly visible, being in the shade; the third is fluted, with a Corinthian capital) topped by a tiled roof. Between the two central columns stands Christ in his usual costume, facing left towards two men, both old with long white hair and beards, wearing chiton and himation; the first figure is speaking to Christ as his right hand gesture clearly indicates; the other figure puts his right hand on the chin, showing attention and concern; both keep the left hand under the himation.





Jesus raises his right hand while speaking, and holds in his other hand an arched lash made of intertwined small ropes; this detail is mentioned only in John (2, 15). Between the two columns of the portico an old bearded man bends as if trying to escape a whiplash; the man wears a long-sleeved tunic with a waistband and high knee-high sandals; he carries away his money changer stand with some coins on it while looking at Christ. Next to him, on the ground, is a tablet with small black dots arranged in regular rows which Haseloff mistakenly identifies as coins; Hans Graeven indeed points out that the object is actually an abacus or some kind of counting tool; next to this object lies a small leather bag from which some coins are spill.

On Christ's right some merchants are leaving quickly. Near the column, a young man with a short beard walks away calmly, carrying a large vase with both hands and turning his head towards Christ. In front of him another young man with a sleeveless tunic, firmly puts his bare feet down on the ground trying to drag away a reluctant goat,

grabbing the horns and ears, while also looking at Christ.

Behind him another young man walks rapidly to the right; he is carrying an open cage with a dove in it, and raises his right arm upwards towards a second dove flying; his face is turned to-



towards the man who carries the stand. Lastly, on the background to the right, two large yoked oxen walk, led by a young man in a sleeveless tunic who is holding a baton in his right hand; in the foreground stand two sheep and a goat walking in the same direction as the oxen.

And who are the two old men talking to Christ?

There are various hypotheses among the scholars but we propose another explanation, which appears most likely if the liturgical value of the Rossano illustrations is taken into account.

We believe, despite Haseloff's opposition, that their liturgical value is indisputable.

Once such an interpretation is acknowledged, the scene of the expulsion must refer, as we will see later, to the Holy Monday, when the liturgy includes the Gospel of Matthew 21, 18-43. Accordingly, the scene would be an illustration of the words of Matthew 21, 23-27, in which the priests ask Christ: *"By what authority are you doing these things?"*. *"And who gave you this authority?"*.

This would explain the reason why the episode of the expulsion of the merchants does not occupy the main place in the miniature: the



miniature depicts the moment immediately after the expulsion of the profaners in which Christ talks with the priests; the image in fact shows the merchants leaving and Christ turned towards the priests.

## Iconographic analysis

The Rossano Gospels representation, compared to others, takes a different point of view, giving prominence to the liturgical value of the illustrations. In fact, the choice of portraying the moment immediately after the expulsion of the merchants emphasizes the verses of Matthew 21, 23-27, enhancing the importance of the conversation of Christ with the priests:

Then Jesus went into the Temple. While he was teaching, the high priests and the elders of the people came to him and asked, "By what authority are you doing these things, and who gave you this authority?"

Jesus answered them, "I, too, will ask you one question. If you answer it for me, I will also tell you by what authority I am doing these things. Where did John's authority to baptize come from? From heaven or from humans?"

They began discussing this among themselves: "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask us, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'From humans,' we are afraid of the crowd, because everyone regards John as a prophet." So they told Jesus, "We don't know."

He in turn told them, "Then I won't tell you by what authority I am doing these things."

Figure 4

## The wise and the foolish virgins



The inscription at the top of the image refers to the title of the parable: “The ten virgins”. The scene is divided into two parts by the profile of a portal, with decorated jambs, and coffered doors. To the left of the door, outside, stand the foolish virgins, with long tunics and bright coloured cloaks to represent vanity; the first virgin knocks with the right hand on the door asking to be let in; the almost extinguished torch rests on her left shoulder. The two virgins behind her carry empty oil ampoules, representing wastefulness; the torches they carry on their right hand are almost extinguished as is the hope of crossing the door of Paradise. The fourth virgin is fur-



ther behind and her hands cannot be seen. The fifth virgin has thrown the torch to the ground and holds the oil ampoule on the left hand; she seems to display grief, having her right hand on her chin in a typical gesture of sorrow. On the other side of the portal

(which represents the entrance to Paradise, according to the symbolic value of the parable), stands the figure of Christ, his head is slightly inclined and his right hand is risen as in the act of speaking; his left hand is covered by the himation.

Behind him stand the five wise virgins in white costumes, all carrying a lit torch in the right hand; in the other hand three of them have ampoules filled with golden oil; the left hands of the other two virgins aren't visible. Behind this group, in the background, there is a forest of trees crowned with black foliage, through which some red fruits stand out.

The representation corresponds to Matthew 25, 1-13:

At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep. At midnight the cry rang out: "Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!"

Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, "Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out."



“No,” they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut. Later the others also came. “Lord, Lord,” they said, “open the door for us!”

But he replied, “Truly I tell you, I don’t know you. Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

## Iconographic analysis

A representation of the same scene can be found in the Roman catacombs in two frescoes dating back to the fourth century. In the one from the Coemeterium Maius [Roma - t/n], on the right side of the image the five wise virgins walk towards left with lit torches and oil ampoules. In the middle of the scene lies the tomb of the deceased person while on the left side are depicted four virgins at table, hinting at the bliss of the celestial banquet; the foolish virgins are missing in this representation.

In the catacomb of Santa Ciriaca [Roma - t/n], Christ stands in the middle, while the wise virgins stand on the left and the foolish ones on the right; at the bottom of the image there is a building with an open door representing the celestial palace, where Christ will accompany the wise virgins.

Figure 5

## The last supper and the washing of the feet



The inscription on the top of the miniature reads: “*Truly I tell you that one of you will betray me*” (Matthew 26, 21; Mark 14, 18). The two scenes are separate: the last supper is represented on the left and the washing of the feet on the right.

### The Last Supper

At the semi-circular table, on a cushion, lies Christ with the twelve apostles. The front of the table and the couches are embellished with three golden drapes decorated with a bird in the middle. The table top is made of veined marble and on the centre of it stands a golden vase with two loaves of bread by its side.





