

## The Utrecht Psalter and the Art of Memory

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### Résumé de l'article

Les travaux de recherche en histoire de l'art sur les illustrations du *Psautier d'Utrecht* ont porté principalement sur les problèmes d'identification de sa date, de sa provenance et de ses origines stylistiques. Ces renseignements ont donné des résultats positifs, sans toutefois fournir une meilleure explication de l'emploi surprenant du mode « littéral » dans l'illustration du manuscrit. D'après moi, ceci peut s'expliquer par le rôle didactique important que jouèrent les psautiers au début du moyen âge, particulièrement dans le cadre de la réforme de l'enseignement qu'entreprit Charlemagne. Les psautiers étaient des textes de base pour apprendre le latin. Tout en apprenant à lire les psaumes, les élèves apprenaient les mots par coeur, talent très prisé dans les écoles monastiques. Je pense que les enluminures du *Psautier D'Utrecht*, surprenantes de par leur nombre (une illustration pour chaque psaume) et leur genre (ce sont les mots exacts du psaume qui sont illustrés et non pas leur symbolisme ou leur signification), doivent être considérées comme des aide-mémoire pour retenir les psaumes. Elles semblent représenter une adaptation des techniques de « l'Art de la mémoire » classique tel que le décrivent les textes anciens de rhétorique. Ces textes existaient au début du neuvième siècle, période où les sources classiques étaient fort recherchées et consultées avec un regain d'intérêt. Si l'on considère les illustrations du *Psautier d'Utrecht* comme des moyens mnémotechniques dans la tradition de « l'Art de la mémoire », alors certaines de leurs caractéristiques, dont l'explication s'avérait jusque là peu satisfaisante, deviennent intelligibles. C'est sous cet angle que se fait l'analyse des psaumes 92 et 102 qui servent d'exemples pour démontrer comment l'imagerie du *Psautier d'Utrecht* a été conçue et utilisée à des fins mnémotechniques.

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# *The Utrecht Psalter and the Art of Memory\**

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## RÉSUMÉ

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Les travaux de recherche en histoire de l'art sur les illustrations du *Psautier d'Utrecht* ont porté principalement sur les problèmes d'identification de sa date, de sa provenance et de ses origines stylistiques. Ces renseignements ont donné des résultats positifs, sans toutefois fournir une meilleure explication de l'emploi surprenant du mode « littéral » dans l'illustration du manuscrit. D'après moi, ceci peut s'expliquer par le rôle didactique important que jouèrent les psautiers au début du moyen âge, particulièrement dans le cadre de la réforme de l'enseignement qu'entreprit Charlemagne. Les psautiers étaient des textes de base pour apprendre le latin. Tout en apprenant à lire les psaumes, les élèves apprenaient les mots par coeur, talent très prisé dans les écoles monastiques. Je pense que les enluminures du *Psautier d'Utrecht*, surprenantes de par leur nombre (une illustration pour chaque psaume) et leur genre (ce sont les mots exacts du psaume qui sont

illustrés et non pas leur symbolisme ou leur signification), doivent être considérées comme des aide-mémoire pour retenir les psaumes. Elles semblent représenter une adaptation des techniques de « l'Art de la mémoire » classique tel que le décrivent les textes anciens de rhétorique. Ces textes existaient au début du neuvième siècle, période où les sources classiques étaient fort recherchées et consultées avec un regain d'intérêt. Si l'on considère les illustrations du *Psautier d'Utrecht* comme des moyens mnémotechniques dans la tradition de « l'Art de la mémoire », alors certaines de leurs caractéristiques, dont l'explication s'avérait jusque là peu satisfaisante, deviennent intelligibles. C'est sous cet angle que se fait l'analyse des psaumes 92 et 102 qui servent d'exemples pour démontrer comment l'imagerie du *Psautier d'Utrecht* a été conçue et utilisée à des fins mnémotechniques.

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Ever since 1858, when sustained scholarly interest in the *Utrecht Psalter* was awakened, art-historical investigation of this manuscript has been directed almost exclusively towards determining its date, provenance, and stylistic origins.<sup>1</sup> The initial goal of such research was to provide evidence relating to a non-artistic problem, namely the historical pedigree of the Athanasian Creed, which is in-

cluded among the canticles and prayers at the end of the manuscript. However, accounting for the *Psalter's* age and style of illumination, along with the attendant question of whether or not it was copied from an earlier prototype, soon also became and remained the dominant art-historical problems of the *Utrecht Psalter*. Such a stylistic preoccupation was not, of course, unique to the analysis of this manuscript, but rather the reflection of a prevailing methodological conviction about the aims and limits of the discipline of art history: the view that the primary task of the art historian is to locate works chronologically and geographically in order to provide an increasingly complete chart of stylistic development through the ages.

