Some Greek Gospel Manuscripts in
the British Library: Examples of the
Byzantine Book as Holy Receptacle
and Bearer of Hidden Meaning

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The British Library has sixty-six Gospel books and seventy-two Gospel lectionaries, spread amongst its various collections of manuscripts. Gospels are by far the most numerous type of Byzantine book to have survived, not just in the British Library, but in all libraries. In surveying these British Library books for my doctoral thesis I was struck by the extent to which, far from resembling one another, they contained many unusual or unique features. This article considers a small number of such Gospel manuscripts, and argues that they were not merely intended to be read in a public or private context, but in addition could function as reliquary-like receptacles, containing holy material. In some cases the presence of this holy material was clear, but in other cases it was disguised or hidden, so that the book’s user had to work in order to find or understand it. An element of cryptographic investigation will therefore be important to my argument.

A sixth-century hagiography records that St Peter of Iberia left Constantinople, taking with him a book (a small text of John the Evangelist) which contained a fragment of the True Cross. Frolow explained that the relic was probably inlaid in the cover of the book. Here a relic and a book were indubitably unified in one entity. Probably the relic was visible, although we cannot be certain, since the book does not survive. But the treatment the book received surely must have been different because of its extra holiness: it did not just contain the word of God, it incorporated a precious relic of Christ’s Passion, and in due course it became a relic of St Peter of Iberia as well. Probably it was displayed and carried in processions more than it was read. Even if when originally made its intended function was to be read from, in due course it became a book with added spiritual value, value that might not have been conspicuous, and for which the Byzantine viewer would have needed to search. The book had become a holy receptacle as well as a bearer of hidden meaning.

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BL, Add. MSS. 5111-5112: a Gospel book as receptacle

The first example to be considered here in detail is one of the most remarkable Byzantine Gospel books in the British Library, Add. MSS. 5111-5112, in which it is particularly clear that the book (now two volumes) functioned as a literal and symbolic receptacle for precious material. Add. 5111 contains the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark on 121 folios, and Add. 5112 contains those of Luke and John on 241 folios. Originally, however, the two certainly formed a very bulky one-volume Gospel book of 450+ folios. There is good evidence for this: quire marks which end in κε (25) at the end of Add. 5111, continue from κς (26) at the beginning of Add. 5112. It is, furthermore, unlikely that the book was divided into two at an early date, for neither the end of Add. 5111 nor the beginning of Add. 5112 shows the characteristic signs of the outer pages of a volume, such as wear and tear, dirt, damp, mould, or the activity of bookworms in adjacent covers. The modern division into two volumes, must, however, predate its acquisition by the British Museum in 1785. A note on folio iv states that it was bought at the sale of Dr Askew’s books, 15 March 1785 (lot 622) 2 volumes. Probably the thickness of the 450+ parchment leaves, which would be more than 10 cm, was thought to make a volume that would be difficult to handle, especially given the difference between the physical structure of a Byzantine binding, designed for a book that was stored horizontally, and the standard western binding for a book that was to stand vertically. That Add. 5111-5112 is outstandingly long for a Gospel book is revealed by comparison: ninety per cent of the Gospel books in the British Library consist of between 170 and 320 folios.

The folios of Add. 5111-5112 now measure 25.5 x 18 cm. Despite the trimming of the leaves the blank margins are still broad (the text block measures 17.2 x 10.1 cm, and there are 18 lines per folio). The dimensions, together with the large number of parchment sheets that were used, indicate that the materials for this bulky volume were unusually costly. Fragments of Canon Tables, which date from the sixth or seventh century, are found as folios 10-11 of Add. 5111. And three evangelist portraits, which date from the third quarter of the twelfth century, were inserted on single leaves as folio 12 of Add. 5111, and folios 3 and 134 of Add. 5112 (the image of Mark is lost). The fragments of Canon Tables, which now measure 25.5 x 17.5 cm, are very similar to the present size of the Gospel book, but originally they must have been far larger. According to Lowden’s reconstruction, these leaves would originally have measured at least 30 × 26 cm. The evangelist portraits were also originally larger than the Gospel book. Their blank margins were cut off, but carefully, so as not to lose any part of the image or its gold background. Even when trimmed, however, the leaves were still too broad for the present book, and therefore had to be folded when they were inserted. They now measure when unfolded 25.2 × 18.9 cm. Lowden


