

## Visions of the End in Medieval Spain

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# Visions of the End in Medieval Spain

*Catalogue of Illustrated Beatus Commentaries on the  
Apocalypse and Study of the Geneva Beatus*

*John Williams*

*Edited by Therese Martin*

Amsterdam University Press

Front cover illustration: Geneva, Bibliothèque de Genève, Ms. lat. 357, fol. 241: The Institutions of Priscian and the Commentary on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana  
Back cover illustration: Geneva, Bibliothèque de Genève, Ms. lat. 357, fol. 228: The Institutions of Priscian and the Commentary on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden

Lay-out: Crius Group, Hulshout

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 94 6298 062 4  
e-ISBN 978 90 4853 001 4 (pdf)  
DOI 10.5117/9789462980624  
NUR 684



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*To Mary*



**John Williams**

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## Editor's Foreword

The five volumes of John Williams's magnum opus, *The Illustrated Beatus: A Corpus of the Illustrations of the Commentary on the Apocalypse*, came to conclusion in 2003. Throughout the following years, Williams carried on with his research and publications on the Beatus manuscripts, while new works by other scholars appeared, most notably Roger Gryson's 2012 textual analysis of the Beatus Commentary. In the meantime, two heretofore unknown Commentaries came to light, one fragmentary and one nearly complete. A decade after completing *The Illustrated Beatus*, Williams decided to publish an updated summary of his ideas and conclusions that would take into account these discoveries, gathering together, for the first time ever, all twenty-nine known illustrated copies of the Beatus Commentary on the Apocalypse, and undertaking a comparative analysis within a single volume. Williams offers here his latest considerations on the material, revising and summing up a lifetime of study.

This volume also presents an in-depth look at the recently discovered Geneva Beatus. One of only four Commentaries written outside the Iberian Peninsula, this Italian manuscript closely follows a Spanish model but was written in a Beneventan script and painted in a style dramatically different from the Iberian examples. The Geneva Beatus includes multiple exceptional elements that distinguish it from the rest of the Commentaries. Williams discusses each illustration, highlighting especially Geneva's unique characteristics, with the hope that the present publication will facilitate future studies.

When this book was in the final stages of preparation, John Williams was unable to continue working on it, so he asked me to see it through to completion. It was an honor to collaborate with him on its publication and a pleasure to continue learning from him. He died on 6 June 2015, a few months before the book went to press. When in doubt, I turned to his illustrated Beatus Corpus for clarification.



# Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Juan José García, Murray Grigor, Peter Klein, Barbara McCloskey, Teresa Mezquita Mesa, Pablo Molinero, Fernando Regueras, Roger Reynolds (†), Barbara Roth, Barbara Shailor, Hamid Shams, Ana Suárez González, and William Voelkle and The Morgan Library & Museum. Thanks are due as well to all the institutions who hold the manuscripts illustrated in this book, as noted in the catalogue entries and figure captions.

The editor would like to add her gratitude to Erin Dailey, Simon Forde, Judith K. Golden,

Julie Harris, Pamela Patton, and above all to Shannon Wearing.

Both author and editor gratefully acknowledge support from the University of Pittsburgh's Richard D. and Mary Jane Edwards Endowed Publication Fund, and from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013), ERC grant agreement no. 263036.

All translations are by John Williams unless otherwise indicated.



# 1 Visions of the End in Medieval Spain

## Introductory Essay

Three remarkable monuments bestow on Spain a preeminent position in the history of medieval art: the Great Mosque of Córdoba, founded in 784 (Fig. 1), the shrine of the Apostle James at Santiago, founded in the ninth century (Fig. 2), and the illustrated copies of the Commentary on the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana, the subject of this book.

