

Leeds Studies in English

Article:

Peter Meredith, 'Some Notes on the Amesbury Psalter Crucifixion (All Souls College, Oxford, MS 6)', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 37 (2006), 427-39

Permanent URL:

https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123835&silos_library=GEN01



Leeds Studies in English
School of English
University of Leeds
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

Some Notes on the Amesbury Psalter Crucifixion (All Souls College, Oxford, MS 6)

Peter Meredith

Unresolved observations about a mid-thirteenth century psalter may seem an odd choice of subject as an offering for a resolute Anglo-Saxonist, but my latter struggles with the psalter and my acquaintance with Joyce Hill are almost co-terminous, and it would be good to end the struggles and concentrate on the friendship. So here's to an end to one and a continuation of the other!

One of the most startling effects in the illumination of the Amesbury Psalter (All Souls College, Oxford, MS 6) is the contrast on the Crucifixion page (fol. 3/5) between the painting of Christ's body and that of the cross on which he hangs (Plate 1).¹ Christ's body is modelled in brown and heavily outlined and anatomised in black. His forehead is bound with what is perhaps best described as a matt green band, his head is backed by a gold cross-halo, and the lower part of his body is covered with a rich blue garment with a border of gold and lined with orange. From his forehead, hands, feet and right side run stylised trickles of blood. The whole effect (with the exception of the green band) is rich and precise. By contrast, the cut-branch cross on which he hangs (set against a reddish cross-shaped panel), is a blank matt pale green, outlined in black and with orange on the cut-branch stubs as the only additional colour.

There is no doubt about the effectiveness of the contrast, but considerable doubt about whether it is what the artist intended. If one looks closely at the cross it is immediately clear that, except for those from Christ's side which flow straight on to the reddish background cross, the trickles of blood from Christ's wounds are interrupted by the green cut-branch cross, but continue once they are beyond it. The blood from Christ's right hand re-appears first on the black outline of the cross, then at one point crosses the orange of a branch stub, and finally flows over the reddish background cross and onto the gold background. The same is broadly

true of the left hand, though there is no branch stub. At his feet the effect is most marked since there is a large gap between the blood that flows from the wounds in his feet and the blood that appears to well up from the hole in which the cross stands. At no place is the blood shown actually on the green cross, yet its reappearance beyond the edges of that cross, certainly at the cross arms, imply it.

The matt green appears elsewhere in the illumination, and in some places the black line which would once have edged the green is separated from it by a band of gold, and it is clear that the original pigment has flaked away leaving either the stained vellum or the bare gold leaf. In other words, the matt green is not the intended surface but merely a stain left in the vellum. On the whole page there is only one tiny fragment of green pigment remaining, at the foot of Mary's undertunic. The effect which appears so startling is, it seems, not one of artistic intent but one of time. And yet time is surely not the only cause of the disappearance of the green paint. There is a thoroughness about the elimination of almost every speck of green, that does not seem like the effect of time alone.

In the other illuminations in the manuscript where the green pigment has been used, there is in all cases some flaking, and occasionally and in certain areas the disappearance is as complete as on the Crucifixion page.² But on this page, because of the cross, the use of green is more dominant than elsewhere and it seems most likely that the remaining flakes of pigment have been systematically removed, perhaps, prosaically, simply to tidy up the illumination. Unfortunately, the flaking and removal of the pigment has resulted not only in a misrepresentation of the artist's intention but also in some loss of detail – in some cases significant detail. The green band round Christ's head was once the crown of thorns, though now the lines of the twisted twigs are only just visible. On the tomb at the foot of the cross, the interior, and therefore the effect of depth, has totally gone; the artist's intention being represented only by a faint line on the green and the black edging over the central figure's legs. On the cross itself, the topmost part of the ground in which the cross stands is visible only as a faint line on the green of the cross, and the edges of the fingers of Christ's right hand and most of the heads of the nails have been lost. The lining of John's robe no longer has any folds shown, the tunics and wings of the angels are now featureless, and any decoration there might have been on the ground below Mary and John has totally disappeared.³