The range of the evidence that has been drawn upon for the solution of the *Utrecht Psalter's* stylistic problems has been impressive; and the com-

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1 For an account of the history of research into the *Utrecht Psalter*, and full bibliography, see J. H. A. Engelbregt, *Het Utrechts Psalterium. Een eeuw wetenschappelijke bestudering (1860-1960)* (Utrecht, 1965). The most important recent study is Suzy Dufrenne, *Les illustrations du Psautier d'Utrecht. Sources et apport carolingien* (Paris, 1978), which also contains an updated bibliography.

bined skills of connoisseurship and paleography have been utilized so effectively that there is now little disagreement over the facts that the *Psalter* must have been produced at the monastery of Hautvillers near Reims in the early decades of the ninth century and that its illustrations display acquaintance with late antique art. The central "problem" of the *Utrecht Psalter* has thus essentially been solved, so that the illustrations can now be used by the art historian as evidence for the identification of the origins of other art works. More recent research has been directed largely towards the still unresolved question of whether or not the manuscript is a copy of an earlier work, a concern which is also aimed at establishing with greater accuracy the *Psalter's* place within the network of stylistic developments and influences during the early Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup>

Stylistic classification undeniably plays an important role within the discipline of art history; but while it must of necessity form the starting point of many inquiries, it obviously cannot answer all questions worth posing about medieval art. In the case of the *Utrecht Psalter*, preoccupation with attributional problems has overshadowed considerations of the possible purpose underlying the unusual nature of the manuscript's illustrations. In this article, I do not intend to address directly the many issues and points of detail relating to the *Utrecht Psalter* that have been raised by recent art-historical scholarship. Instead, I wish to ask a more fundamental question about how the *Psalter's* images were originally regarded, and to suggest that a mnemonic function of the illustrations accounts for some of their unique characteristics.

The mode of illustration employed in the *Utrecht Psalter* is generally termed "literal," in the sense of depending on the exact words of the text. For purposes of defining more specifically the relationship between imagery and meaning, the literal mode can usefully be distinguished here from two other types of text illustration: what could be called "narrative" and "symbolic."<sup>3</sup> A narrative technique uses artistic conventions like facial ex-

pression and gesture to convey information about an event or sequence of events. Narrative images communicate the essence of "what happened" if the viewer is familiar with the conventions being used; such images will be read in more or less detail depending on the viewer's knowledge of the story being depicted. In manuscripts, narrative illustrations may stand quite independently of the text they accompany. For example, many medieval psalters are illuminated by scenes from the life of David, events relevant to the text in so far as David composed the Psalms, but not described therein. Symbolic illustration encourages the reader to associate the meaning of the words with a concept not explicitly stated therein but somehow related. The inclusion in medieval psalters of representations of the Trinity, the Crucifixion, or the *Agnus Dei* exemplify this mode of illumination. Again, such images can carry meaning that is independent of the text. But literal illustrations are quite meaningless without the exact words to which they refer. A tradition of literal illustration of the Psalms is traceable throughout the Middle Ages, beginning in the seventh or eighth century;<sup>4</sup> within this tradition, the *Utrecht Psalter* holds the pre-eminent position, possessing the fullest and richest surviving cycle of literal imagery, and having served as a model for a significant group of later illuminated psalters.

Consideration of an example will demonstrate how absolutely the *Utrecht Psalter's* images relate not to the essential sense or meaning of the Psalms (as rendered by "corrected" versions of the text or translations, for example), but to the exact words of the Psalms as they appear on its pages.<sup>5</sup> Psalm 107 (numbered 108 in the King James version) is one of David's songs of praise. Its central theme, God's readiness to intervene in earthly affairs to protect his people, takes in verses 7 to 9 the form of a series of statements put by the psalmist into the mouth of God. In strict literal translation from the *Utrecht Psalter* (which makes rather less sense than other versions), these verses read as follows:

I will rejoice and divide Sicima, and I will measure out the valley of the tabernacles. Gilcad is mine and Manasch is mine, and Ephraim is my head's support. Judah is my king. Moab is the wash-bowl of my hope. Into Edom

2 This is the aim of Dufrenne's study, cited above, although her approach relies not on traditional connoisseurship, but on a systematic iconographic analysis and comparison of relevant examples of other illustrated psalters.

3 These categories are my own, and should not be confused with those used by historians of manuscript illumination to classify forms of illustration according to various criteria, which may include "literalness," but also such factors as placement, size, and region of origin. For this type of discussion of psalter illustrations, see J. J. Tikkanen, *Die Psalterillustration im Mittelalter* (Soest, 1975; originally Helsingfors, 1895-90); V. Leroquais, *Les Psautiers manuscrits latins des bibliothèques publiques de France*, 3 vols. (Macon, 1940-41); and Dufrenne, *Les illustrations du Psautier d'Utrecht*, 25-38.

4 See Dufrenne, *Les illustrations du Psautier d'Utrecht*, 29-33.

5 Dufrenne, while pointing out that the *Psalter's* images take the form of "des groupes sémantiquement autonomes qui traduisent chacun, visuellement, une expression du texte," nonetheless also maintains that each composition "réflète normalement l'idée générale de chaque psaume" (Suzanne Dufrenne, "L'illustration médiévale du psautier: problèmes de l'illustration d'un texte poétique," *Actes du Colloque de l'Association des Médiévistes Anglicistes de l'enseignement supérieur* [Amiens, 1974], 59-72 [64]).

