

# The Bamberg Apocalypse



## A Luxury Manuscript for Two Emperors

### The fascination of the Apocalypse

Apocalypses are texts on visions and prophecies on the end of the world, frequently combined with the idea of a doomsday and the Divine renewal of the world. Their encoded language and enigmatic pictures have fascinated and at the same time bewildered men since the beginning of time.

Nearly 1000 years ago, when apocalyptic visions overflowed Europe and their interpretations were widely discussed, the Ottonian dynasty commissioned a luxury manuscript after the text of the Revelation of St. John the Divine to be carried out at Reichenau, one of the best scriptoria of their empire.

### Reichenauian book illumination at its best

The Bamberg Apocalypse is among the most marvellous illuminated medieval manuscripts and the only illustrated cycle of the Apocalypse produced by Ottonian book painting. The leading scriptorium of the empire endowed the manuscript with imperial luxury: 57 miniatures on gilded ground and over 100 golden initials ornate its 106 leaves.

Beside the Revelation of St. John, the last book of the New Testament, this magnificent manuscript also comprises a richly decorated Gospel Lectionary containing lessons from the Gospels for use in liturgy.

### An enigmatic commission

While the manuscript can be dated with considerable precision to the period between 1000 and 1020, no clear evidence exists as to the person for whom it was made. However, it can be presumed that the Bamberg Apocalypse was commissioned by Otto III (+ 1002).

After the early and unexpected death of the emperor at the age of 21, the codex remained unfinished for some time in the scriptorium of Reichenau before his successor Henry II ordered the manuscript to be finished.

### An imperial consecration gift

What we know for certain is that Henry II donated the manuscript to the Collegiate Abbey of St. Stephan at Bamberg on the occasion of its inauguration in 1020. The following inscription on the original binding, which has been lost, has come down to us in ancient literature on this subject: HENRIC ET KUNIGUNT HAEC TIBI MUNERA PROMUNT (Henry and Cunegund bequeath you these presents). These words clearly confirm the donation of the Bamberg Apocalypse by Henry II and his wife Cunegund.

The Bishopric of Bamberg was founded in 1007 by the Holy Roman emperor Henry II and blossomed into one of the most important political, artistic and religious centres of the empire thanks to his imperial patronage.

### **Miniatures filled with expressive power**

Gold and silver ornate the numerous full page miniatures and initials of the Bamberg Apocalypse in costly luxury.

From early times, the workshop of Reichenau developed its own typical character which is marvellously expressed in the 57 large format miniatures. The desire to achieve the highest expressive power is paralleled by a reduction of spatiality and plasticity. Brightly coloured surfaces are clearly limited by sweeping lines. A fascinating enhancement of form and movement allows representation of religious translation in an intensity that

### **103 golden initials**

Besides the magnificent, mostly full page miniatures, the Bamberg Apocalypse contains 103 golden initials. The gilded corpus of the letters are mostly outlined with minium. The space surrounded by the form of the letter shows golden rinceaux on blue or green ground, ending in shamrock-like shapes and the arrow tips typical of Reichenauian art.

An important feature is the alternation of uncial and capital writing of the E initials in the Apocalypse. As most sentences there start with an "E", the scribe used these initials to liven up the presentation of the book.

### **The facsimile edition**

The complete manuscript, Apocalypse and Gospel Lectionary, has now been reproduced for the first time in full detail, with its 57 miniatures on 106 leaves in the original format of approx. 29.5 x 20.4 cm, and is available in a limited facsimile edition of 980 copies world-wide. Its precious binding made of red silk has been recreated according to the example of another manuscript of Henry II and woven especially for this facsimile edition using the traditional technique.

### **The commentary volume**

In the enclosed expert commentary, specialists treat the history of the manuscript, including the mystery of its commission, and examine the different iconography traditions present in the illustration of the Apocalypse and the Gospel Lectionary. A theological and philological study of the Apocalypse text intends to make this singular work accessible to a wider public. The expert commentary is edited by Dr. Bernhard Schemmel and Dr. Gude Suckale-Redlefsen and contains articles by Dr. Renate Baumgärtel-Fleischmann, Dr. Avinoam Shalem, Professor Dr. Yves Christe, Professor Dr. Martina Pippal, Professor Dr. Bernd Schneidmüller, Dr. Peter Wind, PD Dr. Peter Wülsche and Professor Dr. Peter Klein.

Both the facsimile and the commentary volumes come in a protective acrylic glass box.