If one of the reasons for the complete absence of green pigment on the Crucifixion page is that it has been scraped away, is it possible that there is a connection between this and another curious fact? In a half quatrefoil in the right-

hand side of the frame is a figure of Synagoga, holding in her right hand a broken pennon and in her left an upturned pot (Plate 2). Behind her head is the tie of a bandage, but there is almost no sign of the painting of the bandage across her face. It seems likely that the bandage would have been indicated in a way similar to that on the figure of Synagoga in the related Henry of Chichester Missal at Manchester (John Rylands Library MS 24, fol. 153),⁴ that is a tie at the back of the head and two lines of black crossing the face, except that in the Chichester Missal there is a differentiation made between the colour of her face under and outside the bandage. What is curious about the All Souls figure is that though there are no lines across the face, there are lines from the tie at the back across the hair which stop short at the face, and where the lines of black pigment should be, there are narrow lines of flaking white. The only lines of pigment left on the face are on the left cheek and just above the right eyebrow, but these are hardly visible. In other words it seems as though the bandage has been deliberately and painstakingly removed from the face of Synagoga.⁵

It is difficult to say why this might have been done. The banal explanation is that, as with the green pigment, someone was tidying up a flaking surface. But the bandage is painted in black not green, and black, except on gold, shows little tendency to flake. At the other extreme, could it have been an attempt to underline the idea that with Christ's coming the veil was removed from the Old Law:

Hactenus obscuris legis uelata figuris
Adueniente fide rem synagoga uide? ⁶

Without further evidence, neither of these suggestions seems completely satisfactory. Unfortunately the somewhat sketchy history of the manuscript up to its donation to All Souls College by Daniel Lysons in 1772 seems to give little help. Apart from the annotations in the hand of John Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter, and the seventeenth-century inscription by Robert Mandey on flyleaf 2/fol. 2,⁷ there is no easy way of telling into whose hands it fell. There are one or two peculiarities in the later additions to the manuscript, however, which may give an indication of the kind of person who at one time owned it. In the calendar there are the expected erasures of certain saints, but most of these have been re-written in brown ink in a hand imitating the *textura* of the original. Is this further tidying up? Or does it go with the insertion of an obit for Mary Tudor for the seventeenth of November and perhaps indicate a Catholic owner? At the tops of the relevant calendar pages the names of the months have been added in Latin and

the psalter itself has been divided up for morning and evening recitation of the psalms in thirty days.⁸ Also, the psalms have been numbered, and identifications of the Old Testament pieces (the canticles), customarily added at the end of the psalms, appear with some notes. Much of this seems to be the work of Robert Mandey, but though it is suggestive of continuing use (partly perhaps scholarly, partly perhaps devotional), it is not easy to make a convincing link between these additions and the alterations to the green pigment or to Synagoga's bandage. Perhaps the most that one can say is that if someone, possibly Mandey, was sufficiently interested in the manuscript to bring it into line with current Anglican liturgical usage, presumably in order to use it, the same person might well have been concerned to improve its appearance by tidying the flaking green paint. But the alteration to Synagoga's bandage argues very acute observation of the miniature and a concern of a very particular kind.

If this problem is at the moment insoluble, another is soluble but only controversially so. For some time now descriptions have appeared of the three figures at the foot of the cross (Plate 3), and though there has been a certain amount of agreement in these descriptions, there has also been some variation. E. G. Millar says, 'below, Adam, Eve (?) and another receive the Holy Blood'; O. E. Saunders, 'Below is the symbolical figure of Adam rising from his grave, out of which the cross grows'; Margaret Rickert, 'Below are the dead rising from the tomb'. Gertrud Schiller has described the figures as 'Resurrection of the Dead' in the caption to her reproduction of the page, and most recently Nigel Morgan has described them as, 'Adam rising from the tomb' and '[. . .] Adam and two other figures in poses of resurrection'.⁹