The origins of the last two enterprises can be linked to a single person, the monk named Beatus. Although we have few details of his life, these two undertakings alone would preserve his name for posterity. Beatus completed his first edition of the Commentary on the Apocalypse

in the year 776, and he was present in 785 in the Asturian capital when Adosinda, the widow of King Silo (r. 774-83), took her vows as a nun. He would thus have been known to Alfonso II, the king whose reign from 791 to 842 witnessed the discovery of the tomb of the Apostle James on the western frontier of his kingdom. The association between Saint James and Spain was not a local topic until Beatus in his Commentary credited him with the evangelization of the peninsula. Although Beatus did not speak of James's death and burial, he authored a hymn, "O Dei Verbum," for the predecessor of Alfonso II, King Mauregatus, where James was not only

**Figure 1** Great Mosque of Córdoba, late tenth century



Photo: Therese Martin

**Figure 2** Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, early twelfth century



Photo: Jennifer S. Alexander

identified as the preacher of the Gospel throughout the peninsula, but honored as the patron of Spain as well.<sup>1</sup> The link between the royal family and Liébana, Beatus's monastery, would continue under Alfonso III, king from 866 to 910. A major expansion of the Compostelan *locus sanctus* took place when Sisnando, like Beatus a former abbot of Liébana, presided as bishop of Santiago. He oversaw the construction of the new basilica dedicated in 899, the largest church then in Spain. With this history, it is difficult to deny a connection between the writings of Beatus and the discovery of the apostolic tomb, which fostered a pilgrimage that even today brings thousands to Santiago every year.

### The Commentary on the Apocalypse

If the eighth century was a difficult time for a Europe still coming to terms with the collapse of the Roman Empire, for Iberians it was calamitous. Their Christian kingdom disintegrated almost overnight after an army of Berbers led by Muslim Arabs crossed the narrow Strait of Gibraltar in 711 and took possession of rich lands that had supplied the Roman Empire with wheat, olives, wine, and metals, both precious and base. The lands were so integral to the empire that Caesar was a governor there, and the emperors Trajan and Hadrian were among its natives. For the most part, Iberians would remain where they were after the Islamic conquest and gradually assimilate. Although Muslims tolerated Christianity as a religion of the Book, Christians with a religious calling must have chafed under rules designed by their Islamic governors to veil the public face of Christianity. Numbers took the road north to the unoccupied margin behind the Cantabrian range. Among these refugees would have been a monk named

Beatus. We can only guess at his trajectory, but he must have left al-Andalus about the time Abd al-Rahman I (r. 756-88) arrived and made Córdoba his capital. Beatus then settled in Liébana, where he composed his Commentary.

Internal evidence assigns the Commentary a date around 776. Thus it can be linked, if speculatively, to the prospect of an event even more momentous than the Muslim occupation of most of the peninsula: the end of the world that Christian tradition predicted would take place in the year 800 (Spanish era 838), based on calculations of the earth's age.<sup>2</sup> Beatus was aware of the Church's official stand against trying to predict the end of time. After all, Jesus himself had warned against such attempts, and earlier predictions had proven wrong. However, Beatus's solemn warning that only a quarter of a century remained before the end must reflect his own belief: "Thus, for all that has been said above every catholic ought to ponder, wait, and fear, and to consider these twenty-five years as if they were no more than an hour, and day and night should weep in sackcloth and ashes for their destruction and the world's."<sup>3</sup>

Beatus composed his work by dividing the text of the Apocalypse or Revelation, the final book of the Bible, into sixty-eight sections, termed *storiae*. Typically a dozen or so verses, these present the text in its normal sequence. Each *storia* was followed by a series of exegetical passages – the *explanatio* – which interpret in allegorical and anagogical terms each of the verses or figures in the *storia*. Between the *storia* and its interpretation copied from a variety of sources, Beatus for the first time inserted an illustration that was essentially a pictorial reprise of the Apocalyptic narrative just above it. The Commentary itself was a collage of allegories and symbolic interpretations that would have been virtually impossible

1 González Echegaray 1995, 667ff.

2 Williams 1994a, 103ff.

3 Gryson 2011; Gryson 2012, II: 523.

**Figure 3** Map of the World. *Morgan Beatus*, fols. 33<sup>v</sup>-34. New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, MS M.644



Photo: Joseph Zehavi

to present coherently in pictorial form, given the poetic, visionary language of John's Revelation.

