

4-24-2015

The Madrid Skylitzes

David Willhite
Ouachita Baptist University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/history>



Part of the [Medieval History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Willhite, David, "The Madrid Skylitzes" (2015). *History Class Publications*. 19.
<https://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/history/19>

This Class Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Class Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons @ Ouachita. For more information, please contact mortensona@obu.edu.

David Willhite

04/ 24/ 15

Medieval Europe

Dr. Bethany Hicks

The Madrid Skylitzes

In the late 11th century, following the reign of Emperor Isaac I Komnenos, historian John Skylitzes recorded a history of the Byzantine Empire. This history, later to be called *The Synopsis of Histories* follows the Byzantine Empire from the year 811CE to 1057. Sometime in the two centuries to follow, the 250 year history was copied by scribes onto several manuscripts. Named after the current city it rests in, the Madrid Skylitzes is the only surviving manuscript of *The Synopsis of Histories*. Not only is the Madrid Skylitzes the only surviving manuscript of John Skylitzes' work, it is also the only surviving illuminated manuscript of a Greek chronicle.¹ The manuscript contains over 500 individually painted miniatures along with many pages containing space for miniatures that the illuminators failed to complete.² Along with missing illuminations, many of the original manuscript pages are missing altogether. Despite the manuscript's incompleteness, it still stands as a significant work in both the fields of history and art. In recent years the manuscript has been the center of many studies and is slowly gaining popular attention.

¹ Helen C. Evans & William D. Wixom ed. *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 501.

² *Ibid.*

The conditions surrounding the initial writing of *The Synopsis of Histories* is unknown. Nothing is known about John Skylitzes except for what can be assumed through his works. For instance, it is known that he was a historian in the Byzantine Empire sometime during the 11th century. Despite the absence of details surrounding Skylitzes' life, a pretty consistent estimate among scholars puts the original writing at about 1070CE.³ During this time, Skylitzes recorded the history of the Byzantine Empire from the reign of Emperor Michael I. Rangabe (r. 811-13) to the ending of Emperor Komnenos' reign in 1059CE.⁴ Beginning in the seventh century, the Byzantine Empire was quickly declining due to both inward and outward forces. In the West, the Lombards, Avars, and Slavs occupied land through invasion. In the East, Muslim forces began a conquest to retake present day Turkey. Within the empire, the religious dispute of iconoclasm, the usage of icons during worship, created disorder in the Orthodox Church. When icons were officially banned in 814CE, the empire saw a huge artistic decline.⁵ The decline in the arts ran harmoniously with the territorial losses at the hands of invaders. With societal and territorial change came instability and a chaotic empire.

In the two decades to follow, the empire slowly recouped its losses. Longer lasting reigns of emperors allowed for stability to be rebuilt. Not only did the military regain many of the city states occupied by foreigners, but art also saw a dramatic rise. At the time of Emperor Basil II's death in 1025, the Macedonian Dynasty had brought the Empire to the highest levels of

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Explore World Cultures: Byzantine Empire* (British Museum, accessed 04-23-15), http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/europe/byzantine_empire.aspx.

prosperity and art since the death of Justinian I.⁶ It was in this historical context that John Skylitzes wrote *The Synopsis of Histories*. Skylitzes' history recorded the prosperous age beginning just prior to the banning of iconoclasm, through the reinstatement of iconoclasm in 843CE, past the conquests of lands occupied in the previous four centuries, and finally ended shortly after the death of Basil II.

The dates and facts surrounding the initial writing of Skylitzes' history are unclear, but they are far more certain than the facts known about the Madrid Skylitzes. Most of what is "known" about this illuminated manuscript is at best an educated guess. The manuscript is thought to be one of many *Synopsis of Histories* manuscripts copied sometime during the 12th and 13th centuries. The most commonly held view is that the manuscript was copied in the 12th century in Norman Sicily.⁷ The date is seen as an earlier date based on other illuminated works from around this time. While the Madrid Skylitzes is the only surviving illuminated Greek chronicle, there are pieces of illuminated liturgy still intact. These documents from the Greek Orthodox church help scholars format an early date for the Madrid Skylitzes.