Before considering what this scene might represent, it is essential to describe the page as a whole and the group below the cross in some detail. In circular medallions at the corners, four angels kneel, honouring the act of sacrifice (and the Trinity) with swinging censers, three of which cross the edge of the medallions and intrude into the main scene. Above the Crucifixion, contained in a half medallion in the frame, is a half-figure of God the Father holding the dove of the Holy Spirit (facing upwards) and with a worshipping angel on each side. He stares out at the viewer. There is no contact between these two and the cross, and this is not an obvious Throne of Grace image or *gnadenstuhl*.¹⁴ Above the arms of the cross the sun (on the viewer's left) and the moon (on the right) appear as faces with eyes closed. The sun is a simple circular disc; the moon is also a disc but containing a female face framed on the viewer's right by a crescent moon on the wane. On Christ's right, Mary wrings her hands, her eyes cast down.

On his left, John, with partly cast-down eyes rests his head on the back of his right hand and holds back his robe with his left. Behind Mary, in a half medallion in the frame, stands Ecclesia with banner and chalice; behind John, in a similar half medallion, Synagoga, as has already been said, staggers with broken banner staff and emptying urn. The cross is set in a small pit in a hillock. In the border immediately below, contained within a half-medallion, is a rectangular matt green tomb with its 'red' lid lying diagonally across its left-hand side (like a heraldic bend). Out of the tomb, at the centre, rises a single naked man his hands together and raised towards the cross. He has grey hair coming down over his shoulder, and a beard. His raised right thigh and knee are visible just above the rim of the tomb. He is turned half round and looks up to Christ on the cross. Behind him, to the viewer's left, is another naked man, outside the tomb. He is not bearded, has fair hair and his hands are also raised in prayer. To the right of the central figure is a third naked man, also outside the tomb. He too has fair hair but is bearded. His right hand is raised, palm outwards, and his left elbow rests on the frame of the medallion. All the green pigment has gone from the tomb but the black outline of the rim can be seen on the central figure's leg and just behind the lid, and the original line of it can just be made out elsewhere. Out of the pit in which the cross is set four trickles of blood flow, one from the left side and three from the centre. The one on the left runs down to the left-hand figure, two from the centre run down onto the central figure, and the third runs behind the upraised hands of the central figure, and across the raised arm of the right-hand figure.

The pictorial tradition of Adam's grave at the foot of the cross is an old and by this time a common one,¹⁰ but the All Souls' version is a somewhat different development of the tradition. Peter Brieger has described the group most carefully in that he draws attention to the importance of the blood: 'Old Adam and two other naked men rising from their tombs and reached by trickles of blood from the wounds'.¹¹ The description, however, needs to be refined a little. There is only a single tomb and though the trickles of blood do reach all three figures, the ways in which they do so vary. The two in the centre reach the central figure and end on his body (the left-hand one ending on his stomach and the right-hand one exactly on his navel) The single one on the viewer's left, likewise ends on the body of the left-hand figure (the upper part of his right arm), but the third central one flows past the figure on the viewer's right and ends on the edge of the tomb. It is also clear that the figures are not all alike, as Hollaender observes;¹² Adam, for there can be no doubt about the identity of the central figure, holds his hands up as in prayer, so does the figure on the left, but the one on the right leans on his left

arm and gesticulates with his right. Not only is he bearded but he is also somewhat long-nosed,¹³ while his clean-shaven opposite has a nose like Adam's. The question is are these significant distinctions or distinctions without a difference? It is possible that they are indeed, as Morgan has said, simply 'Adam and two other figures in poses of resurrection'. The only distinction then being between Adam and two representative figures. But it is also possible that the variations in the destinations of the trickles of blood are not insignificant, but indicative of something beyond a general idea of salvation.