Buckton, *Byzantium*, p. 76.
suggestions that they must have been made originally as part of a set for a Gospel book of exceptionally large size, some 35 × 27 cm, perhaps comparable to the original size of the Canon Tables, but seemingly different in proportion.\(^8\)

It seems clear that in 1189 the book was planned without evangelist portraits. This is suggested by the fact that the headpiece for the opening of St John’s Gospel was painted on a verso, which therefore could not face a full-page image unless that portrait was to interrupt the text – a solecism that Byzantine craftsmen usually avoided. More generally, although the script was carefully executed, the headpieces and initials are rather unimpressive, without any use of gold. The use of muddy rather than pure and intense pigments also gives the impression that the book was not originally a product of the best craftsmanship.

How and why were the Canon Tables, the evangelist portraits, and the Gospel book made? We have already noted that if the insertion of the portraits had been planned from the start of the making of the manuscript, the maker would have prepared the headpiece of John on a recto so that it could face the portrait on a verso. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the portraits were only integrated after the completion of the manuscript, at which point they were cut down and folded. What of the Canon Tables? Were they cut down on the same occasion, or had they been already cut down before, possibly long before, they were rebound into Add. 5111?

Canon Tables are a standard element at the beginning of a Byzantine Gospel book. They are often elaborately decorated in contrast to other non-Gospel elements, such as the prefatory lists of chapters (kephalaia), or the calendar of Gospel lections (synaxarion) often included as an epilogue. Canon Tables have attracted scholars’ attention since Nordenfalk’s exhaustive study in the 1930s.\(^9\) The primary concerns of research have been their origins, stylistic development, classification into types, and possible interpretation.

The harmonious interrelation between the four (different) Gospels was most important as the very core of the Gospel book: if any part was lacking, the result was a departure from the canon. This is reflected in a decorated preface to the Canon Tables that is found in several examples, which states: ‘Symphony of the four evangelists […]’.\(^10\)

In the fourth century, Epiphanius furiously refuted those who did not accept the Gospel according to John.\(^11\) He also condemned the Ebionites, who accepted only the Gospel according to Matthew, which is not even complete in their version, but adulterated and manipulated. They called it the Gospel according to the Hebrews.\(^12\) Those people who did not accept the canon were heretics, and those who manipulated the canon, editing the extracts and making up their own Gospel book, were also heretics. Epiphanius also fiercely condemned the Marcionites, for

\(^8\) Buckton, *Byzantium*, p. 78.


Marcion had only a Gospel by Luke, with the beginning removed. He cut off not just the beginning, we are told, but also removed much of the conclusion and of the words of truth that come between, and added other things to what was written. Epiphanius said, ‘How could he [Marcion] help preserving at least a few words of Scripture? Since sacred scripture’s whole body, as it were, is alive, what dead limb could he find in agreement with his opinion, to represent as a falsehood against the truth?’ The Gospel book was perceived as alive, and therefore, no one could divide, add to, or rearrange anything in it. Human words could not intrude into the divine words of the Gospel book. The perfection of the word of God is crucial, and it seems that one role of the Canon Tables was to represent visually such perfection, by the concord of the four Gospels.

