

The Illustrated *Visio Baronti*: A Carolingian Manuscript from Reims

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In 678 or 679 A.D., a Merovingian monk named Barontus, from the Benedictine monastery of Longoret, experienced a vision involving a journey through heaven and a glimpse of hell.¹ The events he described on his return were recorded by a contemporary, possibly from a nearby monastery.² Of the sixteen or more copies of this vision that survive, only one is illustrated. This illuminated 9th century version of the *Visio Baronti*, also the earliest extant copy is contained in the Codex Petropolitanus Lat. oct. v. 1, no. 5, in the St. Petersburg Public Library and has escaped the attention of art historians. The aim of this essay is three fold: First, to summarize the text and examine how the images relate to the text; second, to use the style to verify its provenance; and, finally, to make suggestions concerning its contemporary audience and purpose.

The manuscript is made up of at least twenty folios each measuring 101 x 85 mm.³ It begins with a full page frontispiece composed of multiple scenes. Facing the frontispiece is a decorated incipit. Four pages include illustrations which have been inserted into the single column text. Otherwise the pages remain unadorned, inscribed with text alone. The script is Caroline minuscule, the elegant, uniform and clear mode of writing fostered under Charlemagne. The manuscript was one of several codices endowed to the Public Library of St. Petersburg in 1805 by Peter Dubrowsky, who acquired it while employed by a Russian ambassador in France.⁴ The Latin text of the manuscript was transcribed by W. Levison in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* series of 1910.⁵ The *Visio Baronti* takes its place in a sequence of visions of heaven and hell that extends from St. Paul's Vision in the 3rd century to Dante's *Divine Comedy* of the 14th century. The first task is to relate the images to the text, which has been summarized in an attempt to focus on the passages illustrated and still maintain the story's continuity.⁶ The manuscript contains two types of illustration, that is the frontispiece which in episodic patchwork presents the vision as a whole and then the half-page illustrations inserted within the text which are clearly narratives of distinct moments in the story.

The story begins with Barontus, a man of noble birth, who converted late in life and joined the community of monks at Longoret, a monastery dedicated to Apostle Peter. One morning, soon after morning prayers, he returned to his bed seized with a sudden fever. The brothers observed Barontus struggling and gesturing toward his throat as if choking. The monks began to pray and recited psalms at his bedside without

ceasing. The following morning, Barontus suddenly opened his eyes, and related the vision he had experienced. Illustrated in the lower left hand corner of the frontispiece, one can faintly discern a thinly drawn gesturing figure sheltered within a house-like structure who appears to be addressing others (Figure 1). These sketchy figures can be understood as Barontus giving his account of the vision to the monks. In the text Barontus explains that, when taken with the fever, he fell into a heavy sleep. Two black demons came and began strangling him violently, wanting to drag him to hell. This episode is depicted on the bottom-center of the frontispiece. Below the archway one can barely distinguish two demonic figures on either side, the one on the right a bit clearer with upright wings. Between them is the suggestion of a face, with the long limbs of the demons grasping it. The text describes the intervention of the Archangel Raphael who comes to the aid of Barontus, an appearance accompanied by glittering brightness. On arrival, Raphael argued that the matter of this monk should go before the judgement of God. But the arrogant demons refused to release the monk and continued the battle all day. Finally, at the hour of vespers, Raphael took action by extending his finger and touching Barontus' throat. This released the monk's soul from his body. Barontus, taken by the soul's smallness, commented that it resembled a young bird when it stepped from an egg. The quarreling foursome, that is Barontus, Raphael, and the two demons, then ascended travelling over the forest of the monastery. Raphael called the demons blood-thirsty beasts and commanded them to retreat, asserting that as long as his brothers were praying they would be unable to injure the little soul. The two determined demons, however, clung tightly.

The upward journey continued until the travellers encountered the first gate of heaven. Visible in the center of the frontispiece is the gate followed by three more gates of paradise in the upper right to which Barontus will travel. Twice Raphael is illustrated carrying a bust of Barontus in a convention which conveys presentation, once between the first two gates and then in front of the fourth and final gate. According to the text, Barontus saw several brothers from his monastery outside the first gate awaiting the day of judgement, five of whom he called by name. These brothers were stunned to see the demons clinging to Barontus and anxiously engaged Raphael and Barontus in conversation. One of the brothers, Leodoaldus, inquired about what kind of monk Barontus had been and on what account he wandered, as no monk had ever

been taken away from the monastery by demons before. Turning again to the frontispiece, outside the first and lower gate, to the left, a dialogue occurs between two tonsured persons. As these figures remain outside the gates of heaven, it is likely the artist's attempt to depict this inquiry by the former monk about Barontus' waywardness. In the text, Raphael quickly consoled the brothers with favorable words concerning Barontus' life as a monk.