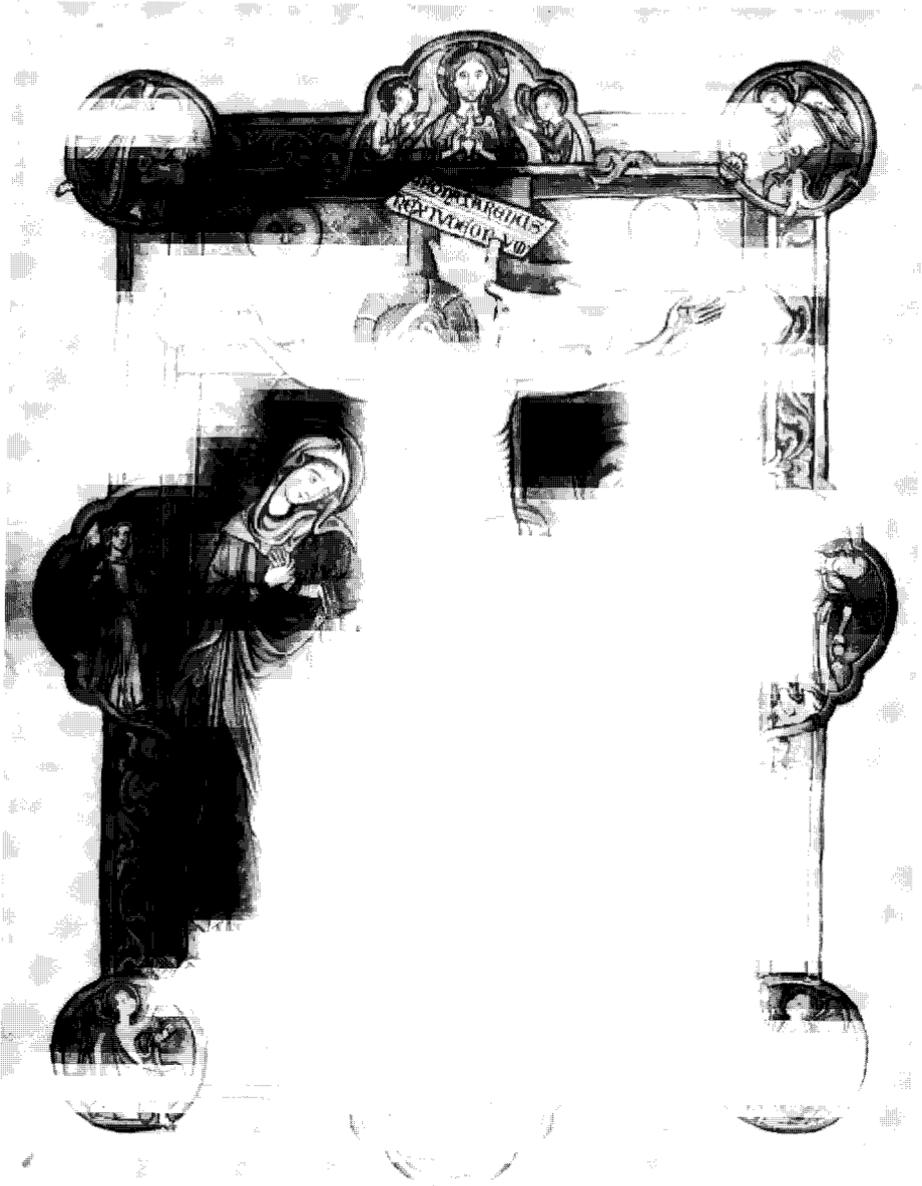
It seems to me that there cannot be a certain answer to the question, but there are one or two matters which are worth bearing in mind. First of all, it is important to put the figures below the cross into the context of the whole scene. The composition is unusual only, perhaps, in containing so many different elements, and the question which naturally arises is whether these elements combine and interrelate or remain separate. Their very presence together means that they interreact. That is inevitable. But there does seem to be a pattern on each side of the cross – up to a point one might say a commonplace pattern. On the right of Christ: the sun represents the rise of the New Law, Mary represents Ecclesia, which in turn stands behind her. On his left: the moon represents the waning Old Law, John too can represent the Old Law,¹⁵ and behind him stands Synagoga, the Old Law itself. It seems not unreasonable to take the pattern further to the figures at the foot of the cross. There is no doubt that the figures to right and left of Adam are distinguished. The most obvious explanation is that they are Adam's sons: Cain, the elder, (in front of Adam) and Abel, the younger (behind Adam). The differences in appearance could then simply reflect the differences in age. Similar distinctions can be seen in the Cain and Abel figures in the *Beatus* initial (fol. 11/13). But Cain and Abel are frequently seen as representative of the peoples of the Old and the New Law, and Cain, as the murderer of Abel, is also seen as a figure of the crucifiers of Christ, and Abel as a figure of Christ himself, for example: 'Itaque occiditur Abel minor natu a fratre majore natu: occiditur Christus caput populi minoris natu a populo Judaeorum majore natu: ille in campo, iste in Calvariae loco'.¹⁶