The two leaves of Canon Tables in Add. 5111 now consist of part of the Epistle of Eusebius to Carpianus, explaining how to use the tables, and part of Canon I on folio 10v, Canons VIII, IX, X (Mt), X (Mk) on folio 11r, and Canons X (Lk) and X (Jn) on folio 11v. It is obvious that they can no longer function for practical use, and Add. 5111 has its own complete set of the Canon Tables (ff. 2r–7r). As is well known, the reused Canon Tables are on pages of gilded parchment, the only example of such a conspicuously extravagant technique known from Byzantium. These leaves must always have been considered very precious. If we assume that they appeared valuable in the eyes of a late-twelfth-century viewer, and the purpose of binding them into Add. 5111 was to protect these relatively fragile objects, it seems unlikely that they would have been cut down so severely at this date. An alternative, namely to fold the excess, as with the evangelist portraits, would have been possible, but was not attempted. It seems, therefore, plausible to assume that the Canon Tables had already been cut down and were already approximately the present size (25.5 × 17.5 cm) when inserted into Add. 5111. Probably they were also already reduced to two leaves. This implies that the new Gospel book was produced to accord with the size of the carefully preserved fragments of Canon Tables, unlikely as this might at first appear.

As mentioned above, the resultant book occupies more than 450 leaves, and in its exceptional thickness if bound as a single volume it would look as much like a relic box as a book. This would be appropriate were the book to be considered a container for the precious Canon Tables, forming a kind of book shrine.

What of the luxurious and oversize evangelist portraits with their gold backgrounds which were also bound into the Gospel book? It is not likely that the portraits would have been purposefully removed from a near contemporary parent book in order to be rebound into Add. 5111 and 5112. It is also unlikely that the parent book had been destroyed, leaving only the portraits to be reused, since they do not show any trace of damage. It is more probable, therefore, that the illustrations were originally prepared for some book that was never completed. Perhaps the original plan was to make a Gospel book of large format that could include both the Canon Table fragments and the evangelist portraits. But this would have necessitated parchment bifolia of a very large size (say 52 × 36 cm, giving a page size of 36 × 26 cm), which may not have been available in sufficient numbers to the makers of Add. 5111–5112. Perhaps they decided to fold the bifolia in half (thus doubling the number of sheets available and giving a page size of 26 × 18 cm).

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15 Nordenfalk, *Die spätantiken Kanontafeln*, pp. 127–46. Nordenfalk’s reconstruction is as follows:
   - Seite 1: I I (folio 10v)
   - Seite 2: II II
   - Seite 3: II III
   - Seite 4: IV V V
   - Seite 5: V VI VI VII
   - Seite 6: VIII IX X X (folio 11r)
   - Seite 7: X X (folio 11v)
16 Buckton, *Byzantium*, p. 78.
Can we be sure that the three elements were integrated in a Byzantine workshop, not by a modern collector who had obtained them separately and bound them into one manuscript? The role of a modern collector seems improbable, for the likelihood that the Canon Table fragments and the evangelist portraits could have survived many centuries had they not been bound in a book would have been greatly reduced.

A Gospel book is literally a receptacle or container for the word of God. When still in its original binding, as is the case with BL, Add. MS. 11838, for example, a Byzantine Gospel book resembles a box, with leather covers and metal bosses. Add. 5111 and 5112 could thus be viewed as exemplifying an unusual extension of this box-like function. They contained a precious inheritance from the past, as well as luxurious contemporary work, in a book that was given a reliquary-like form.

**BL, Burney MS. 19: a receptacle for evangelist portraits?**

The second example, BL, Burney MS. 19, is another Byzantine Gospel book that exemplifies an unusual history of use and reuse. Its text was written in the tenth century, but the evangelist portraits were only added much later, in the twelfth century. In general, it is not rare to find traces of later ‘improvement’ in Gospel books, such as the insertion of evangelist portraits, or the overpainting of headpieces, since these precious objects were often used from generation to generation. Burney 19 represents an interesting and unusual example, nonetheless, of how a Gospel book was improved, and deserves to be considered in detail. The evidence is complex, and to avoid confusion it will be necessary to pursue codicological arguments in detail. Since the images are the work of one of the most skilful Byzantine artists, the resolution of the problems posed by this manuscript is a matter of importance.