I will extend my shoe. Friends have become foreigners to me.<sup>6</sup>

The illustration accompanying this psalm (Fig. 1) is not an accurate portrayal of the *meaning* of the verses, in that it does not represent God making a promise to his people. Rather, it puts the metaphors of God's speech into a number of separate images. In the lower right a figure divides an area with a rod, while another to the left (who also serves as the psalmist with harp and lyre of verse 2) measures out another area in front of a tabernacle. A crowned figure is probably identifiable as King Judah but also holds extended a pair of shoes. The metaphor assigned to Moab, a wash-bowl, is held aloft by the figure opposite. This type of concrete visualization of the words of the Psalms, rather than their meaning, is common to all of the *Utrecht Psalter* illustrations.

But why would a book of Psalms have been illustrated in this extraordinary manner? The question seems seldom to have been pursued seriously, but the most frequent type of response maintains that the non-narrative, poetic nature of the Psalms somehow demands this mode of illustration.<sup>7</sup> Such an observation begs the question, however, for whoever commissioned the *Utrecht Psalter* must have had a reason for wanting every psalm to be illuminated in this way, difficult though such a task was, in preference to some other form of decoration. The reason underlying such a choice must lie in the function which the *Psalter* was intended to serve.

Psalters had a number of roles in early medieval society. Most obviously, they had an important liturgical function; recitation of the Psalms, accompanied by lessons and responses, formed the basis of worship at the canonical hours, as well as on special days of the Christian year, and at funerals. Psalters were also books of personal piety for both clerics and laymen, the reciting of psalms to oneself being a form of prayer or penance. We have ample testimony that some devout individuals made a habit of repeating all one hundred and fifty psalms daily, in addition to the canonical office.<sup>8</sup> Given the frequency with which recitation of

the Psalms was required, it is hardly surprising that monks and clerics were expected to know the entire psalter by heart, although the regularity with which this was achieved was another matter. Memorization of the Psalms was begun at an early age, in conjunction with learning to read them, for yet another important role of the psalter was as an elementary reading text. It is this practice of learning to read and memorize the Psalms in the eighth and ninth centuries which I believe is of particular relevance to the characteristics of the *Utrecht Psalter's* illustrations.

In both monastic and secular schools, similar systems of elementary education were followed in eighth-century Gaul.<sup>9</sup> Boys first learned the letters of the Roman alphabet, then the recognition of Latin syllables and words. The book from which they learned to read words and phrases was invariably the Psalter, which had replaced non-Christian works like Aesop's fables that had served as the primary reading texts in Roman antiquity. To be *psalteratus* was synonymous with knowing how to read Latin. While they learned to read the Psalms, students also began to memorize them, repeating the verses until perfected. Complete commitment of the Psalms to memory was particularly important in the monastic schools, for monks had to know the Psalter by heart in order to follow and take part in the Office. The process of memorization seems normally to have taken two to three years, and novitiates were regularly examined on their mastery of the Psalms. Writing and chant were complementary studies to the reading and memorization of the Psalms, also learned by all students at monastic schools. Thus, psalters were not only liturgical and devotional books, but also educational texts on which were focused the skills of reading, writing, memorization, and chant.

Although the Franks had been nominally Christian since the conversion of Clovis at the end of the fifth century, by the middle of the eighth century there was still no strong and unified Christian culture throughout the kingdom. Hence, although the programme of elementary Christian education just outlined was the desired one, it was by no means universal. When Charlemagne assumed leadership of the Frankish kingdom in the late eighth century, the principal aim of the series of reforms he initiated was the consolidation of Frankish Christian culture by means of a vigorous

6 EXSULTABOR ET DIVIDAM SICIMA ET CONVALLĒ TABERNACULORŪ DIMECIAR. MEUS EST GALAAD ET MEUS EST MANASSES. ET EFFRAIM SUSCEPTIO CAPITIS MEI. JUDA REX MEUS. MOAB LEBES SPEI MEAE. IN IDUMĒA EXTENDAM CALCIAMENTUM. EUM MIHI ALIENIGENE AMICI FACTI SUNT.

7 This is the view expressed by Francis Wormald, for example, in *The Utrecht Psalter* (Utrecht, 1953), 5-6. A second fairly common attitude regarding the reasons underlying the *Utrecht Psalter's* mode of illustration is that the artist was simply "naive" or "literal-minded"; see, for example, Gertrude R. Benson, "New Light on the Origin of the Utrecht Psalter," *Art Bulletin*, XIII (1931), 13-53 (18-19).

8 See Leroquais, *Les Psautiers manuscrits latins*, I, viii-ix.

9 My discussion here is based on Pierre Riché's full treatments of the subject in "Le Psautier, livre de lecture élémentaire d'après les vies des saints mérovingiens," *Études mérovingiennes* (Paris, 1952), 253-56, and in *Ecoles et enseignement dans le Haut Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1979), 221-45.

educational programme.<sup>10</sup> His *Admonitio Generalis*, issued in 789, constituted a full statement of his proposals for the reform of the church and the education of the people. Among these proposals was the recommendation that in every monastic and clerical school the minimum course of instruction should consist of the thorough teaching of reading, writing, psalmody, chant, calculation, and grammar. This would at least ensure that the next generation of clergy would be literate and able to lead the people competently in their performance of Christian rituals. Charlemagne's educational programme for the clergy went much farther than this, but his attention to good elementary education confirms other evidence that many of the clergy had previously lacked even the rudimentary skills of competent Latin and psalmody.<sup>11</sup>