Rather than just a hopeful image of salvation, then, the Crucifixion page may carry an image of judgement. God the Father, youthful like the Christ below him, has the steadfast gaze of a judge. Salvation is now a possibility, but only for those who accept it. In addition to an image of the Old Law giving way to the New and the promise of salvation, there is a hint of the threat of damnation for those who, like Cain, reject the promise. 'Maior est iniquitas mea quam ut veniam

Some Notes on the Amesbury Psalter Crucifixion

merear' (Genesis 4. 14); despair of the power of God's mercy, interpreted by many as the sin against the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ Whether the destination of a trickle of blood can carry such weight depends in the end upon individual perceptions of the artist's (or his director's) concern with detail. The artistic importance of the Amesbury Psalter has long been recognised, but there are questions relating to the physical state of the manuscript, to its past ownership and, perhaps, to its iconographic significance that deserve further consideration.¹⁸

Plate 1: Full page miniature of the Crucifixion
(All Souls College, Oxford, MS 6, fol. 3/5)



Reproduced by kind permission of the Warden and Fellows of
All Souls College, Oxford



Plate 2: Detail of fol. 3/5: Synagoga

The black lines of the bandage can be clearly seen on her hair, and their original positions just made out in the broken line of white pigment on her right cheek, nose and forehead.

Plate 3: Detail of fol. 3/5: the group below the cross

The termination of the right-hand trickle of blood can just be made out on the black line of the edge of the tomb. Note the rough edges of the matt green where pigment has been lost or removed.



NOTES

¹ The best colour reproduction of the Crucifixion page appears in N. J. Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts (II) 1250-1285*, A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles, 4 (London: Miller, 1988), plate 29. This present article was first prepared as a note for the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* in 1977. I am grateful to the editors for their careful consideration and helpful comments at that time and particularly for putting me in touch with Professor Morgan whose friendly and painstaking response to the note delayed it by very properly making me aware of the many new directions it might take. I hope it has gained something from both, but the shortcomings, many of which I know remain, are my own. All the plates in this article are reproduced by kind permission of the Warden and Fellows of All Souls College, Oxford. I am most grateful to successive Librarians at All Souls College for their friendly assistance over many years, and especially to the present Librarian-in-Charge and her assistant for invaluable help with the colour illustrations. The manuscript has been re-foliated by the exclusion of the two fly-leaves from the numbering. Both foliations, divided by a slash, are used in references here, the new one being given first. There is a recent and full description of the manuscript in Andrew G. Watson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Medieval Manuscripts of All Souls College Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 13-15.

² The illuminator clearly had difficulties with the green pigment. All the full-page miniatures, except that on fol. 4/6, Christ in Majesty, which uses hardly any green, are in a state similar to that of the Crucifixion, though in no case has the green been removed quite so thoroughly as there. Deliberate removal after initial break-up of the pigment would again seem the most likely explanation of the totally blank areas. On fol. 1/3, the Annunciation, only the small area of ground is completely blank, though the shading on Mary's robe and on the buildings at the top has flaked a little. On fol. 2/4, Virgin and Child, there is more use of green and almost all, even the smallest areas, are now blank. This affects particularly the basilisk under Mary's left foot and the tunic of the angel at the top left. The green shading still appears to some extent on the lining of Mary's cloak, and on the turrets above her head. The Beatus page too (fol. 11/13) has suffered, losing some of its detail; especially the shape of the altar and Cain's sheaf (medallion top right), Abraham's altar (medallion middle right), and the stem of the Jesse Tree. The sea surrounding the Ark, however, (medallion bottom right), and Abel's tunic (medallion top left) retain their green pigment almost completely. Other colours are little affected except where they are over gold leaf, or, in the case of the Annunciation (fol. 1/3), where a patch (top left corner) has strained the page and forced it to fold diagonally across the figure of Gabriel - though even here the loss is slight. (The patch was removed and the leaf restored in the conservation of the manuscript by Nicholas Pickwoad in 1990.) All colours stain

through the vellum on to the reverse of the illumination to some extent, but the green most markedly. One of the blues used frequently shows the same stain colour as the green.