A prominent exception to the Apocalyptic content of Beatus's Commentary was the map of the world present from the beginning (Fig. 3).<sup>4</sup> It was prompted by Beatus's inclusion of *De apostolis* from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (Bk. VII, 9, 1-4), along with a short portion of the "Birth and Death of the Fathers" (*De ortu et obitu patrum*) sometimes attributed to Isidore, in which the Apostle James's mission was to convert Hispania. Probably based on a formula inherited from Late Antiquity, the map, spread across two pages, was one of the most all-encompassing to survive from the

first millennium.<sup>5</sup> Adam and Eve preside over Paradise, which appears in the premier locale at the top (direction east). This is the habitable world of Asia, Europe, and Africa above the equator, the world that in the Book of Genesis was divided among Noah's sons, Shem (Asia), Ham (Africa), and Japeth (Europe), with the ocean surrounding it.

### The Illustrated Commentary

Most historians have assumed that the images in the first illustrated Commentary would not have been invented by Beatus or some scribal colleague, but appropriated from an inherited manuscript of the Apocalypse.

4 For the map, see Saénz-López 2014a and Williams 2014. Crucial questions regarding the history of the map have not been resolved.

5 Williams 1997b; Edson 2005.

However, surviving Apocalyptic imagery offers no counterpart for the illustrations,<sup>6</sup> for the content of each Beatus picture was dictated by the *storia* just above it, and thus generated particular compositions unmatched in other traditions.

The texts of these *storiae* were borrowed from a commentary on the Apocalypse written in the second half of the fourth century by the North African writer Tyconius;<sup>7</sup> one might therefore postulate a lost illustrated Tyconius as a model for Beatus's work. Despite the complete lack of surviving examples, claims for "lost models" played a significant role in the twentieth-century historiography of medieval illumination, and depressed the appreciation of invention in new works. In the case of the illustrated Beatus Commentary, a parallel tradition of original biblical illustration in northern Spain provides an additional reason for recognizing inventiveness in Spanish manuscript production: in the middle of the tenth century at the Castilian monastery of Valeránica, the scribe Florentius created a Bible with some ninety pictures placed next to the passages that provided their inspiration.<sup>8</sup> This fact, together with my growing skepticism of the doctrine that medieval imagery was always based on some earlier model, eventually led me to reject my former assumption of a Tyconian model for the illustrations in favor of the originality of the images composed by Beatus for his Commentary.<sup>9</sup> However, it may be that the Commentary subsequently served as an inspiration for Florentius's illustrated Bible, for, as we shall see, there is reason to think that Florentius himself was responsible for a copy of the Commentary. In any case, I am less certain

today that Beatus would have conceived an illustrated Commentary without a Tyconian model, for the *storiae* – the quotations from the Apocalypse that precede each illustration and essentially define their content – are virtual captions for the pictures. The challenging question of what inspired the inclusion of illustrations is too important to close; it is my hope that future generations of scholars will delve further into this matter.

The decision to incorporate a multitude of illustrations is perhaps the most surprising aspect of the enterprise. Beatus himself may never even have seen an illustrated book. Certainly none from the peninsula survives from so early a date, and claims for their existence lack real evidence. The oldest Iberian manuscript with an image, an orational now in Verona, dates from around the time of the Muslim invasion of 711; it has a drawing of a wind rose of the type associated with Isidore's *De natura rerum*, with personifications of the winds.<sup>10</sup> Helmut Schlunk once argued for the existence of a Visigothic tradition of biblical illumination, in part on the basis of a comparison between the Offering of Isaac in the Bible of 960 and a similar iconography on a capital in the seventh-century church of San Pedro de la Nave.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the origin of Beatus's decision to illustrate his Commentary, it resulted in the most densely illustrated Latin text of any Christian exegetical work up to that point. Ultimately, it was the pictorial cycle rather than Beatus's text that conferred upon him a fame that would endure to our own time, and in places not known to exist when he wrote.