Next the group travelled to the second gate of paradise where they encountered innumerable children adorned in white garments, harmoniously praising the Lord in one voice. Raphael and Barontus, with the two demons still attached to the monk, passed through these holy ones and entered the gate. There they saw a prepared footpath which continued to the next gate. This pathway, or at least the direction of travel, appears on the frontispiece as two narrow parallel lines connecting the second and third gates; the text describes a multitude of virgins flanking the pathway who began shouting encouragement to Barontus.

As the dueling foursome entered the third gate, which is described as having a likeness of virtue, they came upon a multitude of crowned holy martyrs. In the upper left corner of the frontispiece, five figures appear on a level between gate three and four. Since these figures have halos, it is reasonable to assume they are the holy martyrs. The text notes that inside this gate also appeared a multitude of priests of high merit residing in mansions built with small golden bricks, which the writer of the text noted recall the Dialogues of Gregory.⁷ Corbolenus, a former monk from Longoret, showed Barontus a large mansion among these prepared for their abbot, Francardo. As Barontus, the archangel and demons continued their journey, the martyrs also cheered on the monk. Arriving at the fourth and final gate, they no longer had free passage, but were overwhelmed by a wonderful splendor and brightness in all parts.

It is at this point that a choice was made to illuminate the written script. As further travel was barred, Archangel Raphael summoned one of the angels. Folio 8 verso depicts the interchange between Raphael, who stands on the left with his staff, and the single angel on the right, who has stepped out of the group (Figure 2). Raphael sent the angel to summon Apostle Peter to come quickly. Peter arrived as illustrated on the facing page with his gigantic keys of heaven (Figure 3). His higher status is emphasized by his towering size and he asked: "What is it, brother Raphael, that makes you summon me?" Raphael replied: "Demons are speaking against one of your monks, not at all willing to release him."

The illustrations are continued on folio 9 verso (Figure 4). Peter turns to face the two winged demons on the right who restrain Barontus, easily identified by his monkish garb, between them. The Apostle spoke: "What accusations do you hold against this monk?" The demons, whose faces have been rubbed out by a zealous reader, responded: "Princely faults." And Peter demanded: "State these things!" The demons declared: "He possessed three wives, which is not permitted; he

committed many other adulteries and sins of which we advised him in many." Peter inquired of Barontus: "Is it true, brother?" And Barontus replied: "It is true, Lord." Yet Peter defended Barontus to the demons, testifying of his good works: the monk gave alms, confessed his sins to priests, repented from sin, tonsured his hair, joined the monastery and abandoned all before God. Thus, all the bad which the demons incited against Barontus was trampled by good. Peter challenged the demons saying, "Openly recognize, he is not your ally, but ours." The demons continued to rebel, claiming: "If the brightness of God does not carry him away from us, neither can you."

Turning the page, reveals the final textual illustration on folio 10 recto (Figure 5). Peter was moved to anger, crying, "Withdraw, worthless spirits; Withdraw, enemies of God, give him up!" Peter is illustrated with his keys raised to strike the defiant demons. In a flurry, the demons expanded their wings and started to flee. Peter prohibited them from leaving the way they came, thus the demons were forced to fly over the gate.

Returning to the depictions on the frontispiece, two demons can be found on the right side, falling from mid-page through a flaming area into a hellmouth in the bottom right corner. Although the text continues at length, the illustrations end here. In brief, the story continued with Peter turning to Barontus, saying: "Redeem yourself, brother." Barontus, quaking, asked: "What can I give, good pastor?" Peter instructed the monk that when he returned to his earthly sojourn, he was to give back the twelve shillings which he had concealed and held back when he converted and entered the monastery. Barontus was directed to give one shilling each month to the poor for the full cycle of a year. One of the brothers, Frandolenus, was charged to take Barontus back to his body. On the return trip the monk was taken to hell and permitted to look in without entering. Among the damned he recognized two bishops, both guilty of fraud and avarice. Once returned to his body, the first words from the mouth of Barontus were *Gloria tibi, Deus!*

It is curious that this one manuscript possesses two different approaches to illustration. Whereas the images within the text illustrate particular passages of the story in a straightforward manner and adhere to the text, the frontispiece involves a more complex approach. The artist attempted, in a rather maplike fashion, to convey the journey of Barontus in one comprehensive image. He included conventions, such as the hellmouth, which are not mentioned in the text, thus indicating a broader medieval perception of the otherworld than the *Visio Baronti* alone. The result is an image with elements which remain puzzling and figures which escape identification, quite unlike the clarity of the textual images.