On the left side of the table Christ is lying supine with his torso lifted, stretching out his right hand in a gesture of pointing towards a disciple who is dipping in the vase. The twelve apostles, of different ages sit around the table; the sixth apostle is drawing from the vase and is therefore recognizable as Judas, according to the account of Matthew and Mark.

The twelfth apostle, laying on the opposite side is entirely visible like Christ; he's not supine as the Master, but bent on one side, turning his back to the viewer. Of the remaining apostles, just the top half can be seen; two of them rest their chin on their hands.

The representation follows the accounts of Matthew (26, 20-25) and Mark (14, 17-21), which are identical:

When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me."

They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?"

Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born."

Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?"

Jesus answered, "You have said so."

## The washing of the feet

On the top of the scene the inscription (that Hasseloff failed to notice) says: “*you shall never wash my feet.*”

In this picture Christ is bowing and washing the feet of an apostle whose feet are soaked in a basin full of water; he’s stretching his arms towards Christ; this figure can clearly be recognized as Peter who is also the one pronouncing the words of the inscription.



Christ is girdled with a washcloth and his cloak has slipped off his shoulders, in accordance with John’s description. Behind them stand the other eleven apostles; the old and bald one, (who is the same one sitting closest to Christ in the last supper representation) is speaking with his hands opened to the other apostles who are looking at him; in this way Christ and Peter in the foreground look almost isolated.

We will analyse the probable reason for this uncommon disposition, which has not been observed in Codex researches so far.

As it is commonly known the washing of the feet episode is described only in John (13, 4-12), by which the miniature is inspired.

## Iconographic analysis

The last supper, more than all the other scenes, shows some specific features of the Byzantine representation of Matthew and Mark’s gospels. Luke and John do not describe the detail of Judah reaching for the plate, so it seems that it cannot be referred to those two gospels. However, the detail of the vicinity of Christ to John,



suggest instead, that the representation could also be related to the Gospel of John.

In Sant' Apollinare Nuovo church [in Ravenna - t/n] there is an identical representation of the table and of the apostles' arrangement; however, in this image the apostles are only eleven since Judas is missing; also, in the centre of the table there are two fishes instead of two loaves.

The semi-circular table, with Christ close to John, Judas in the middle, and Peter on the opposite side, is typical of Byzantine art; in Western art this disposition can be found in monuments of Oriental inspiration.

Regarding the washing of the feet, according to the inscription, the scene depicted refers to the moment when Peter says to the Master: "*you shall never wash my feet.*" (John 13, 8).

Haseloff wrongly attributed the image to the subsequent moment when Peter says: "*Lord, not only the feet, not also the hands and the head*", having ignored the inscription on the top of the scene.

The gesture of Peter confirms the link between the sense of the inscription and the image: Peter shows a natural gesture of repulsion, lowering both hands, as if to move away those of Christ. The same moment is shown in the Cambridge Gospel Book, in the fragment of Petersburg and in many other monuments, especially Oriental ones, to which the Rossano Gospels belongs.

Figure 6

## The distribution of the bread



The inscription at the top of the miniature says: “*He took the bread, uttered some words of thanks and gave it to them saying – This is my body –*” (Luke 22, 19).

On the usual wavy background, Jesus stands on the left holding a piece of bread in the left hand and giving a piece of it to a young apostle who bends over the Master’s hand; the apostle reaches out keeping one hand on the top of the other so that the right covers the left resting between the thumb and forefinger, in order to receive the bread.



A second young apostle, in the background, raises his hands in prayer. A third, bearded apostle moves his hands under the himation that covers both of his shoulders; two other young people follow in the same position, curving their torso a little and opening their hands; the last man reaching out with his arms uncovered is identified by Harnack as Judas.



Figure 7

## The distribution of the wine



The inscription at the top of the miniature says: *“He took the bread, uttered some words of thanks and gave it to them saying – This is my blood –”*.

This image resembles the previous one: Christ stands on the right holding a cup containing a red liquid with both hands; Peter bows to drink, putting his lips to the chalice, while he stretches out his hands as if to support the chalice in case it fell.

In the background, behind Peter, stands another young apostle: his head is lowered and his right hand is extended towards the chalice; another young man with his hands under the himation follows; the

next in line is John who can be recognized by his bald head; the last two are Andrew and another unidentified apostle both in the same posture as John, who has his hands extended to the side of the body. This miniature's colours look much darker because the reverse of the sheet is painted in black.

## Iconographic analysis

These two miniatures (the distribution of bread and the distribution of wine) are not, like the previous ones, an account of historical facts, but the representation of the Church's liturgical rite at that time, the only difference being Christ administering the Eucharist instead of a priest.

The Last Supper in Christian art was typically represented at two different moments: the banquet and that of the distribution of the bread and the wine. The first scene has an historical nature while the second a liturgical one; normally just one of these two moments is represented: it is thus an uncommon circumstance to find both representations in the Rossano Gospels. There is no such case in any other ancient evangeliary and this may in fact reflect the desire to give a special prominence to the episode of the Last Supper in the Codex.

Another very important observation to be made is that the liturgical form of the scene is absolutely foreign to Western art. The oldest example of such form was found in the Rabbula Gospels, a 6<sup>th</sup> century illuminated manuscript written in the Syriac language and preserved nowadays in the Laurentian Library in Florence. In this evangeliary however, the apostles depicted are eleven and Christ is holding the bread with his right hand while holding the chalice in the left.

Very close correspondences can instead be found between the Codex and monumental art: in many apsidal mosaics or paintings Christ is represented in the middle, in front of the altar covered by the ciborium (a detail that indicates the liturgical value of the images) in the act of distributing bread and wine to the apostles, six standing on his left side and six on his right side.



Almost certainly the Codex miniatures were inspired by one of these monumental figurations: the last supper scene was divided into two parts and in both of them Christ is present; the two scenes belong closely together so that is impossible to separate them, because in fact, each one contains only six apostles.



We must therefore imagine the original representation with Christ in the centre, presumably pictured twice, and six apostles on each side; in this case the two parts would be transposed, the right one (Figure 6) to the place of the left.

Another detail that proves the derivation of the miniatures from monumental art is the different orientation of the apostles who, in one scene stand on the left (Figure 7) and in the complementary scene on the right (Figure 6) while in Rossano Gospels all the scenes generally unfold from the left to the right.