The Gospel book Burney 19 was left incomplete when it was bound in the tenth century. Although the headpieces and initials were carefully executed, the pages reserved for the evangelist portraits were left blank. As for the text, the Gospels were completed, but all the other elements are lacking: there were neither kephalaia numbers or titles, or the numbers of the so-called ‘Ammonian sections’, nor are there the Epistle of Eusebius and Canon Tables. Indication of lections and the Synaxarion / Menologion, which are necessary for liturgical use, are also not found. Comparisons show that a Gospel book which lacks all of these elements is very unusual, and the lack must have made the book inconvenient and impractical for actual use, if we assume such use to consist of reading the text. In fact, the parchment is in very good condition, and it appears as if the book has been scarcely handled, so perhaps it was not in fact used in such a fashion, or at least not much.

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We should note that only the portrait of John, which is painted on a recto, does not now face the headpiece to the opening of its Gospel. The other Gospels have the usual arrangement (fig. 1). However, it can be proved by reconsideration of the blank folia, that, most unusually, none of the portraits originally faced their headpieces when they were inserted in the twelfth century.

The portrait of John (on an unruled bifolium, folios 165-no numbering) faces a blank page which comes immediately after the last leaf of Luke’s text (folio 164). The headpiece of John on folio 166r faces a blank verso page (Diagram 1). On this blank page (no numbering), there are two offset traces of John’s headpiece. From this fact, we can deduce that the book has been rebound at least twice. In the second binding, the bifolium stayed in the same place in the same quire, but was moved slightly downwards or upwards, so that the trace of the headpiece was duplicated.
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When the book was rebound at least twice in modern times, the folia were also numbered twice. Confusingly enough, there exists a slight difference between the first and the second numberings, but this numbering provides crucial evidence. In Diagram 2, the end of Mark and start of Luke, the first numbering is indicated in parentheses. At the moment, a blank folio with no number (which was numbered as folio 97 for the first numbering), is inserted between folios 95 and 96 (previously numbered folios 96 and 98 respectively), which contain the text of Mark. It is, therefore, very puzzling that the trace of headpiece is found, upside down, on this blank folio (Diagram 2).

![Diagram 2]

It proves that the unruled blank folio, which interrupts the text of Mark, was not originally inserted here. What is more, another two unruled blank folia with no numbers are inserted at the end of the book. Each of them contains an offset trace of a headpiece. Where were the original locations of these blank folia? What caused this disorder?

We must carefully examine the traces of evidence left on the folia in order to reconstruct the original arrangement. The thirteenth and fourteenth quires, which contain the portrait and headpiece of Luke respectively, are here taken to exemplify a possible reconstruction, since it appears as the clearest example among the four portraits.

![Diagram 3. Present Arrangement]

At present, the thirteenth quire, which includes Luke’s portrait, consists of three bifolios and a single leaf (Diagram 3). Between the last folio of the twelfth quire (folio 95) and the second folio of the thirteenth quire (folio 96), a blank unruled unnumbered folio is inserted. As
mentioned above, the upside down trace of the headpiece is found on the recto of this folio. Presumably because it was blank, the second numbering did not count this single leaf, but it had been numbered as folio 97 in the first numbering.

This blank single leaf (folio 97 by the first numbering) was once part of a bifolium. The other half of this bifolium is also blank and unruled, and now is inserted at the end of the book. It is certain that these two blank folia (*97* / no numbering) once formed a bifolium, as proved by the first numbering: the blank folio at the end of the book is unnumbered at the moment, but the first numbering counted it as folio 104, and therefore, its original location is defined. Turning back to the thirteenth quire, according to the first numbering the three bifolia of text were numbered 98 to 103, and the two blank folios, numbered 97 and 104, must have formed another bifolium enclosing quire thirteen (Diagram 4).