Before one can assess its audience or interpret its purpose, we need to know the origin of manufacture. Lacking any identifying inscriptions such as a colophon, we must depend on analyzing style. Comparison with images from two different Carolingian manuscripts will suffice to verify that the illustrated *Visio Baronti* is from the School of Reims. An illustration of Psalm 101 from the Utrecht Psalter (Figure 6), may be compared with the image of Raphael with the angels

from the *Visio Baronti* (Figure 2). Both use large hands to express communication and a variety of vigorous stances to depict interaction between figures. Comparing the figure of Moses (the larger figure to the bottom left) in the Psalter with the Raphael of the *Visio*, one sees that both figures lean with their shoulders back and stomachs pushed forward, while their arms extend to gesture. Likewise, the smaller Israelite to the right of Moses may be compared to the angel summoned by Raphael as they both lean forward to listen, gesticulating with correspondingly large, expressive hands. The figures in both are clearly engaged in energetic discourse. A wavy landscape rolls under them. Finally, a fluttering flaglike fabric that trails behind Raphael is also visible behind the angels of the Utrecht Psalter.

Another manuscript of the School of Reims which shares stylistic elements with the illustrated *Visio Baronti* is the gospel book from the Pierpont Morgan Library, manuscript 728 (Figure 7). Both the evangelist Matthew and Apostle Peter from the *Visio's* Folio 9 (Figure 3), have sculptured faces with dark bold outlines delineating the features. The brow, nose, and mouth are particularly prominent, and the eyes in both bulge outward. Matthew's enormous hand recalls the huge hand of Peter. The toes exposed under the hem of Matthew's robe hint at an excessive size which is matched by Peter's sizable feet. Swaying vegetation in the evangelist portrait is not unlike the balloon-like plants of the *Visio*, both looking as if they belong underwater. Assuming an origin of the manuscript within the orbit of the School of Reims, we can begin to resolve the question of its contemporary usage.

As the first words of the manuscript "I wish to recount to you, dearest brothers" suggests, the intended audience of the *Visio Baronti* is the community of the monks. The motive of the manuscript is didactic; it demonstrates the power of a patron saint to defend and protect those in his care and it establishes a role model of proper behavior for monks. Apostle Peter's protective yet also corrective care of Barontus recalled the mandate of the Rule of Benedict that "an abbot should manifest the sternness of a master and the loving affection of a father."⁸ He had managed Barontus gently, defending him in front of the demons. But once the dark ones were banished, the Apostle was quick to rebuke Barontus for breaking the Benedictine rule that a monk was to keep nothing as his own.⁹ Peter, acting as the spiritual director of his monk, designed a disciplined schedule for Barontus to follow in order to correct his infraction of withholding wealth from the community. The monks must have felt comfort in this vision which included a mansion prepared for their abbot and former monks from their monastery in heaven. Furthermore, they must have felt a sense of justice that bishops, whom monasteries often had to battle, were found in hell.

In the St. Petersburg manuscript, the illustrations are limited to four clustered together within a few sequential folios, thus indicating what the illustrator or his patron considered the crucial element of the story. All images emphasize the intervention of the patron saint, that is Apostle Peter, on behalf

of Barontus. These images, particularly the massive Peter with his formidable keys, would reassure and comfort a monk as he witnessed the heavenly community operating in a fellow monk's defense. As Barontus was later canonized, it is known from his *Vita* that he did return to the monastery, giving his money to the poor as prescribed, and eventually, became a hermit monk.¹⁰ Those reading this illustrated version almost two centuries later than the vision itself would be aware of the eternal value and spiritual profit of behavior modeled after Barontus' example.

In 1938, the paleographer Frederick Carey, included the codex from St. Petersburg in a list of manuscripts he believed to have been produced in the diocese of Reims and which are associated with the reign of Archbishop Hincmar (845-882).¹¹ This bishop is recognized as zealous about the welfare of the monasteries including the discipline and education of the monks. We know that he was responsible for a later *Visio Bernoldi* in which the archbishop recorded a vision of heaven and hell as told to him by the priest Bernoldus.¹² It contained a series of meetings with various persons in the otherworld, among them a bishop and a king, all of whom pled with Bernoldus to return and instruct others to offer prayers and give alms, and to petition on their behalf with holy oblations. The result of such actions would certainly have benefitted the monasteries. Thus it seems clear that vision literature was understood by bishops and monks alike as a valuable source of authority in encouraging the maintenance of the monastic system.

In conclusion, what can be stated about the illustrated *Visio Baronti* is that it is a ninth century manuscript produced in a scriptorium of Reims, quite possibly under the reign of Archbishop Hincmar. The manner of illustration is sophisticated, utilizing two diverse methods to render the text. The story is one of encouragement yet clearly didactic and intended for the monks themselves, suggesting the monks found vision literature authoritative and a useful tool of communication. It is this last aspect which begs further investigation to understand more clearly how specific illustrated manuscripts were used by the monasteries for the edification of their monks and to fortify the monastic cause.