Franz Xaver von Funk observed that Christ is represented in the act of putting a piece of bread into the mouth of an apostle although this rite didn't exist before the 8<sup>th</sup> century; he would prove in this way that the Codex could not date back to earlier times. Hasseloff arguing against this affirmation



## Figure 8

### Jesus at Gethsemane



The scene takes place on a clear night. The landscape is composed of rocks. At the bottom of the image a black stripe on the background represents the darkness, while at the top the sky is painted in blue with small stars and a quarter moon.

On the left, among the rocks, Christ is bending over and touching the shoulder of one of the three apostles who is sleeping peacefully, using his arm as a pillow; Christ's left arm is covered by a himation.

Among the apostles are recognizably Peter and John; the third, a young man with black hair, is probably James.

On the right side of the figure of Christ appears again: he is kneeling on the rocks, wrapped in his himation; his arms are



outstretched on the ground, his head bent and almost touching his hands, in a posture of fervent prayer.

The representation corresponds to Matthew (26, 36-46), and to Mark (14, 32-42):

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray". He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

## Iconographic analysis

The image of Christ in Gethsemane shows two moments reunited together in a single miniature, as never seen before in any such ancient representation.

Byzantine art often combines these two moments, but the Rossano Gospels show some peculiarities.

In this miniature there are no specific details that indicate a difference between the Oriental and Western representations of the



scene. According to Hasseloff Christ kneeling with his body stretched out is a representation typical of Byzantine art.

However, a similar representation was recently found in a fresco decorating the oratory of Santa Maria via Lata in Rome, in which Christ is depicted three times, as many times as the number of the prayers he said, according to the Gospel. It cannot yet be excluded that the Roman fresco has an Oriental inspiration as it is certainly not pre - 8<sup>th</sup> century.

A joint representation of the two moments of Christ praying and awakening the apostle can also be found in the Codex Bezae Cantabrigensis, the Greek Codex kept in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge



Figure 9

## Frontispiece of the apostolic canons



An inscription is enclosed by a round frame which is composed of four curved ellipses crossing each other. The four medallions resulting are decorated with a golden frame and in each of them is portrayed the bust of an Evangelist on a turquoise background. Between the medallions, the internal part of the frame is adorned by overlapping fans of different and vivid colours. The Evangelists have golden halos around their heads and hold a closed book with a golden cover with their left arm; their right arm

is raised and their ring finger and little finger are bent to touch the thumb, while the index is kept straight.

Outside of the frame and next to each medallion we can spot the abbreviated name of each Evangelist: **1.** Matthew at the top; **2.** Luke on the right; **3.** John, the oldest of the four, at the bottom; **4.** Mark on the left.

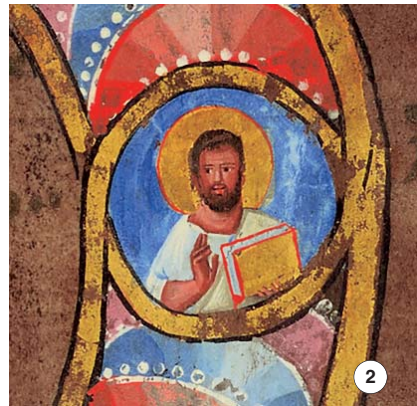
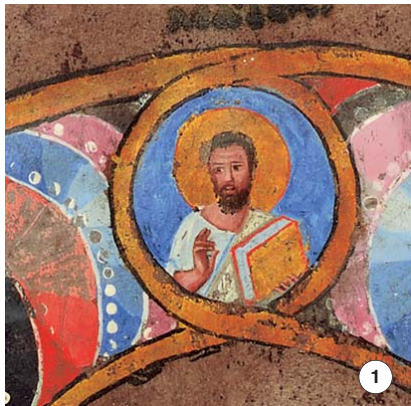
## Iconographic analysis

The Evangelists, as they are represented in this miniature, have no specific features; except for John, portrayed as an old man with a white beard, the other three are similar to each other; this detail could suggest that the artist wasn't following any tradition when portraying their appearance. In fact, the reduced size of the busts did not allow the Codex illuminator to emphasize small features.

In the Rabbula Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke are depicted with a beard, while John is beardless; also, only Mark and Luke are depicted with a nimbus, the rest of the Evangelists do not have it, probably due to the artist's forgetfulness. In the Codex Bezae Saint Luke is bearded also.

In the Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes all four Evangelists are bearded, however Luke shows a trimmed beard; Matthew and John are pictured as old men with white hair and beard; Mark is red haired instead. In the Codex Amiatinus, the Evangelists are all old and bearded, except for John, who is young and beardless. In the now lost, 5th century mosaic of the oratory of San Giovanni Battista in Rome, relying on Ciampini's records, Matthew, Mark and Luke were bearded, while John was beardless according to the western art tradition. In Sant' Agata in Subura church in Rome, in another lost mosaic dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century John is represented with a beard and long hair while Matthew is bearded with short hair.

In the medallions of Basilica di San Vitale [in Ravenna- t/n] John is beardless while Matthew's beard is short; In the lunettes the four Evangelists are all portrayed as old men with long hair and beards,



with halos around their head. Mark and John are depicted with lectern, inkwells and quills. In the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe [also in Ravenna - t/n] the busts of the Evangelists were reworked in later times; in these mosaics Matthew is portrayed with long beard and hair and Luke with short beard and bald on his forehead. In the mosaic of San Marco in Rome, the Holy Evangelist Mark has a white beard, and he's almost bald, except for some white hair on the side of his head.

Given those considerations it does not seem that the Codex artist was following a specific model in representing the Evangelists, except for John, who is portrayed as old and bearded, according to Oriental art tradition.



The Rossano Gospels representation of the Evangelists resemble the ones found in the Coptic Gospel book no. 9 of the Vatican Library, dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in which Matthew, Mark and Luke look similar to each other, with short hair and black beards, while John is old and bearded.

## Figure 10

### The letter of Eusebius to Carpiano



The only remaining part of the epistle is framed by a golden band with black outlines. The four strips composing the frame are decorated in their centre with a rosette with pink leaves and a white button in the middle. At the four corners can be spotted some small baskets containing something pink though unrecognizable. The lateral bands, on each side of the rosettes, show two stems with pink flowers resembling lilies. The top band is decorated, on the rosettes' sides, with two black doves facing each other, with white wings and ribbons fluttering around their neck. The bottom one shows two small ducks in the same position.