Given the integral relationship of text and picture in the Beatus tradition and the uniformity of imagery and format through the centuries, scholars have assumed that the

6 Klein 1992.

7 Gryson 2011; Gryson 2012, I, XVIII, CXXXVII.

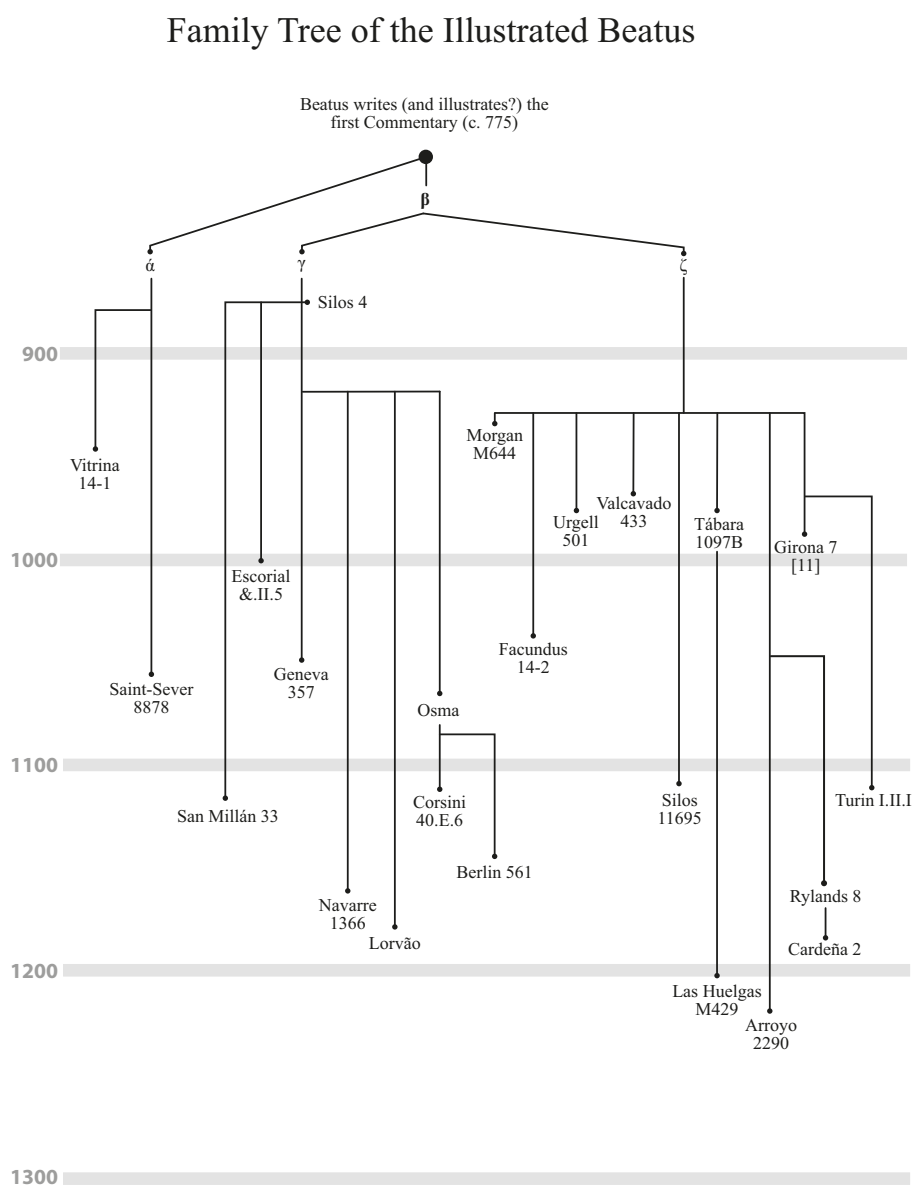
8 Williams 1999b; Díaz y Díaz 1999; Williams 2012b.