³ The original decoration of the ground may be perhaps deduced from the illuminated initial on fol. 62v/64v, *Dixit insipiens* (Temptation in the Wilderness), where though there is some loss of gold leaf and the devil's face has been scored across, the ground is almost intact, or, to a lesser extent, that on fol. 94/96, *Exultate Deo* (Jacob's dream and wrestling with the angel). The decoration on Christ's tomb on fol. 112/114, *Domine exaudi* (Resurrection) may give an idea of what is lost from the tomb at the foot of the cross.

⁴ Reproduced in Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts (II)*, plate 20.

⁵ This has led to some errors in description. O. E. Saunders says that Synagoga 'is not, as usual, blindfolded'; Lewis Edwards, 'she is not however blindfolded or veiled', and A. E. Hollaender, most positively, 'this time the Synagogue is *not* blindfolded – a remarkable variation'. See Saunders, *English Illumination*, 2 vols (Firenze: Pantheon; Paris: Pegasus Press, 1928), 1, 63; Edwards, 'Some English Examples of the Medieval Representation of the Church and Synagogue', *Jewish Historical Society of England*, 18 (1958), 73; Hollaender, 'The Sarum Illuminator and his School', *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, 50 (1943), 243. In her excellently detailed typescript notes on the Amesbury Psalter, Mrs Lucia N. Valentine first wrote simply: 'She is not blindfold', and then added by hand: '[. . .] owing to the colourist ignoring the lines indicating the position of the bandage'. I am grateful to Mr J. S. G. Simmons, at the time Librarian of the Codrington Library, for obtaining Mrs Valentine's permission to make use of her notes, and to her for granting permission.

⁶ See Eton College MS 177, fol. 7. These lines border a picture of Synagoga in which a hand draws away a veil from her head. Compare Lambeth Bible (Lambeth Palace Library MS 3) fol. 198, where Synagoga stands between two prophets and again a hand pulls away the veil (C. R. Dodwell, *The Great Lambeth Bible* (London: Faber, 1959), plate 4). Neither of these, however, refers directly to the Crucifixion. The elaborately symbolic Crucifixion in the eleventh-century Uta Gospels refers to the same idea by means of a medallion of the splitting of the veil of the temple (bottom left) with the inscription: '*Velum templi scissum est / Quia obscuritas legis ablata est*' (C. R. Dodwell, *Painting in Europe 800 to 1200* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), plate 84).

⁷ See Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts (II)*, p. 61. The inscription runs as follows: 'Rob. Mandey / Memorandum, Psalmus nonus in hac translatione continet psalmum 10^{mum} et ea ratione variatio cum Hebraica, siue anglicana quoad numerum vsque psalmum 146 qui diuiditur in psalmos duos complere numerum 150'. Morgan (*Early Gothic Manuscripts (II)*, p. 61) reads the name as 'Manday', Watson reads 'Mandey' (*Manuscripts of All Souls*, p. 15). Robert Mandey may be the gentleman of that name, living at North Nibley in Gloucestershire, who witnessed a number of deeds and who seems to have become receiver of rents to Lord Berkeley in 1671

(Gloucestershire Record Office, Parish Deeds, D2957, and D225). The Lysons family had extensive estates in Gloucestershire, their main seat being at Hampsted (or Hampstead) Court, just south of Gloucester, and the manuscript may well have come to them there. For Daniel Lysons, see *Dictionary of National Biography* under Daniel Lysons, 1727-1800. It should be said that it is only an assumption that Mandey owned the All Souls Psalter, but his free annotation of it certainly suggests that. Watson suggests that Mandey's annotations 'evidence a Roman Catholic allegiance' (*Manuscripts of All Souls*, p. 15). The only indubitable sign of this is the obit for Mary Tudor which does not seem to me to be in Mandey's hand, though the brevity of it makes absolute certainty impossible. The re-insertions of 'Papa' and the saints in the calendar could just be antiquarian tidying-up.