Figure 11

## The healing of the man born blind



In the first scene on the left Christ stands in the middle followed by Andrew and a younger disciple with his hand under the himation. Before him stands the blind man, bent forward and leaning on a cane; Christ touches with his right index and middle fingers the eyes of the man while the man gently accompanies Christ's gesture with his hand.

On the right part of the miniature the blind man appears again. He's leaning over a square pond containing water and he's washing his eyes bringing his hands to the face; his right eye looks open and he seems to be washing his left eye. A group of men and women of different ages is gathered around the pond, their gestures seem to express wonder; the men of the group wear paenulas while women



have a head scarf covering their heads. As mentioned in John (9, 2-3), the man who is standing in the front of the group and dips his right hand in the water is probably the blind man's father, while the woman on his right could be his mother.

The whole miniature corresponds to John (9, 1-7):

As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

"Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him. As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world."

After saying this, he spit on the ground, made some mud with the saliva, and put it on the man's eyes. "Go," he told him, "wash in the Pool of Siloam" (this word means 'Sent'). So the man went and washed, and came home seeing.

The representation of this episode is similar to many others of Byzantine tradition and therefore, multiple examples, with slight variations between them, could be cited.



## Figure 12

# The parable of the Good Samaritan



On the left side appears the city of Jerusalem, with the gates open and embedded in a round arch. On the outer side of the walls stand a couple of square towers while inside some houses can be seen; one of them is covered by a dome, and a sort of semi-circular amphitheatre with a red edge; behind the city, the crowns of some trees that look like cypresses stand out.

In the middle of the miniature, a naked bleeding man lies on the ground using his right arm as a pillow.

On the left, Christ, in his usual costume, bends over the man, extending his arms to lift him off the ground; on the man's right stands a winged angel wearing a nimbus and holding in his hands, wrapped





in a cloth, a golden vase that must contain some restorative liquid.

Further to the right there is a donkey (in the same identical posture as the donkey of the miniature of the entry into Jerusalem, in

Figure 2), on



which the wounded man sits completely naked. The donkey is saddled with a white cloth and the bridles lie on the animal's neck. Next to the donkey Christ is stretching out his left arm, which is still covered by the cloak and handing something over to the innkeeper with the other hand. The old innkeeper extends the right hand to-

wards Christ's while holding two books with pink covers. Above his head two horizontal stripes, one white and one red can be glimpsed: the sense of the lines is not clear, they could probably represent a door lintel and the red roof of the guesthouse. Unfortunately, this sheet is not intact and it is not possible to know what was pictured on the right edge of it.

The books in the host's hands seem to confirm von Gebhardt's and

Harnack's hypothesis about the symbolic value of this figure as the Fathers of the Church believed.

The image represents Luke 10, 30-35:

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"

## Iconographic analysis

The representation of the parable of the good Samaritan, with Christ in place of the Samaritan, is peculiar to Oriental art only. A similar representation can also be found in Sant'Angelo in Formis abbey in Capua, in some frescoes which, despite Kraus denial, have an indisputably Oriental origin.



## Figure 13a

### Christ's trial before Pilates



The inscription on the top left reads: “*So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor*” (Matthew 27, 2). The miniature is surrounded by a blue curved line that starts from the opposite ends of the background. In the middle stands Pilate’s throne, with a large square back and a big cushion covered by a blue cloth. Pilate is bald and bearded and wears a tunic and chlamys; he looks to his left and rests his left hand on his knee, which is hidden by the clothes; in the right hand he holds a closed scroll that he rests against his chin. Behind the throne, on both sides, on a hidden platform stand two young men of whom only the upper body is visible; they wear golden necklaces and hold the stems of two banners with opposite hands, so as to be symmetrical. The square banner shows two golden imperial busts on a blue background.



In front of the throne is placed a low table covered with a fringed cloth, decorated with other two golden imperial busts. On the table there is an inkwell and three quills.

Christ moves forward from the left in his usual costume, keeping his hands hidden under the cloak. He is looking at two men who are ahead of him: one is turned back and looks to be speaking with Jesus, as the hand gesture suggests; the youngest of the two raises his hand vigorously towards Pilate. Each of them keeps their left hand under the cloak. These two characters are almost certainly two priests accusing Christ, as the close resemblance with the two priests to whom Judah returns the money (depicted below, on the same page) suggests. On the opposite side, next to the throne, stand five men of various ages, holding their hands under the chlamys and looking towards Christ; they can be identified by their costumes as roman officers, as they are dressed in the same way as Pilate.



Figure 13b

## The repentance and death of Judas



In the same sheet of the Jesus before Pilate miniature and just under it, there is a second miniature picturing the repentance and death of Judas. On the bottom of the image the inscription reads (Matthew 27, 3-5):

When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. “I have sinned,” he said, “for I have betrayed innocent blood.” “What is that to us?” they replied. “That’s your responsibility.”

So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.

On the left side of the image there is a baldachin supported by four veined columns, with quadrangular bases ending in capitals ornamented with *Acanthus spinosus* [Spiny bear’s breech - t/n]. The roof of the baldachin is a dome covered by tiles, internally decorated with alternating coffers and rosettes. Underneath the structure, on a straw chair with a high back, sits the old bearded priest, who is pulling back, looking away and putting his hands forward in a gesture of repulsion; in front of the chair is placed a wooden stool. In order not





to cover the figure of the old priest, one of the columns of the baldachin was placed further back, instead of being in its correct place.

Outside the baldachin on the old priest's left, stands a younger priest, of whom only the upper body can be seen; he's raising his right arm speaking and looking towards Judas who is coming

from the right, curved and carrying the thirty denarii with both hands; some coins are falling to the ground.

The right side of the miniature shows the death of Judas. He hangs from the branch of a slender olive tree with a rope and a clearly visible slip knot tightens his neck; his arms are by his sides; the sleeves of the chiton are rolled up to the elbow; the himation has fallen from his shoulders and covers only the lower part, touching the ground.

## Iconographic analysis

The richness of the scene of Judas returning the coins has no equivalent scene either in Santo Apollinare or anywhere else, but in the sculptures decorating the columns of the San Marco ciborium in Venice.