The burst of activity in the realm of manuscript correction and production in the early Carolingian period was in direct fulfilment of the need for large numbers of reliable texts for Charlemagne's educational programme. These texts included psalters, which would have been used both liturgically and, within the invigorated programme of reading and psalmody at the monastic schools, pedagogically. Lavishly illuminated manuscripts would normally have been produced only for royalty or high ceremonial use. Although the *Utrecht Psalter* displays some of the features of a deluxe manuscript, the complete lack of colouring and gold leaf in its illustrations in preference to the sketchy pen drawings would make it an anomaly in such a category. Furthermore, its format would seem not to be that of a liturgical psalter.<sup>12</sup> These facts, together with the literal mode of illustration, indicate to me that the *Utrecht Psalter* should be seen within the educational context of psalters in the Carolingian period. I would suggest that the *Utrecht Psalter* (or, perhaps more probably, a group of manuscripts of which it was a deluxe version) was produced for use in a monastic or clerical school and that its illustrations were designed as mnemonic aids to the task of learning by heart all of the Psalms.

That the illustrations had some sort of mnemonic function has also been suggested by J. H. A. Engelbregt, but I cannot accept his view that the *Utrecht Psalter* was a monastic choirbook from which monks chanted the psalms, their im-

perfect knowledge of Latin being aided by the manuscript's graphics.<sup>13</sup> For not only is the Psalter not of liturgical format, but it would also seem that monks were expected to have already committed the Psalms to memory before reciting the Office. Even if they were allowed to have the text in front of them, it is difficult to imagine how the tiny, detailed drawings of the *Utrecht Psalter* could have been visible, let alone helpful, to a whole choir of monks. I would locate the role of the illustrations specifically in the schoolroom, where novices were learning Latin and psalmody together in preparation for their participating in the Office. Furthermore, I differ from Engelbregt<sup>14</sup> in that I see the illustrations as being inspired by specific mnemonic techniques employed by earlier educators, namely the antique "art of memory" whose history has been traced by the late Frances Yates.<sup>15</sup>

In classical antiquity, memory was one of the five parts of rhetoric, for the ability to memorize long speeches was a skill essential to becoming an effective orator. The mnemonic technique taught to the student of rhetoric was an imagistic one, with which he brought to mind vivid mental pictures of both places and things that would help him recall the words of the speech he was to deliver. Images of a set of clearly visualized places (like the rooms of a house) were meant to provide an orderly sequence to what he was memorizing. The words themselves were to be remembered by images of things which he mentally placed within the rooms. These images were to be "active, sharply defined, unusual, and having the power of speedily encountering and penetrating the mind."<sup>16</sup> Their purpose might be to bring to mind a particular word, or a whole sentence or idea. Descriptions of the classical art of memory have survived in three Latin sources: Cicero's *De oratore*, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria*, and an anonymous treatise on rhetoric known as the *Ad Herennium*. Cicero's and Quintilian's remarks on mnemonics are rather brief, both authors assum-

13 Engelbregt, *Het Utrechts Psalterium*, 8-9, 80-83, 118-21.

14 Engelbregt, *Het Utrechts Psalterium*, 119, sees the illustrations within the context of Helga Hajdu's rather generalized observations regarding the use of medieval manuscript imagery to help retain texts: *Das Mnemotechnische Schrifttum des Mittelalters* (Vienna, 1936), 51. Hajdu maintains that the antique mnemotechnical systems were unknown during the Middle Ages until the eleventh or twelfth century, the original sources describing them being inaccessible until then (55-56).

15 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London, 1966). My discussion of the antique art of memory is based on Yates's account in her chapter 1, "The Three Latin Sources for the Classical Art of Memory," 1-26.

16 Cicero, *De oratore*, II, lxxxvii, 358, as cited in translation by Yates, "The Three Latin Sources," 17-18.

10 On Charlemagne's educational reforms, see especially Rosamund McKitterick, *The Frankish Church and the Carolingian Reforms, 789-895* (London, 1977).

11 See McKitterick, *The Frankish Church*, chapter 2, and M. L. W. Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe, A.D. 500 to 900* (Ithaca, 1976), 189-97.

12 See Leroquais, *Les Psautiers manuscrits latins*, I, xl-lxii.

ing that the reader would already be familiar with the actual technique. But the *Ad Herennium*, being a proper textbook addressed to students of rhetoric, contains a fuller account with examples; these give a somewhat clearer idea of the imagistic technique involved.<sup>17</sup>