This reconstruction is confirmed by the offset of a headpiece found on folio 104v (first numbering), which must have come from the headpiece on folio 105r (first numbering, folio 102r by the second numbering). At the same time, it is important to note that there is also a trace of a portrait on folio 104r. The portrait of Luke (on folio 103v / 101v by the first and second numbering respectively) therefore, certainly once faced the blank folio, and not the headpiece. This blank folio was then cut out in a modern binding, and inserted at the end of the book.

We should remember that the folio which formed the other half of the blank bifolium (folio 97 / [no number] by the first and second numbering respectively) also contains the offset of a headpiece. How can this be, given that the headpiece is on folio 105/102? The answer is suggested diagramatically below (Diagram 5).

The blank bifolium (folios 97-104) must originally not have been a part of the thirteenth quire, but an independent bifolium between the thirteenth and fourteenth quires. Probably it was
intended for the kephalaia and the portrait of Luke, which were to precede the headpiece and the beginning of the text of Luke which started at the fourteenth quire. However, the kephalaia and the portrait were not executed, and thus the bifolium was left blank.

We can now reconstruct the changing order of the leaves. Originally, there was a blank bifolium (folios 97-104) between the thirteenth and fourteenth quires (Diagram 5). The design of the headpiece was offset onto ‘folio 97’ at this stage. In a first rebinding the blank bifolium was turned upside down and placed as the outer bifolium of quire thirteen. As a result, a second offset of the headpiece to Luke was offset, this time on folio 104 (Diagram 6).

![Diagram 6](image)

**Diagram 6**

At this point quire thirteen was arranged as in Diagram 7.

![Diagram 7](image)

**Diagram 7**
Then in a second rebinding, the bifolium was divided, and folio 104 was removed and placed at the end of the book (Diagram 8).

Diagram 8

This process of two rebindings and two numberings may seem complicated, but through the reconstruction we are able to see that originally the book was prepared with an independent bifolium for the kephalaia and portrait, which were not executed. When the evangelist portraits were added, they did not face the headpieces, but the blank folia.  

A blank folio, which had once faced the portraits of Mark, is now bound at the end of the codex. John’s portrait still faces a blank folio. The evidence does not survive for Matthew’s portrait.
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Why did the artist use the inner recto of the blank bifolium, when by using the outer verso he
could have ensured that the evangelist portrait would face the headpiece? Certainly it was no
mere mistake. Perhaps there was already a disfiguring offset of the headpiece on the page in
question, but were this the case he could have turned the folio.

The portraits in Burney 19 are attributed to the so-called Kokkinobaphos Master, a
Constantinopolitan painter of high quality, who worked for members of the Komnenian imperial
family, among others, in the second quarter of the twelfth century.20 It might seem surprising,
therefore, to find such an outstanding artist at work in a ‘recycled’ book. It does not seem likely
that an old book was used for what might be termed negative reasons, such as a lack of funds.
On the contrary, it is more likely there was some positive reason, which promoted the reuse of
the old book on this specific commission. We should remember that this Gospel book did not
contain some of the seemingly indispensable elements, such as the kephalaia lists or Ammonian
sections. Furthermore, these elements were not added when the evangelist portraits were
inserted. They could certainly have been added at that time, if the owner specifically wanted to
adapt the Gospel book for practical use. In other words, it seems likely that the Gospel book
had not been in ‘normal’ use from the time of its production to the occasion of its reuse some
two hundred years later, and its text was not used ‘normally’ even after the insertion of the
evangelist portraits in the twelfth century. Perhaps the fact that the book had hardly been opened
for two hundred years was considered to be a positive feature. The Gospel book could have been
regarded as a receptacle (rather than as a book to be read), which already had some holy
association, and which could be rendered more valuable by the addition of paintings by an
outstanding artist. Since the evangelist portraits were arranged so as not to face the Gospel
headpieces, perhaps they were intended to be viewed as independent icons rather than
illustrations to the text.