Deciphering the location of the site that the copying occurred is a more difficult process than estimating the date. The large number of illuminated miniatures was unique to its time. As one scholar puts it, "The number [of miniatures] suggests a large, well-organized effort carried out at an important center of power and learning."⁸ The uniqueness of the project qualifies possible locations to a wealthy thriving city in the 12th century. Furthermore, the paintings

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bente Bjornholt, "The Madrid Skylitzes Project," Sussex Centre for Byzantine Cultural History (accessed 04-23-15), <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/byzantine/research/skylitzes>.

⁸ Evans, 501.

themselves give a hint to their place of origin. The miniatures are distinguished into three groups, illustrations of Byzantine culture, illustrations of Turkish culture, and illustrations of Western culture.⁹ Many of the paintings show a detailed familiarity with the Latin and Muslim cultures as well as their architecture. Because of these cultural combinations, scholars have come to believe that the Madrid Skylitzes was copied in Norman Sicily due to its unique mix of Western, Muslim, and Byzantine cultures.

While there is no physical utility of the manuscript, the Madrid Skylitzes' significance is found in the elements it teaches. The Manuscript serves in both the fields of art and history. In the school of social studies, the Madrid Skylitzes teaches historians about the 200 years of revival in the Byzantine Empire. Scholars are able to learn many things about architecture, warfare, and society. One example of this is in the Madrid Skylitzes' depiction of the Imperial Palace. For many years certain details of the palace's layout were lost. The illuminations in the Madrid Skylitzes have answered architectural questions about the palace's ground floor and subsequent rooms.¹⁰ Along with the historical teachings of the manuscript, the Madrid Skylitzes continues to be a stark example of Greek illuminations of the 12th century. Through its illuminations, the manuscript satisfies its classification as a piece of art.

While publishers today are less concerned with the aesthetics of book pages, scribes in the high medieval period put a lot of work in the beauty of pages. Illuminations were painted on the pages to depict the writing and often contained precious metals including gold and silver.¹¹

⁹ Andre Grabar, *The Art of the Byzantine Empire* (New York City: Crown Publishers Inc., 1966), 182.

¹⁰ Ibid, 119.

¹¹ "Illuminated Manuscripts," National Gallery of Art (accessed 04-23-15), <http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/conservation/paper/manuscript-project.html>.

For 500 years illuminated manuscripts were given much attention. Often made from hide of animals, the manuscripts were very time consuming and highly expensive to make. While most of the manuscripts were made for royalty, nobility were known to hire scribes to decorate manuscripts.¹² The rise of illuminated manuscripts began in the monasteries when bored monks had to find a way to pass the time. Small manuscripts were used by wealthy nobility for personal use while the larger manuscripts were meant to be read among many people together. The process of illuminating manuscripts continued through the 15th century until the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg made illuminations less desirable.

The majority of the pages of the Madrid Skylitzes have at least some sort of illuminations on them, but many are blank altogether or only contain words. Pages are either completely blank due to fading overtime or they are strictly story pages. These story pages consist of two columns of narrative with empty margins on both sides. The illuminated pages help tell the story of the narrative. Most of the pictures follow the actions of the king. Because monarchies make for easy chronology reference points, most medieval histories focus on the leader of the empire or state. The art found in the manuscript is no different and contains few paintings that do not focus on the king.

There is a large variety of stories told through the paintings. The range of illuminations includes but is not limited to pictures of: kings being crowned, assassination attempts, festivities, general garrisons, war movements, battles, the king's palace, and local trading.¹³ The battles depicted in the illuminations are very one-sided. The Byzantine troops are mostly dressed in gold

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, Biblioteca Nacional De Espana (accessed 04-23-15), <http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000022766>

armor and are painted as nearly immortal beings. Almost every illumination of a battle shows bloodshed, specifically the beheading of enemy units mid-battle.¹⁴ Rarely is there a picture of an ugly looking Greek or a fallen Byzantine soldier. The Madrid Skylitzes also holds some of the most famous images of Greek fire. These pictures are some of our only artistic references to the great naval weapon.