The first example demonstrates how a lawyer might remember the details of a court case in which the defendant is accused of poisoning a man in order to gain an inheritance, a crime to which there are many witnesses and accessories. The suggested image for remembering the charge consists of a man lying ill in bed with the defendant at the bedside holding a cup in his right hand and tablets and a ram's testicles in his left. The cup reminds one of poisoning, the tablets of the will or inheritance, and the *testes* (by *verbal* similarity) of witnesses. The second example involves memorizing a line of poetry: "Iam domum itionem reges Atridae parant" (And now their homecoming the kings, the sons of Atreus are making ready). The proposed mental image for recalling this line does not consist of royal figures doing something suggestive of preparing to go home, as one might have expected. Presumably that would not signify with sufficient precision the exact words. The author of the *Ad Herennium* instead suggests two images: "Domitius raising his hands to heaven while he is lashed by the Marcii Reges" and "Aesopus and Cimber being dressed for the roles of Agamemnon and Menelaus in Iphigenia." Both rely on the student's familiarity with contemporary personages, for Domitius and the Marcii Reges were seemingly members of well-known plebeian and aristocratic families respectively, while Aesopus and Cimber were famous actors. The first vivid image is meant to aid recall of the words "Iam domum itionem reges" purely by *sound* resemblance, irrespective of meaning. The second brings to life "the sons of Atreus" as actors "making ready" to play these roles.

Both of the examples cited in the *Ad Herennium* indicate that the art of memory was used for memorizing not just political speeches, but other things like poetry and court cases as well. Moreover, the extraordinary images proposed make it clear that to work as mnemonic devices they need not be logically related to the meaning of the text (although they could be), as long as they helped bring to mind the key words. The author advises that we will create images that will "adhere longest in memory" if we

set up images that are not vague but active, if we assign to them exceptional beauty or singular ugliness, if we ornament some of them as with crowns or with purple

17 Yates, "The Three Latin Sources," 11-14.

cloaks . . . or if we somehow disfigure them, as by introducing one stained with blood or soiled with mud . . . so that its form is more striking, or by assigning certain comic effects to our images, for that too will ensure our remembering them more readily.<sup>18</sup>

Compared to the memory images described in the *Ad Herennium*, the lively, gesticulating figures of the *Utrecht Psalter*, who often hold concrete objects standing for figures of speech or are vividly garbed or characterized, perhaps now appear in context. Indeed, I believe they were devised as mnemonic images like those described in the *Ad Herennium*, as aids to the memorization of the Psalms. To maintain such a hypothesis, it is important to establish the fact that it was historically possible that the antique art of memory was known in Carolingian times. Although references to the actual use of the technique are lacking, we do know that several copies of the *Ad Herennium* (attributed to Cicero in the Middle Ages) were in circulation in the early ninth century. For example, Servatus Lupus, who indefatigably borrowed, copied, and collated classical texts to build up the library at Ferrières, refers to the *Ad Herennium* in a letter of 830. Cicero's *De oratore* and Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* were also available, though scarce.<sup>19</sup> Thus, relevant texts describing the art of memory were in fact accessible, and the so-called Carolingian Renaissance was certainly a period in which the works of antique authors were actively being sought out and studied. In considering the possibility of a reawakening of interest in the ancient mnemonic techniques, we must allow for a certain amount of misunderstanding or freedom of interpretation in their adaptation to Carolingian concerns. It must be noted, for example, that in their original prescribed form memory images were always mental ones devised by the individual memorizer, whereas the *Utrecht Psalter* provides a ready-made set of images for the student.

If the illustrations of the *Utrecht Psalter* are considered as mnemonic aids in the art of memory tradition, some of their otherwise puzzling characteristics are rendered intelligible. In 1932, E. T. De Wald attempted the difficult task of relating each detail of the *Psalter's* drawings to the verse it seemed to illustrate.<sup>20</sup> More recently, in the course of her comparative iconographic study, Suzy Dufrenne has proposed a number of revisions to De Wald's interpretations.<sup>21</sup> Many of the images re-

18 *Ad Herennium*, III, xxii, as cited in translation by Yates, "The Three Latin Sources," 10.

19 Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe*, 217-18.

20 E. T. De Wald, *The Illustrations of the Utrecht Psalter* (Princeton, 1932).

21 Dufrenne, *Les illustrations du Psautier d'Utrecht*, 41-44 (note 110), and throughout her illustrative tables.

main unsatisfactorily explained, however, in part because of the assumption that, although they are literal, the illustrations should nonetheless be read as attempts to give visual form to the meaning of the Psalms. But if the illustrations are regarded as mnemonic aids meant to make it easier for the novice to remember the exact words of the Psalms—words in Latin which he was still probably learning to read—then the purpose of some of these images becomes clearer.

Psalm 92 (93 in the King James version), which consists of just five verses, will serve as an example (Fig. 2). De Wald associates the image of Christ rather vaguely with the meaning of verse 1, which he gives as “The Lord reigns; he is robed in majesty; the Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.”<sup>22</sup> In the actual words on the page, however, the last part of this verse reads “INDUTUS EST DOMINUS FORTITUDINE ET PRAECINXIT SE,” literally, “the Lord is clothed with strength and girds himself.” De Wald notes that the spear and shield by Christ’s side represent the idea of being girded with strength, but he has no explanation for the scrolls extended prominently in each of Christ’s hands. Dufrenne relates these to verse 5: “TESTIMONIA TUA CREDIBILIA FACTA SUNT NIMIS.”<sup>23</sup> The image of Christ holding two scrolls would indeed be an effective way of remembering that “Thy testimonies” is plural in the last line of the psalm. Within the spirit of the *Ad Herennium*, however, perhaps these scrolls also served to bring to mind the *sound* of the exact words of verse 1, for the word *praecingo* (to gird) sounds very much like another Latin verb, *praecino* (to prophesy). A prophesying Christ holding scrolls is a much more vivid image by which to remember *praecinxit* than would the repetition of something representing Christ being girded, since this has already been done to suggest *indutus est dominus fortitudine*. This may seem far-fetched, but it is exactly the sort of process recommended by the *Ad Herennium* examples, in which lively images bring to mind words which sound familiar to those being memorized.