It is natural that we should regard books as objects primarily to be read. However, Burney 19
seems to provide evidence that the Byzantines could also regard books in other ways. The point
may seem strained, but the complex archaeology of this book hardly permits any other
conclusion.

BL, Add. MS. 39603: Cruciform text and the True Cross within

BL, Add. MS. 39603 is a Gospel Lectionary without evangelist
portraits.21 Most remarkably, all the script was written in the form of
a cross on every single page from the beginning to the end (fig. 4).
As a fully Cruciform Lectionary it has only three parallels.22

It is clear that the book is a top-level production with
abundant quantity and good quality of parchment, of large size
(37.4 × 28.6 cm), with carefully written script and decorative
headpieces. In order to structure the script into the cruciform, it
was necessary for the scribe to leave blank a much greater area in
comparison with the usual one or two text columns (more than
twenty per cent of the rectangular surface is left blank in this
case), and, consequently, it required more than twenty per cent
more sheets of parchment. It was also necessary to prepare and

20 Buckton, Byzantium, pp. 160-1. See most recently, K. Linardou, ‘The Kokkinobaphos Manuscripts
21 J. C. Anderson, The New York Cruciform Lectionary (University Park, 1992), pp. 76–80, 87–9; Buckton,
Byzantium, pp. 163–4, fig. 179.
22 Princeton, Garrett MS. I; the Pierpont Morgan Library, cod. M 692; Mount Athos, Iviron Monastery, a
lectionary with no inventory number.
execute a special ruling pattern, and to organize each page very carefully to maintain the uniformity of the cruciform. It is indeed, a remarkable book which was produced following a highly unusual procedure. All the text in Add. 39603 was written in light brown ink, and the colour effectively makes the script in the cruciform appear from a distance resemble a wooden cross. When one turns the pages, innumerable crosses of identical size and shape make their appearance one after another. It is as if the cruciform is no longer formed of writing on the flat surface of the parchment, but has become a three-dimensional object with a certain thickness, located in a box (Diagram 9).

In other words, the white margins of parchment may be viewed as the frame of the box, and the inside of the box is cut into the exact form of the cross, in order to enable the wooden cross to be located within it. Since the cruciform design was repeated on more than 190 folia, it has considerable thickness. The book resembles a box to contain a relic, and it looks very like a staurotheke. To open the front cover of the book is comparable to opening the cover of a reliquary. The cruciform shape here is an image of the True Cross. On this cross is written every detail of the life of Christ. The True Cross supported the body of Christ, and the cruciform text bears the Life of Christ. The lectionary did not, as far as we know, contain a relic of the True Cross on its cover, like Peter of Iberia’s copy of St John’s Gospel, yet it was truly cross-like in a way that was both fundamental and subtle.

Cross and cryptography: Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, MS. Vat. gr. 1156

The use of cruciform text throughout a book was extremely rare, as we have seen in MS. Add. 39603, yet the last page of a Gospel book or a Gospel Lectionary was quite often laid out in a cruciform schema, or alternatively a full-page illustration of the Cross is sometimes

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included at the beginning of the book. The final two examples explore the hidden meaning of these two types of cross. The image of the Cross is often accompanied by the monogram of Christ (IC XC NIKA [Jesus Christ Conquer!]) at the upper left and right, and the lower left and right respectively. But occasionally we find an example of the Cross combined with other letters of the Greek alphabet. Vat. gr. 1156 is a richly illuminated Gospel Lectionary which contains a full-page illustration of the Cross combined with Greek capitals written in gold on folio 68 (fig. 5). Here, the usual monogram is replaced by seemingly meaningless letters. There are EEPP on the upper left, TTPP on the upper right, CCPP on the lower left, and ΙΤΤΙΤΙ on the lower right. What do they mean?