The death of Judas is represented in a way common to many other images. It could be assumed that similarities between the representations of this scene could be purely accidental, the scene is simple and therefore easy to represent in the same way by different artists.

However, the Codex representation has the closest affinity with the columns of the ciborium of San Marco, but even more with the Rabula Gospels.

In later representations of the scene an angel pushing the traitor's body down was added.

Figure 14

## The choice of the Jews between Christ and Barabbas



In the upper part of the image, in the centre, Pilate sits on the same throne represented in the previous image of Christ before Pilate. He seems to be speaking while gesturing with his right hand and looking in the same direction; with his left hand he's holding a scroll which is upright on his knee.



Next to the throne, on the right, stands a young officer (dressed up in tunic, chlamys and high sandals), who writes something with a stylus on a wooden framed dip-tych; at its feet lay two scrolls.

On both sides, standing in a semicircle, there are two groups of men of different ages, some wearing tunic and himation, some others wearing paenula; almost all of them gesturing vivaciously with

their right hands in the air as to emphasise something they are saying or shouting.

On the lower half of the image, on the left side, Jesus is standing upright in a solemn attitude; he's flanked by two officers, dressed in the typical Roman costume; the officer on the left holds a bundle of rods, the second one on the right is depicted from behind and his face turned towards Christ can be seen in profile.

On the right Barabbas is standing naked, wearing just a cloth around his waist; his hands are tied behind his back and his feet are chained; he's twisting and his head with shaggy hair and beard is turned and can be seen in profile. Behind him a servant in a short-sleeved tunic holds him down or indeed could be loosening his hands, in answer to the crowd claiming his freedom.

A second servant, standing in front of Barabbas, holds a rope which



is tied around the thief's neck; he seems to look up at Pilate waiting for his orders.

The inscription at the top refers to the words of Luke (23, 7):

When he learned that Jesus was under Herod's jurisdiction,  
he sent him to Herod, who was also in Jerusalem at that  
time.

Haseloff rightly observes that the whole page represents just one scene despite von Gebhardt's and Harnack's arguing that the scenes represented would be two: the first image depicts Pilate dictating the letter to Herod, and the second one would represent Christ and Barabbas. Such opinion is based on the upper inscription, which does not completely fit the entire page. Actually, none of the scenes alone would make sense.

Haseloff in proving his assumption, failed to notice that the upper part of the miniature is not presented on a wavy strip to represent the ground (as in the other miniatures) but instead, the figures are just placed on two thin lines at the sides of Pilate's throne which is not even set on some kind of ground.

Moreover, in the previous sheet (Figure 13), where two distinct scenes are represented, the upper part of the image unfolds on a thick strip of soil which also runs under the throne. This detail indicates that the page depicts only one scene.

## Iconographic analysis

The two images of Christ before Pilate depict different moment from those represented generally in eastern and western monuments; in those representations is common to see the image of Christ being conducted before Pilate among the soldiers and the image of Pilate washing his hands; the priests are missing with the exception of Sant' Apollinare mosaic, in which an old man appears representing almost certainly one of the priests.

In the Rabbula Gospels, Pilate sits on an identical throne, and speaks with Christ who gestures towards him; in both of these representations a servant appears carrying a basin with water in it. Also in the columns of San Marco ciborium [in Venice - t/n] the



episode is divided in two, showing therefore an evident similarity with the Rossano Gospels as observed by Graeven and Haseloff; in those decorations the two sign bearers lower their banners, according to the Gospel of Nicodemus from which the whole representation is supposedly inspired; Haseloff rightly observes that the Rossano Gospels scene is not inspired by the Nicodemus Gospel.

Ussov, in the representation of Venice, recognized the influence of the *Acta Pilati*, in which it was recounted that the sign bearers were forced to lower the insignia. In the Rossano Gospels the sign bearers are indeed included as a purely decorative element. However, the affinity between the Venetian reliefs and the miniature is so close that we can conclude that the two pieces derive from the same source.

The sign bearers are present to emphasize the power of Pilate, or perhaps, as Graeven suggests, they were inspired by a story by Josephus (the Romano-Jewish historian), according to which Pilate was the first governor who introduced banners with the emperor's portrait into Jerusalem whereas his predecessors, complying with the Jewish law that prohibited such images, used to leave them outside the city.

The episode of the choice between Christ and Barabbas is found in a similar form in a Coptic evangeliary preserved in Paris; other examples are currently unknown, suggesting that such a representation could be exclusive to Oriental art.





## Figure 15

### Mark the Evangelist



The inscription above bears the name of Mark in Greek. The Evangelist sits under a tall structure. The latter is composed by two columns with a three-step base, supporting a golden architrave, on which, at the opposite sides, are placed two pyramids with golden spheres on top; in the centre is a semi-dome brightly coloured in red, gold and turquoise. Below the architrave, on the sides there are two windows half-closed by red curtains which

cross them diagonally. Through the windows can be seen a glimpse of the sky painted in different shades of blue. The pillar between the windows and the whole part under the semi-dome are painted in turquoise, probably representing the apse curve or a drape.

Mark is sitting in the foreground in a straw chair with a high back, resting his feet on a stool; He has a nimbus around his head and wears a tunic and a himation. On his knees lies a large unrolled scroll on which he is writing with a stylus the first words of his gospel: "*The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God*". In the background can be seen an inkwell with three quills and behind them, a sort of tablet on a corner of which the lid of the inkwell is attached with a string.

A woman wearing a cloak that covers her head stands before Mark; her left arm is hidden and she points out the scroll with her right hand as in the act of dictating words to the Evangelist. She also has a nimbus around her head and her face looks youthful; who is this female figure?

## Iconographic analysis

St. Mark the Evangelist, is portrayed at the beginning of his gospel, in the typical posture of an author writing in a way that is common in pagan representations as well.

What makes the Rossano Gospels' representation unique is the presence of the feminine figure: she's apparently dictating the words of the Gospel to Mark, as her gesture of indicating the scroll suggests. She has a halo around her head and she's almost entirely covered by a light blue cloak.

At first sight we could think that this figure represents the Virgin Mary, but by a deeper consideration this hypothesis is not plausible. In fact, what special relationship could Mary have had with Saint Mark? And since the other three lost gospels also had their own frontispiece miniature, should we suppose that Mary was also represented together with Matthew, Luke and John in those miniatures?