While most of the illuminations are adorned with many colors, several of the pages have become black and white (literally dark brown and light brown).¹⁵ The aging process has slowly diminished the art on certain pages and continues to be a threat to the other illuminations. Technically speaking, the paint does not deteriorate on the pages; rather, paint flakes slowly detach from the pages.¹⁶ Curators are capable of reattaching the paint flakes, but the process is slow and has to be done using microscopes and job-specific tools.¹⁷ Because of this, most manuscripts are not properly maintained.

A miniscule viewing of the Madrid Skylitzes would quickly show that many of the paintings are painted almost identically. The same colors and styles are used throughout the manuscript and similar stories produce nearly redundant art. As mentioned, the art is in three categories, Byzantine, Western, and Muslim. Though each style has different elements, the artistic themes are very similar. From examining the manuscript, it has become apparent that very few scribes were working on this piece. Curators can come to this conclusion by again using microscopes. Under these sharp lenses, conservators are able to study brush strokes as well

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Illuminated Manuscripts," 1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

as materials used to look for patterns between paintings. If two artists were to draw a sword or a hand, there would be enough minute discrepancies for a curator to be able to tell the artists apart and even identify other works of theirs.¹⁸ By examining these subtle changes in strokes and materials, the amount of painters used to create the illuminations can be hypothesized as a large group or as a select few.

While little is known for certain about the Madrid Skylitzes, the piece still holds significance in its historical uniqueness as well as aesthetic beauty. Currently the manuscript is at the Spanish national library, the Biblioteca Nacional de España. The piece is on display but is not always open to the public in order to help the piece last for many years. Curators wish to keep the manuscript together for generations to come and therefore do not leave the piece out in the light for very long. Light remains one of the largest enemies to aged documents. Short exposure time to library visitors as well as the development of “climate-free” zones have helped keep manuscripts safe from losing their color.¹⁹ The safety of the manuscript is the most important priority for the study of the old documents. The more a document fades the harder it is to learn from it. In order to protect the document for generations to follow, the Spanish National library has taken digital photos of all of the pages in the manuscript including all 574 illuminated paintings. While outside climate and light have devastating effects on documents, they cannot damage what has been produced digitally. This technique should continue to be used to protect and further the study of history.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Through these illuminated paintings as well as through the narrative written by John Skylitzes, the Madrid Skylitzes has built on the academy's understanding of medieval history. The manuscript not only teaches about the ninth and tenth centuries of the Byzantine Empire, but it teaches about 12th century Sicily. The gap between the original writing of the document and the copying of the history into a manuscript is also an important distinction. By using liturgical illuminations from the ninth and tenth centuries, scholars can see how accurate the 12th century depictions were. This is a direction of study that could be taken in the near future. A readily available English translation as well as some more details about the creation of the document would be useful in further applying the meaning of the Madrid Skylitzes to its overarching historical significance.

The Madrid Skylitzes is not removed from the academic radar. Currently the University of Sussex is working on a project to bring attention to and learn more about the illuminated manuscript. This study is being headed by Bente Bjornholt, Roger Scott, and John Burke. While digital copies of the manuscript are already available, the Sussex team hopes to add English translations from the Greek as well as text commentary.²⁰ In the past fifteen years the manuscript has been involved in many studies. These include the Colloquium at the Institute of Byzantine Studies, the International Medieval Congress, the XIVth Conference of the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, and the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies.²¹ The Madrid Skylitzes continues to gain appeal throughout Western scholarship as it is made known to more people.

²⁰ Bjornholt, 1.

²¹ Ibid.



22



23

²² Biblioteca Nacional.

²³ Ibid.

Bibliography

Bjornholt, Bente. "The Madrid Skylitzes Project," Sussex Centre for Byzantine Cultural History (accessed 04-23-15), <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/byzantine/research/skylitzes>

Evans, Helen C. & Wixom, William D. ed. *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997.

Explore World Cultures: Byzantine Empire British Museum, accessed 04-23-15.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/europe/byzantine_empire.aspx.

Grabar, Andre. *The Art of the Byzantine Empire* New York City: Crown Publishers Inc., 1966.

"Illuminated Manuscripts," National Gallery of Art (accessed 04-23-15),
<http://www.nga.gov/content/ngaweb/conservation/paper/manuscript-project.html>

John Skylitzes, *Synopsis of Histories*, Biblioteca Nacional De Espana (accessed 04-23-15),
<http://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000022766>