The letters of the Greek alphabet were also used for numbers, that is to say, α, β, and γ are 1, 2, and 3, and so on. So the letters in Vat.gr.1156 can be replaced by numbers as follows:

- **EEPP**: 5, 5, 100, 100
- **TTPP**: 300, 300, 100, 100
- **CCPP**: 200, 200, 100, 100
- **ΙΤΤΙΤΙ**: 3, 3, 200, 200

If we convert the sums above into the letters of their numerical equivalents we get the following pattern:

- **EEPP**: 5, 5, 100, 100 → (5 + 5 = 10) (100 + 100 = 200) → IC
- **TTPP**: 300, 300, 100, 100 → (300 + 300 = 600) (100 + 100 = 200) → XC
- **CCPP**: 200, 200, 100, 100 → (200 + 200 = 400) (100 + 100 = 200) → YC
- **ΙΤΤΙΤΙ**: 3, 3, 200, 200 → (3 + 3 = 9) (200 + 200 = 400) → ΘY

The cryptic letters around the Cross thus represent the traditional name and title of Christ: ‘Jesus Christ Son of God’ ([Χ[ΟΥ]C Χ[ΙΣ]ΤΟ[Σ]ΤΟ[Σ]Ο[Σ]Θ[Ο]Υ]. The scheme looks traditional, but the specific formulation is rather peculiar.

Why go to the trouble of disguising the text in this way? It seems strange to hide the name of God. The answer must be that just as the letters of IC XC ΥC ΘΥ can be represented numerically to hide meaning, so can the same numbers be used cryptographically to represent different words, which, though hidden, can be deciphered.

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25 For example, Paris, BnF gr. 510 (folios Bv and Cr); Vat. Regin. gr. 1 (folios 2r and 3v); Harlaville Triptych in Musée du Louvre, Paris (all the letters are disposed above the horizontal arms here). See A. Frolow, ‘IC XC NIKA’, Byzantinoslavica, xvii (1956), pp. 98-113.


27 The same cryptogram, EE PP TTPP, is found in the niche of the south wall in the naos of the Church in Gracanica. The meaning is not yet deciphered. The eight letters were simply cited in one line and the disposition of each letter is not clarified in the article. It is not mentioned whether the other nine letters of our example (CCPP and ΙΤΤΙΤΙ) are included. G. Babić, ‘Les Croix à cryptogrammes peintes dans les églises serbes des XIIIe et XIVe siècles’, Byzance et les Slaves. Études de civilisation, Mélanges Ivan Dujcev (Paris, 1979), pp. 1-13.
The Byzantines were used to deciphering monograms (a common form of cryptograph), in which the correct meaning was discovered by moving to and fro in various directions between the often superimposed letters. Adopting a simpler procedure, the numbers on the lower part of the Cross, CCPP (600) added to ΓΓΓCC (409), make 1009. I find that the number 1009 signifies the name of the patriarch of Constantinople, Michael Keroularios (1043-1059). When we convert his name into numbers, the total equals 1009: K (20) + H (8) + P (100) + O (70) + Y (400) + Λ (30) + Λ (1) + P (100) + I (10) + O (70) + C (200) = 1009. If we then add the number at the upper right (ΓΓΓPP = 800) to that on the lower left (CCPP = 600), the total (1400) is the sum of the value of the letters in the word ‘patriarch’ / ΠΑΤΡΙΑΡΧΗΣ: Π (80) + A (1) + T (300) + P (100) + I (10) + Λ (1) + P (100) + Χ (600) + Η (8) + Σ (200). The one missing element here is the patriarch’s personal name, Michael/MIXAΛA, which in numbers corresponds to 689: M (40) + I (10) + Χ (600) + Λ (1) + H (8) + A (30). We can find 609 easily in the cryptogram (TT and ΓΓΓ) but the remaining 80 (which we would expect to find in the form of Π or MM [40 + 40]) is elusive.