The next line of Psalm 92, “ETENIM FIRMAVIT ORBEM TERRAE QUI NON COMMOVEBITUR” (“And truly he has made firm the circle of the world which will not be moved away”), is easily recalled by the image of the orb grasped by two muscular Atlas-type figures who are either holding it in place or straining in vain to move it. Verse 3 begins with the words “PARATA SEDIS TUA,” represented by an empty throne made ready with a cloth of honour. The next line, “The floods have lifted up,

Lord; the floods have lifted up their voice; the floods have lifted up their waves,” are vividly brought to mind by the river gods blowing their horns, while the many talkative figures in boats may be meant to suggest the words, “A VOCIBUS AQUARUM MULTARUM.” The two figures consulting their books and Christ’s scrolls illustrate verse 5, “TESTIMONIA TUA CREDIBILIA FACTA SUNT,” and the tabernacle corresponds to “DOMUM TUAM DECET SANCTITUDO.”

I would hypothesize that the *Psalter* was meant to be used in something like the following manner. One or more young novices in the schoolroom of a Carolingian monastery is at a point in his studies at which he has mastered the rudiments of Latin words but is still working on his reading, the *Psalter* being the book from which he learns to recognize and pronounce Latin words. At the same time, he is trying to commit to memory the words of the Psalms. After reading and repeating each line, he looks at the corresponding image. “*Elevaverunt flumina domine, elevaverunt flumina vocem suam*,” he reads, and fixes in his mind the amusing figures of the river gods raising their voices. So he proceeds, then tries to repeat the whole psalm without looking at the words, but with the illustrations still before him. The figure of Christ with his attributes helps get him started, reminding him to include that hard word *praecinxit*, while the memorable river gods and figures in boats make him remember that this is the psalm in which lines about floods and voices lifting up are repeated in several variations, and so on. Finally, he closes the book and recites the psalm completely from memory, the lively images now before his mind’s eye, where they help trigger recall of those words with which he had become used to associate them.

Interpreting the *Utrecht Psalter*’s illustrations as mnemonic aids does not result in the immediate clarification of all of their puzzling features; the specific attributes of many figures and the significance of some of the activities depicted remain obscure. However, if this obscurity is assumed to be the result of now-lost verbal associations or attempts to form memorable images in the spirit of the *Ad Herennium*’s instructions, we can at least attribute their peculiarities to a consistent cause. Very often this affords a more satisfactory form of explanation than the type previously offered. For example, the illustration to Psalm 109 (King James 110) includes in the lower right corner the figure of an elaborately dressed soldier standing on the body of a prostrate nude; his right hand holds a bowl which he extends towards a stream, his left grasps a spear and a shield which he rests on the head of his victim (Fig. 3). This image is clearly related to the last line of the psalm, “DE TORRENTE

22 De Wald, *The Illustrations of the Utrecht Psalter*, 42-43.

23 Dufrenne, *Les illustrations du Psautier d'Utrecht*, 44.

IN VIA PROPTEREA EXALTABIT CAPUT” (“He shall drink of the brook in the way; therefore shall he lift up the head”), but this does not account for either the figure’s characterization as an armed soldier (“He” refers to “the Lord” in the Psalm), or the body on which he stands. De Wald (unchallenged by Dufrenne) suggests, without explanation, that the soldier may represent Gideon at the brook, but there would seem to be no particular reason for such a symbolic reference here.<sup>24</sup> If we assume, however, that the figure is “strikingly ornamented” in order to be better remembered, as recommended in the *Ad Herennium*, it is much less problematic that his characterization seems to be unrelated to the meaning of the psalm. Liberated from necessarily conveying the sense of the verses, the soldier figure can perhaps be seen as intending to aid recall not only of the last line, but also the words of the penultimate one, “CONQUASSABIT CAPITA IN TERRA MULTORUM” (“He shall shatter the heads of many on the earth”). Or does the soldier resting his shield on the nude’s head somehow convey a free, associative, or mistaken reading of the psalm’s last words, *propterea exaltabit caput*?