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For knowledge of this manuscript I am much indebted to Dr. Cynthia Hahn who directed me to Francis Wormald's "Some Illustrated Manuscripts of the Lives of the Saints" in the *Journal of the John Rylands Library* in which he briefly mentions the Illustrated *Visio Baronti*.

The black and white photographs utilized for this paper were obtained from the St. Petersburg Public Library. Having not yet examined the manuscript, this preliminary study is dependent on these photographs.

- ¹ For a bibliography of this monastery founded in the mid-seventh century by St. Cyran, see Dom. L. H. Cottineau, *Répertoire Topo-Bibliographique des Abbayes et Prieurés* (Mâcon Protat Frères, 1939) 2647.
- ² The author is best understood as a monk from either Longoret or the nearby monastery of Meobecque. The text accurately describes the local topography, and names two contemporary bishops as residents of hell. It is reasonable to assume that the author was a contemporary and knew the monk Barontus. See J. Coignet, *Dictionnaire D'Histoire et de Géographie Ecclesiastiques*, vol. 6 (Paris: Librairie Letouzey et Ane, 1932) 882-3. It should also be noted that the vision text contains a curious episode which also links it with the Meobecque monastery. The travels of Barontus and companions were interrupted with a stop at this neighboring monastery in which the Archangel Raphael stepped in with miraculous aid. As the descriptive manner in which this incident is told varies from the rest of the text, it has been suggested by W. Levison that this inserted episode is an attempt on the part of the author to include his own monastery as a part of this other-worldly vision. See W. Levison, "Visio Baronti Monachi Longoretensis" *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Scriptorum Rerum Merovingicarum*, vol. 5 (Hanover, 1910) 368.
- ³ The set of photographs provided by the St. Petersburg Public Library are incomplete, ending with Folio 20 recto whereas the text clearly continues. The entire codex contains 22 folios according to Antonio Staerk in *Les Manuscrits Latins du V^e au XIII^e siècle Conservés à la Bibliothèque Impériale de Saint-Petersburg*, vol. 1 (Saint Petersburg: Franz Krois, 1910) 43. It must be taken into account that this number indicates the *Visio Fratris Rotcharii*, also in this codex. The dimensions given are from Staerk.
- ⁴ In Dubrowsky's collection is found a majority of the manuscripts which were stolen in a great theft of 1791 from the library of Saint-Germain. Although Dubrowsky is thought to have purchased the collection, the exact nature of the transactions involved still remains undetermined. See O. Arngart, *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile*, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1952) 132-33.
- ⁵ W. Levison 368-394.
- ⁶ This summary is dependent on my translation from W. Levison's transcription in the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*.
- ⁷ Dialogues of Gregory, Book IV, 37. For an English translation see *Saint Gregory the Great: Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman, O.S.B. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959) 240-41.
- ⁸ *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Cardinal Gasquet (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1966). See Chapter 2: "What the Abbot Should Be?" p. 12.
- ⁹ Gasquet, *Rule*, see chapter 33: "Ought Monks to Have Anything of Their Own?" 64-65.
- ¹⁰ "Vita Baronti," *Acta Sanctorum*, 1865, March vol. 3, 565-572.
- ¹¹ Frederick M. Carey, "The Scriptorium of Reims during the Archbishopric of Hincmar (845-882 A.D.)" in *Classical and Medieval Studies in Honor of Edward Kinnard Rand*, ed. Leslie Weber Jones (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1st pub 1938, reprt. 1968) 41-60.
- ¹² "De Visione Bernoldi Presbyteri," *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, vol. 125, ed. J.P. Migne, p. 1115-1120.



Figure 1. Frontispiece, *Visio Baronti*, Petropolitanus Lat. oct. 1, no. 5, St. Petersburg Public Library.



Figure 2. Folio 8 verso, *Visio Baronti*, Petropolitanus Lat. oct. 1, no. 5, St. Petersburg Public Library.



Figure 3. Folio 9 verso, *Visio Baronti*, Petropolitanus Lat. oct. 1, no. 5, St. Petersburg Public Library.



Figure 4. Folio 9 verso, *Visio Baronti*, Petropolitanus Lat. oct. 1, no. 5, St. Petersburg Public Library.



Figure 5. Folio 10 verso, *Visio Baronti*, Petropolitanus Lat. oct. 1, no. 5, St. Petersburg Public Library.



Figure 6. Psalm 101, detail, Utrecht Psalter, Utrecht Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS 32/484.



Figure 7. *St. Matthew*, Folio 14 verso, Gospel Book from Reims, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 782.