What does the cryptogram signify, therefore, beyond IC XC YC ΘY? Does it mean the manuscript was made by or for the Patriarch Keroularios? Or is it a copy of such a book, made (on stylistic grounds) around 1100? Is it merely a coincidence that these numbers can be read in this way? Could other names and titles be equally readily traceable? I leave the questions open while turning to my final example.

The name of Photios in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS. grec 510?

Our last example, Paris, BnF gr. 510 is not a Gospel book or a Gospel Lectionary, but a richly illustrated copy of the Homilies of Gregory of Nazianzus, made for Emperor Basil I in 879-882. Among its frontispieces, the book contains two full-page illustrations of a gilded, jewelled cross with the monograms IC XC NHKA on a blue background (folios Bv and Cr) (figs 6, 7). They are on a bifolium that has been folded back to front.

Their appearance at a glance is not unusual, but we should note the strange decorations in the form of jewelled ropes on either side of the arms of the Cross. Rather than the expected Α and Ω (which perhaps we can perhaps vaguely discern as Λ and ω) we see what appear to be the letters Λ, placed on the upper left and right of the arms, two to each side, and the letter Μ, eight times, below the left and right arms. The letters Λ and Μ are the numbers 30 and 40. Furthermore, several dots above the letters are noticeable. Below the arms of the cross, each dot is exactly above the Μ, and appears to belong to each of the four mus. In the upper side, on the
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contrary, two lambdas are placed between three dots. It is unclear, therefore, whether the dots
belong to the lambdas, but they certainly appear to relate to the four mus. The dots in the upper
arms may be mere decoration, but those in the lower arms can be read as a part of letters.
According to Byzantine cryptography, a dot above a number means ten times.31 For example,
Λ (1) with a dot indicates 10. Μ with a dot can be likewise read as 400 (40 × 10). Consequently,
the letters of the Cross represent 1880 in total, as follows: Λ × 4 (30 × 4 = 120), Μ × 4 (40 × 10
× 4 = 1600), M × 4 (40 × 4 = 160) which gives a total of 120 + 1600 + 160 = 1880. I suggest that
the number records cryptographically the name of a prestigious person who was
closely linked to this manuscript’s production, namely the patriarch Photios.32 In numerological
terms his name totals 1880: Φ (500) + Ω (800) + T (300) + I (10) + O (70) + Σ (200).

The two cryptic examples (Vat. gr. 1156 and Paris, BnF gr. 510) were resolved in two different
ways, and a lack of similar examples may raise a question as to whether these are legitimate ways
to decode these cryptic letters. However, the readings offer a meaningful result, and for the
present I offer them as a stimulus or challenge to further research.

As examined above, the Gospel Lectionary (Vat. gr. 1156) and the Homilies (Paris, BnF gr.
510) depict the Cross surrounded by uncial letters with hidden meanings. At a glance their
significance was unclear, but once deciphered, the inscription revealed a deeper meaning. This
kind of decipherment may be compared to a miraculous cure by holy relics, which provides a
type of revelation, even, in the case of IC XC YC ΘY, a theophany.

Conclusion

All manuscript books are unique. Yet when we come to study a type of manuscript of which
there are innumerable examples, such as Greek Gospel books and lectionaries, our first instinct,
reinforced by generations of scholarly endeavour, is to group material together on the basis of
shared elements. As more research is done on these objects, however, the more clear it becomes
that it is the elements that make one object unlike its relatives that are important. The
manuscripts considered here, therefore, are important for their unusual features, features that are
not to be passed over as mere anomalies, but which merit study as providing invaluable insights
into the uniqueness of each object.

32 Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning*, passim.
Obviously, Gospel books and lectionaries had a primary function: to preserve and transmit the words of the divinely-inspired evangelists. But they could be intended to have other functions as well. They could act as receptacles for precious relic-like elements. They could themselves become relic-like objects. They could carry hidden meanings which the viewer/reader was expected to decipher. They could yield up their secrets, or they could preserve them.