An acceptance of the hypothesis that the illustrations of the *Utrecht Psalter* were intended as memory aids gives rise to a number of attendant art-historical problems and considerations. While it is not my intention here to explore these ramifications fully, some of the major areas which would require re-examination should at least be indicated. A central problem, which has already been alluded to, is the *Utrecht Psalter*’s status as a luxury manuscript. Since it seems highly unlikely that a manuscript of this quality would have been used in a monastic schoolroom, we should perhaps regard it as a deluxe version of a whole genre of similarly illustrated psalters, many of which perished as a result of heavy usage. That the *Utrecht Psalter* did indeed belong to a tradition of literally illustrated psalters has been pointed out by Dufrenne.<sup>25</sup> A related problem concerns the originality of the *Utrecht Psalter*’s illustrative programme. Many scholars, including Dufrenne, maintain that the illuminations bear characteristics of having been copied, perhaps from a much earlier prototype. This would mean that mnemonic psalter illustrations must have been devised much earlier. Since access to antique mnemonic techniques seems never to have been lost,<sup>26</sup> and since memorization of the Psalms was practised at least as early as the

sixth century,<sup>27</sup> this is certainly possible. It would make sense, however, that both the mnemonic and illustrative techniques were revived and exploited during the Carolingian period, when classical texts were actively studied and their learning adapted to Charlemagne’s educational reform programme. Alcuin’s textbooks, such as his guide to Latin grammar, are cases in point, with their use of lively dialogue and riddles to convey to unlearned students the principles of classical language in an appropriate and memorable way.<sup>28</sup> Yet another question arising from my hypothesis would be whether or not the pedagogical intent of the illustrations was still recognized when later copies of the *Utrecht Psalter* were made. In the case of isolated representations in other media inspired by the *Psalter*’s illustrations, for example, it seems unlikely that a mnemonic function could have been intended at all.

In her study of the transfer and transformation of the art of memory, Frances Yates was puzzled by the fact that, despite knowledge of texts like the *Ad Herennium* in the ninth century, Carolingian writings like Alcuin’s dialogue on rhetoric did not include discussion of the ancient mnemonic techniques.<sup>29</sup> But perhaps she was not looking in all the right places for evidence that the art of memory was indeed revived in the early ninth century. As Yates herself asked, “what were the things which the pious Middle Ages wished chiefly to remember?”<sup>30</sup> She answered that in general they must have been those things belonging to salvation and damnation, the articles of the faith, and so on. But a more specific reply which she could have made would have been the Psalms. I believe that it was to the task of memorizing the Psalms, the importance of which had been affirmed by Charlemagne, that the ancient art of memory was adapted, and that it was to this end that the pages of the *Utrecht Psalter* were so skilfully enlivened with truly memorable images.

27 See Pierre Riché, *Education and Culture in the Barbarian West: Sixth through Eighth Centuries* (Columbia, S.C., 1976), 115-16; and John Ryan, *Irish Monasticism: Origins and Early Development* (Shannon, 1972), 379.

28 See Eleanor S. Duckett, *Alcuin, Friend of Charlemagne: His World and his Work* (New York, 1951), 109-17; and Laistner, *Thought and Letters in Western Europe*, 198-201.

29 Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 53-54. Yates’s conclusion, that the roles of artificial memory had “disappeared,” since they are not cited in that part of the dialogue which discusses memory as a part of rhetoric, does not seem entirely well founded. For while such roles *per se* are not cited as a “precept” by which memory “can be obtained or increased,” Alcuin does respond in the dialogue that “exercise in memorising” constitutes such a precept; this exercise would presumably include mnemonic rules.

30 Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 55.

24 De Wald, *The Illustrations of the Utrecht Psalter*, 50.

25 Dufrenne, *Les illustrations du Psautier d’Utrecht*, 29-38.

26 Yates, *The Art of Memory*, 50.



QUI S O B T I L A B I T O S S U U  
Q U I S A P I E N S I T C U S T O D I E T

H A E C E T I N T E L L E C E T

M I S E R I C O R D I A S D N I



**P** S A L M U M C L A U D I T U M  
P A R A T U M C O R M E U  
D S P A R A T U M C O R M E U M  
C A N T A B O E T P S A L L A M  
I N G L O R I A M E A  
E X S U R G E P S A L T E R I U E T C Y  
T H A R A E X S U R G A D U L U C U L O  
C O N F I T E B O R I B I I N P O P U  
L I S D N E E T P S A L L A T I B I  
I N M A T I O N I B U S  
Q U I A M A N A S U P E R C A E L O S  
M I S E R I C O R D I A T U A E T U S  
Q U E A D N U B E S V E R I T A S T U A  
E X A L T A R E S U P E R C A E L O S D S  
E T S U P E R O M N E M T E R R A

P S A L M U M C L A U D I T U M  
G L O R I A T U A U T L I B E R E M  
T U R D I L E C T I T U I  
S A L U M E A C D E X T E R A T U A  
E T E X A U D I M E D S L O C U T U S  
E S T I N S C O S U O  
C O N S U L T A B O R E T I D I V I D A M  
S I C I M A E T C O N Q U A L L E T A  
B E R N A C U L O R U D I M E C I A R  
Q U E S I T C A L A A D E T M E U S E S T  
M A N A S S E S E T E S R A I M  
S U S C E P T I O C A P I T I S M E I  
I U D A R E X M E U S M O A B I E  
B E S S P E I M E A F I N I D U M E A  
E X T E N D A M C A L C I A M E N

T U M E U M M I H I A L I E N I C E  
N E A M I C I F A C T I S U N T  
Q U I S D E D U C E T M E I N C I V I T A  
T E M M U N I T A M Q U I S D E  
D U C I T M E N S Q U E I N I D U M E A  
C O N N E T U D S Q U I R E P P U  
L I S T I N O S E T I N O N E X I B I S  
D S I N V I R T U T I B U S N R I S  
Q U A N O B I S A U X I L I U M D E I R I  
B U L A T I O N E Q U I A U A N A  
S A L U S H O M I N I S  
I N D O F A C I E M U S V I R T U T E  
E T I P S A D N I H I L U M D E D U  
C E I N I M I C O S N O S T R O S

FIGURE 1. The *Utrecht Psalter*, illustration to Psalm 107 (Photo: Utrecht University Library).