Scholars have debated a great deal on this issue.



An important detail is that the figure lacks any inscription, therefore one might think that the artist omitted it as superfluous, thinking that the significance of the figure would be obvious and recognizable to everyone: thus, the supposition that the woman represents the Virgin Mary would be confirmed. On the other hand, it is still difficult to prove this hypothesis considering that no relationship between Saint Mark and the Virgin Mary is recounted in the Sacred Scriptures.

It is therefore more reasonable to conclude that the woman represents the Divine Sophia (the Holy Wisdom), as seen in many other sacred depictions.



# Christ, the Apostles and the prophets in the Rossano Gospels

## Jesus Christ

Christ in the Codex is portrayed as a man in the prime of life, with a healthy and lively complexion, long wavy hair, long and hanging moustaches surrounded by a thick beard that covers the cheeks, but leaves free a part of the chin; it is a virile physiognomy, but gentle at the same time.

Christ's costumes are also peculiar: he wears a golden pallium on a blue tunic, he has a golden nimbus around his head that bears a large cross that seems embossed, due to its double outlines.

Kondakoff rightly finds a similarity between the Codex's Christ and the one represented in the mosaics of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna and observes how his appearance has intermediate features between the Christ of the mosaics and the one represented in the Basilica of Santi Cosmas and Damiano in Rome.

This iconography of Jesus is original and exclusive to the Oriental artistic tradition.

A similar representation of Christ with wavy hair, a full beard, a large cruciform halo, was found in the recently discovered frescoes in the church of San Saba in Rome.

## The Apostles

The apostles who appear in the miniatures along with Christ, are not all identifiable.

Haseloff recognizes some of them: John is old, bearded, bald, as depicted in fourth place in the miniature of the distribution of the wine, as last in the scene of the washing of the feet and next to Christ in the image of the Last Supper. He probably is also the man that follows Christ entering Jerusalem, even if this character has a little



hair on the forehead as the one depicted in the frontispiece of the apostolic canons.

This old man's physiognomy is the same as used by the illuminator to represent Pilate in the first of the scenes of the "Christ before Pilate" miniature (Figure 13). The same type of face can be seen also in two of the Jews in the miniature of the choice between Christ and Barabbas (Figure 14).

Peter is also easily recognizable: as the inscription says he certainly is the apostle whose feet Christ washes; he is on the right in the image of the Last Supper, the first in the distribution of the wine and also the first in "the Resurrection of Lazarus" miniature.

Andrew, with white and frizzy hair, is the third apostle sitting at the table of the Last Supper, he is the second character in the washing of the feet scene, the fifth in the distribution of the wine and the first following Christ in "The healing of the man born blind" miniature.

Peter, Paul and Andrew, as they are depicted in Rossano Gospels, show similarities with other pieces of Oriental art. Andrew, especially, with his voluminous hair, is peculiar to this artistic tradition, as the representation in the Rabula Gospels and in Church of San Vitale testify.

By analogy with the Rabula Gospels we can probably identify Bartholomew, sitting between John and Andrew at the table of the Last Supper and in third position in the washing of the feet scene. Judas, in the miniatures of the last supper and of the repentance and death is represented young and beardless as was typical in early Christian art tradition.

## The Prophets (Figures 1-8, 11-12)

Under each of the miniatures representing the scenes of the Gospel, except in the two of "Christ before Pilate", there are the four prophets.

They are represented standing, holding with the left hand an unfolded scroll, which covers the entire lower part of the body and serves as a tribune or pulpit. The prophets stand with their bodies

facing the front, and with their heads turned towards the centre of the page: the two on the left looking right and the two on the right looking left. They are raising their right hands up and pointing with their forefingers.

Some prophets hold the scroll in their hands while others rest the hand on it as if it was the edge of a pulpit; in the Figures 3, 5, 7, 8, 12, the two on the left lay their hands on the scroll, while those on the right are holding it in their hand. In the other miniatures, these two positions seem to have no particular order.

The prophets, except the kings, wear the same costumes as the apostles: a tunic with blue stripes and a white pallium with blue highlights. David and Solomon instead, wear blue tunics and turquoise-purple chlamys, pinned on the right shoulder by a gold buckle with a large square golden tablion. Both wear a golden crown, adorned by three gems on the front, which lies on their hair instead of circling the head. In addition, they have a golden nimbus around their heads as the other two prophets.

The artist did not try to characterize the various prophets individually, and thus sometimes the same prophet was represented in two different ways.



# Nature and value of the Rossano Gospels' illustrations

The miniatures are placed at the beginning of the pages, in a prominent position that highlights their value regardless of the written part. Their order greatly affects the iconographic form.

In the Codex, as we have seen, there are few representations that refer to a single story; actually, the majority of the miniatures combine together various elements taken from the different gospels.

The result is a rich development of the scenes, with a great variety of details and an abundance of decorative patterns that makes one wonder how such elaborate scenes could be found in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Later representations have nothing more to add to these fine pieces of art.

An example of this complexity can be found in the miniature of "Christ's entering in Jerusalem" (Figure 2) which looks surprisingly structured and detailed, with evident contributions from the stories of Matthew, Mark and John.

Regarding the nature of the miniatures, it has long been debated whether the miniatures are merely historical illustrations or if they have a proper liturgical value.

Assuming that many miniatures were lost (whether and which ones were destroyed cannot be confirmed in any way, since the sheets containing the illustrations were added later and do not have a quinternion numbering) it seems that compared with the large number of events mentioned in the gospel, those illustrated in the Rossano Gospels were not many even in origin.

It is indeed probable that the miniatures were intended to be a limited number, considering the substantial amount of space dedicated to them.

Each page is destined to be a single scene only and some are extraordinarily rich and developed, as it is the Last Supper episode,

to which three miniatures are dedicated; same for the illustration of the moment of Christ before Pilate, that is depicted through two miniatures.

This suggests that if many scenes were to be illustrated, various miniatures would have been placed in a single page, in order to save space and reduce the volume of the book.

However, it is quite clear that space is not an issue in the Rossano Gospels, we could even say that space is almost wasted at the bottom of the pages where the four prophets are depicted under each miniature.

It's therefore reasonable to think that the number of miniatures, if different from the current ones originally, was however very limited; It appears that the episodes represented were selected carefully, or alternatively that the illustrations have a liturgical nature.