⁸ The psalms are divided according to the list first set out in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer under 'The Ordre how the Psalter is appoynted to bee redde'. Both Mandey and the BCP *Ordre* point out the discrepancy between the Hebrew and Latin versions in divisions and numbering of the psalms. They are also similar in that they both ignore the conflation of psalms 114 and 115 (AV) in the Latin, and the division of 116 (AV) into two, even though these changes briefly add a new variation to the numbering. The divisions are shown in the psalter by a number for the day, and a letter (M or V) for morning or evening prayer next to the opening of the psalm, and a corresponding sign at the top of the page (i.e. psalms 1-5 are marked 'I M'; 6-8, 'I V'; 9-10, '2 M'; and so on). Mandey indicates on fols. 18/20 and 157/159 the places where the Latin departs from and rejoins the Hebrew numbering. His reference for the *Canticum Anne* on fol. 160v/162v is '1.Sam: c.2.v.1' – an English Bible reference rather than a Vulgate one.

⁹ E. G. Millar, *English Illuminated Manuscripts from the 10th to the 13th Centuries* (Paris and Brussels: Oest, 1926), p. 97; O. E. Saunders, *English Illumination*, I, 63; Margaret Rickert, *Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 116; Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. by Janet Seligman, 2 vols (London: Humphries, 1972; German edition 1968), II, plate 410; N. J. Morgan, *Early Gothic Manuscripts (II)*, pp. 59 and 60.

¹⁰ For a summary see Schiller, *Iconography*, II, 130-33.

¹¹ *English Art 1216-1307*, Oxford History of English Art, 4 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957) p. 175.

¹² 'Sarum Illuminator', p. 243.

¹³ It should be noted, however, that the nose of the figure on the right is somewhat distorted by the loss of some pigment and the uncovering of the gold beneath. But the black outline remains to show the original shape.

¹⁴ See *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. by Engelbert Kirschbaum and others, 9 vols (Herder: Freiburg im Breisgau, 1994), II, col. 535, and Schiller, *Iconography*, II, 122-24.

Some Notes on the Amesbury Psalter Crucifixion

¹⁵ See, for example, the *Glossa Ordinaria* comment on John 20. 4: '*Joannes significat Synagogam, quae prior venit ad monumentum sed non intravit, quia prophetias de incarnatione et passione audivit sed et mortuum credere noluit. Petrus Ecclesiam, quae cognovit carne mortuum, viventem credidit Deum, post quem et in Judaea in fine intrabit.*' (*Patrologia Latina*, vol. 114, col. 422b), though this relates immediately, of course, to the Resurrection and not the Crucifixion.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, Book 12, chap. 9, *Pat. Lat.*, vol. 42, col. 259.

¹⁷ See, for example, *Glossa Ordinaria*, Genesis 4. 13, *Pat. Lat.*, vol. 113, col. 99.

¹⁸ The image of the Trinity contained in the initial of Psalm 109 is, for example, also unusual (fol. 126/128; see Morgan, *English Gothic Manuscripts (II)*, plate 22). The figures of God the Father and the Son are identical and the Father (on the viewer's right) with his right hand grasps the right wrist of the Son (on the viewer's left), trebly emphasising the words of the psalm: '*Dixit Dominus Domino meo sede a dextris meis*', Psalm 109. 1. Paul Thoby in his extensive survey of the representations of the Crucifixion makes no mention at all of the Amesbury Psalter, nor has he any examples of the particular schematic development represented here; see *La Crucifix des origines au Concile de Trente* (Nantes: [Bellanger], 1959) and *Supplément* (Nantes: [n. pub.], 1963).