RICORDIAUBERI  
 ET DISTEXIT OCULUS MEUS  
 IN INIMICOS MEOS ET IN INI  
 SURCENTIBUS IN MEMA  
 LIGNANTIBUS AUDIET  
 AURIS MEA

IUSTUS UT PALMA FLOREBIT  
 UT CEDROS LIBANI MULTI  
 PPLICABITUR  
 PLANTATI IN DOMO DNI IN  
 ATRIIS DNI FLOREBUNT  
 ADHUC MULTIPLICABUNTUR

IN SENECTAUBERI ET BENI  
 PACIENTES ERUNT UT AD  
 NUNTIENT  
 IN MERICUS DNI DNI NOSTER  
 ET NON EST INIQUITAS  
 IN EO



NON LAUSCANT ILLI  
 OACIO IN OICANT  
**D**NS RECREAUIT DE  
 COR INDUTUS EST IN DU  
 TUS EST DNI SORTITUDINE  
 ET TERRA CINCXIT SE  
 ET INIM FIRMAVIT ORBEM  
 TERRAE QUI NON COMMO  
 VEBITUR  
 PARATA SED ISTUA EXTUNC

SABBATUM QUAN  
 COINHABITATA CEST  
 AS ACULOTUES  
 ELEVAVERUNT FLUMINA  
 DNE ELEVAVERUNT FLU  
 MINA IN OCESUAM  
 ELEVAVERUNT FLUMINA  
 FLUCTU SUOS IN OCIBUS  
 AQUARUM MULTARUM  
 MIRABILES ELACIONES MANS

TERRA  
 MIRABILIS IN ALTI DNI  
 TESTIMONIUM ACREDIBI  
 LIA FACTA SUNT IN IMIS  
 DOMUM TUAM DICIT SCI  
 TUDO DNI IN LONGITU  
 DINE IERUM

FIGURE 2. The Utrecht Psalter, illustration to Psalm 92 (Photo: Utrecht University Library).

BENEDICTIONE MEI LONGA  
 BITURABIO  
 ET INDUIT MALEDICTIONEM  
 SICUT VESTIMENTUM. ET IN  
 TRAHSIT SICUT AQUAM IN  
 TERIORAEIUS. ET SICUT OLE  
 UMI NOSSIBUS EIUS.  
 FIAT EI SICUT VESTIMENTUM  
 COOPERIETUR. ET SICUT ZO  
 NA QUAE SEMPER PRAECIN  
 GITUR.  
 HOC OTUSE ORUM QUIDE  
 TRAHUNT MIHI LAPUD  
 DNM. ET QUI LOCUNTUR  
 MALA ADVERSUS ANIMAM  
 MEAM.  
 ET TUDNEDNE FAC MECUM  
 PROPTER NOMENTUUM.  
 QUIASUAUISEST MISERI

CORDIA TUA  
 LIBERAME QUIA IGINUS  
 ET PAUPER EGOSUM. ET COR  
 MEUM TURBATUM EST IN  
 TRAME.  
 SICUTUMBRACUM DECLI  
 NATA BLATUSSUM. ET EXCUS  
 SUSSUM SICUT LOCUSTAE.  
 ENUAME IN FIRMATA SI  
 ALI EI UNIO. ET CAROMEA  
 IN MUTATA EST PROPTER  
 OLEUM.  
 CTEGO FACTUSSUM OB PRO  
 BRIUM ILLIS. UIDERUNT  
 ME ET MOVERUNT CAPITA  
 SUA.  
 ADIUVAME DNE D S MEUS  
 SALVUM ME FAC SECUNDU  
 MISERICORDIAM TUAM.

ET SCIANT QUIA MANUSTU  
 AHAEC. ET TUDNE FECISTI  
 EAM.  
 MALEDICENTILLI ET TUBENE  
 DICES QUI INSURGUNT IN  
 ME CONFUNDANTUR.  
 SERVUS AUTEM TVUS LAE  
 TABITUR.  
 INDUANTUR QUI DEIRA  
 HUNT MIHI PUDORE. ET O  
 PERIANTUR SICUT DE PLO  
 IDE CONFUSIONESUA.  
 CONFITEBORDNE NONIMIS  
 IN ORE MEIO. ET IN MEDIO  
 MULTORU LAUDABO EUM.  
 QUIA ADSTETIT A DEXTRIS PAU  
 PERIS. UT SALVAM FACERET  
 A PERSEQUENTIBUS ANI  
 MAM MEAM.



FIGURE 3. The *Utrecht Psalter*, illustration to Psalm 109 (Photo: Utrecht University Library).