Ussov, Pokrovsky and Haseloff, von Gebhardt and Harnack have long argued over this issue.

Von Gebhardt, and Harnack, saw a part of Christ's life represented in the miniatures. Ussov, on the other hand, believes that the intention of the artist was to represent just the Passion, and relates the miniatures to the part of the apocryphal gospel of Nicodemus called "*Acta Pilati*". This part of the Gospel shows a similar pattern in the illustrations including the depictions of Christ's trial, the healing of the blind man, the ten virgins, the resurrection of Lazarus and finally the last supper scene, which is the central image and the more elaborate. The miniatures in such a reconstructed sequence would correspond exactly to the Greek liturgy, supporting the hypothesis of a liturgical value for the Rossano Gospels' miniatures.

Kondakoff also supports this explanation, as does Kraus, who confirms the evident similarities of the miniature series with the liturgy of the week of the Passion of the Greek-Alexandrian church.

On the other hand, Haseloff disagrees with these conclusions, claiming that the miniatures cannot be derived from *Gesta Pilati*,

because there is no mention of the expulsion of the merchants from the temple and of the parable of the good Samaritan in it. On the matching of the images with the Greek liturgy, he supports Pokrovsky's position maintaining that the Rossano Gospels miniatures are just *disjecta membra* (scattered fragments) of a whole; in this regard the artist would have chosen the main scenes of the four gospels representing them at the beginning of the Codex, as seen in other such illuminated gospels.

We cannot agree with Pokrovsky and Haseloff in any way, and the reasons set out previously persuade us that it cannot be just an historical illustration.

Additionally, looking further into the Greek church liturgy the sequence of the miniatures fits quite well to the liturgy of the of Holy Week: on the first Saturday it includes the resurrection of Lazarus; on Sunday the entry of Christ into Jerusalem; on Monday the cleansing of the temple; on Tuesday the parable of the ten virgins; on Wednesday the banquet at the house of Simone; on Thursday the washing of the feet, the last supper, the prayer in the Gethsemane and the betrayal of Judas; finally on Friday the Passion of Christ with Pilates prosecuting Jesus.

Pokrovsky, for his part, observes that it is unknown whether the use of such liturgy is so ancient (thus no proofs were found to contradict the antiquity of this liturgy that can could indeed be proved by the Codex) and that the liturgy of the week of Passion does not include the healing of the blind man and the parable of the good Samaritan as in Rossano Gospels.

Ussov relates these two missing representations to the Saturday readings of the first and fourth week of Lent. Pokrovsky replies, that on the Saturday of the first week of Lent, the liturgy would include the Healing of the man with a withered hand reading and not the healing of the blind man. This single discrepancy, however, in our opinion is not enough to exclude the liturgical meaning of the Codex illustrations.

Furthermore, the scenes of the ten virgins and the good Samaritan are represented in a symbolic way and not historically which lead



us even more to the conclusion that the purpose of the miniatures was liturgical.

Lastly, as we have seen previously how only the liturgical sense of the cleansing of the temple image can explain why the occurrence depicted is not that of Christ striking the profaners but Christ speaking with the priests, in reference to the words of Matthew 21, 23-27, which are exactly part of the of the Holy Monday liturgy.

## Stylistic examination

The Rossano Gospels has a high stylistic register. The outlines are correct and moderate, but entirely free from the rigid rules of symmetry.

The miniaturist painted harmonious and balanced compositions, in which the elements are excellently fused into a single whole, managing harmoniously to connect the various parts to each other and thus achieving a perfect union.

In this regard, the miniature of the resurrection of Lazarus is a true masterpiece and it is difficult to find in other manuscripts many elements combined so well in a single painting. The Codex miniaturist shows great technical skill and a remarkable sense of colour.

The miniatures do not have a background layer preparation: the colours are placed directly on the parchment and for this reason they are slightly shaded by the purple colour of the sheets; only the face of Christ is painted on top of the golden colour of the nimbus thus overlapping one layer on the other.

The outlines of the naked skin in the Codex are in delicate rosy tints; the golden cloak of Christ is marked by black strokes that look similar to cuts, to highlight the folds of the fabric.

The forms are very balanced and full. People are proportionate and of a reasonable stature. The heads are erect, regular, well built, with high foreheads. Their posture is composed and natural. The characters are firmly grounded and their movements look natural when walking, with one foot still on the ground while the other is raised.

Christ is represented as a gentle and noble figure. The background figures are visible only in their upper part even when the lower parts should also be seen. So it is in the “Entrance to Jerusalem” (Figure 2) where the legs of the whole group of men meeting Christ are not visible; in the “Cleansing of the Temple” (Figure 3), the

merchant carrying the cage is half visible; in the scene of the “Distribution of the Wine” (Figure 7) the feet of the apostle behind Peter are missing.

The illustrations are arranged in a rectangular form and the purely decorative elements are missing. We could say that there is nothing more than is necessary.

The miniatures are not framed, and are without a contour line, except for the two images of Pilate, which are surrounded by a thin semi-circular line, and the picture of Saint Mark with Sofia which are placed under an arch.

The few purely decorative elements can be found around Eusebio’s epistle to Carpiano (Figure 10) and in the frontispiece of the Apostolic Canons (Figure 9). The letter is framed in a decorative motif showing black doves with white wings and a fluttering ribbon around their neck; the same doves can also be seen on the front of the tablecloth covering the Last Supper table (Figure 5).

The frontispiece of the Apostolic Canons is enclosed in a round frame decorated with colourful overlying fans; the frame is furtherly decorated with four medallions bearing the busts of the Evangelists. The round decorative element in the centre of the page is relatively common in Eastern illuminated gospels. The beautiful motif of grey, orange, turquoise and pink intersecting fans is instead exclusive of the Oriental tradition.

## The architecture

The cities are represented surrounded by walls with towers and battlements, made of large, square stones; inside can be seen houses with scaled roofs, or domes, and semi-circular constructions. The gates of the cities are always encompassed by a round arch.

In the depiction of the “Cleansing of the Temple” (Figure 3) the entrance of the temple is preceded by a portico with fluted columns and leaved Corinthian-like capitals supporting a red scaled roof; the entrance is surmounted by a tympanum and a short curtain hangs from the lintel.

In the miniature of the ten virgins (Figure 4) the interesting

architectural detail is the door with coffered jambs that divides the scene and that can also be seen in other images.

The Miniature portraying Mark with Sofia (Figure 15) is extraordinarily rich in architectural details; the Evangelist is sitting under a sort of ciborium, or rather under the cusp of an apse, at the bottom of which are placed two windows.

## The landscape

The landscape is very simple and reduced to the essential; the purple colour of the parchment was apparently considered by the painter, in most cases, an adequate background for his figures.

The landscape is introduced occasionally by necessity, as for example in “Christ in Gethsemane” scene (Figure 8). In almost all other images there are only isolated elements such as trees and plants.

The ground is defined by a wavy green line in various miniatures. In the “Entry of Christ in Jerusalem” (Figure 2) Usov identifies the branches held by the people as the Phoenix *Dactylifera*’s (date palm), which is typical of Syria and northern Africa.

## The animals

Usov and Liidtke have previously studied the animals appearing in the “Clearing of the Temple” scene: Usov finds a resemblance between the goats pictured and a specie common in lower and middle Egypt; he also found similarities between the humped oxen and the *bos africanus*. Liidtke, on the other hand, affirms that the humped ox is a species belonging to Syria and Asia Minor, excluding the Egyptian origin.

The long-tailed sheep and the long-eared donkey, appearing in the Codex, also suggest Syria or Asia Minor.

Liidtke’s conclusions are supported by valid arguments that must be considered correct. In fact, such animals never appear in Western illuminated manuscripts thus excluding, along with other reasons, the Southern Italy origin of the Codex.

## Movements and gestures

In the Rossano Gospels the gestures and movements of the figures are very vivid.

The various feelings are wonderfully expressed by gestures: pain, suffering, supplication, prayer, terror, are represented with such realistic gestures that they seem to come alive.

“Christ praying in the garden of Gethsemane” (Figure 8), with his face almost resting on his hands stretched out on the ground, is a typical position of prayer represented in Byzantine art. In the Figure 14 the gestures of the people shouting “Barabbas!” are vivid and energetic.

## The costumes

Christ wears a blue tunic. The common men always wear high sandals, or are barefoot, like the blind man and one of merchants, and this detail distinguishes the people from the apostles, disciples and priests who wear sandals instead.

The people are also recognizable by the paenula worn by them, while the disciples wear a pallium.

Pilate and his officials are dressed in long chlamys with a large square cloth of contrasting colour on the front; the chlamys are white, yellow, red, blue while the front square is always turquoise.

## Bibliografy Cited By Antonio Muñoz

- Graeven Hans, *Recensione a Rewiev of Haseloff*, *Gottingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, 1900.
- Haseloff Arthur, *Codex purpureus Rossanensis, Die Miniaturen der Evangelienhandschrift von Rossano*, Berlin 1898.
- Kondakov Nicodemo, *Histoire de l'art byzantin considerée principalement dans les miniatures*, Paris 1886.
- Kraus Franz Xaver, *Geschichte der christlichen Kunst*, Freiburg 1896.
- Ludtk Willie, *Untersuchungen zu den Miniaturen der Wiener Genesis*, Greifswald 1897.
- Pokrovskij Nikolaj, *Sketch of Monuments of Orthodox Iconography and art*, San Pietroburgo 1894.
- Stuhlfauth Georg, *Die altchristliche Elfenbeinplastik*, Freiburg 1896.
- Usov German Alekseevich, *The Miniatures of the Grek Gospel Book of the sixth century discovered in Rossano, Antiquites*, Studi della Reale Società Archeologica di Mosca, Mosca 1881.
- von Funk Franz Xaver, *Die Zeit des Codex Rossanensis*, 1896.
- von Gebhardt Oscar Leopold, *Die Evangelien des Matthaeus und des Marcus aus dem Codex Purpureus Rossanensis, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, I 4 Leipzig 1883.
- von Gebhardt Oscar Leopold - von Harnack Adolf, *Die Aöeberlieferung der griechischen Apologeten des zweiten Jahrhunderts in der alten Kirche und im Mittelalter*. Leipzig 1893
- von Harnack Adolf, *Evangeliorum Codex Graecus purpureus Rossanensis*, Leipzig 1880.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	3
Figure 1. The raising of Lazarus .....	5
Figure 2. Triumphal entry into Jerusalem .....	9
Figure 3. The cleansing of the temple.....	13
Figure 4. The wise and the foolish virgins .....	17
Figure 5. The last supper and the washin of the feet .....	21
Figure 6. The distribution of the bread .....	25
Figure 7. The distribution of the wine .....	27
Figure 8. Jesus at Gethsemane .....	31
Figure 9. Frontispiece of the apostolic canons.....	35
Figure 10. The letter of Eusebius to Carpiano .....	39
Figure 11. The healing of the man born blind .....	41
Figure 12. The parable of the Good Samaritan .....	45
Figure 13a. Christ's trial before Pilates .....	49
Figure 13b. The repentance and death of Judas .....	51
Figure 14. The choice of the Jews between Christ and Barabbas ....	53
Figure 15. Mark the Evangelist.....	59
Christ, the Apostles and the prophets in the Rossano Gospels .....	63
Nature and value of the Rossano Gospels' illustrations.....	67
Stylistic examination.....	71
Bibliography cited by Antonio Muñoz.....	75



***The precious miniatures of the  
Codex Purpureus Rossanensis  
illustrated and explained  
by a great art historian***

Antonio MUÑOZ (Rome, March 14, 1884 - Rome, February 22, 1960) was an art historian and manager of Italian superintendencies.

Senior lecturer in history of art at the University of Naples, head of the Monuments and Fine Arts Offices of Lazio, Inspector general of Antiquities and Fine Arts of Rome. He worked on the urban transformation of various areas of the historical centre of Rome. He directed some important restorations of Roman churches. He was the founder and first director of the Museum of Rome. He left behind him a large number of publications.

MARTINO ANTONIO RIZZO, native of Rossano (CS) and living in Florence, is a lover of Calabrian local history, author of various books and articles; he founded the site:

[www.AnticaBibliotecaCoriglianoRossano.it](http://www.AnticaBibliotecaCoriglianoRossano.it)  
a rich historical archive for free consultation on the history and culture of the region.