9 Williams 2003a, 110–11.

10 Williams 1977, 10–11.

11 Schlunk 1945.



**Figure 4 Family tree of copies of the Commentary (Williams over Gryson)**

Commentary was illustrated from the beginning. Roger Gryson, the editor of the latest and most authoritative edition of the Commentary, states definitively that “it is certain that the author never conceived of his work as other

than illustrated.”<sup>12</sup> It can only be imagined that the illustrations were considered partners in the “reading” of the Apocalyptic narrative that appeared just above them. In the famous

<sup>12</sup> Gryson 2012, I: XVIII.

admonition Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604) made to a bishop who had scandalized believers by removing biblical paintings from a church to avoid idolatry, the pope said that pictures tell a story (*historia*), just as words do.<sup>13</sup> Both the *storiae* of the Beatus Commentary and its pictures were designed to fix in the brothers' minds the message that God would mete out justice, punishing those who rebelled against him and rewarding the righteous, albeit after severe challenges.

As we shall see, post-medieval marginal glosses confirm that the Commentary was read aloud in a monastic setting during meals in the refectory, a practice that presumably dated from much earlier.<sup>14</sup> Thus, as the monks consumed their daily meals, they would have meditated on the transcendent events that were just beyond the horizon.

### The Beatus Tradition: In the Beginning

Although the first Beatus Commentary does not survive, the descent of the tradition through time has left us with forty-one witnesses, some mere fragments.<sup>15</sup> Of the surviving manuscripts, the twenty-nine with illumination are described in the complete census gathered here for the first time; each is referred to parenthetically according to its

census number. Taking into account the presumed copies posited by the family tree of the texts (Fig. 4), at least 100 complete manuscripts may have been executed.<sup>16</sup>

Wilhelm Neuss, the original master of the illustrated Commentary's history, composed a family tree of illuminated copies according to which there was an earlier Branch I, closest to the original text, and a Branch II, subdivided, that arose in the tenth century.<sup>17</sup> Neuss's genealogy has stood the test of time, albeit with modifications resulting from more precise analyses culminating in Gryson's 2012 critical edition.

The oldest witness to the tradition, the fragment now at the Castilian monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos (No. 1), is dated by the style of its script and illustration to the last quarter of the ninth century, about a century after Beatus composed the original. It came to Silos in the eighteenth century from Nájera. Although no earlier illustrated manuscripts survive from the Iberian peninsula, the color palette and ornamental details of the fragment recall manuscripts written during the reign of Alfonso III (d. 910) of Asturias, Beatus's home territory. If the Silos Commentary was Asturian in origin, or if it was slavishly copied from an Asturian model by someone with little experience, as it seems, then it is the Commentary with the closest ties to the region where the archetype originated.

Neuss imagined that the original Beatus resembled the Commentary copied in the middle of the eleventh century at the Gascon monastery of Saint-Sever-sur-l'Adour (No. 13). While it is true that the Saint-Sever Beatus employs the original edition of the text, its relatively naturalistic style, so attractive to Neuss,

13 Carruthers 1990, 222-23; Miranda, C. 1998, 339-49.

14 The Commentary was not useful liturgically, for it divided the text of the Apocalypse in a way that did not correspond to the Easter readings of the mass in the Hispanic rite. However, a Silos lectionary (London, BL, MS Add. 30848) for the Roman rite appropriated Apocalyptic texts from the Commentary for readings on the four Sundays after the Easter octave. See Walker 1998, 88.

15 Gryson 2012, I: XIV-XVI. To this should be added a fragment in Milan, No. 28 in this volume's census.

16 "The history of the text [...] obliges us to suppose that there were as many lost examples as those that survive," Gryson 2012, XVIII.

17 Neuss 1931.

**Figure 5 Relief of Christ with Angels, Quintanilla de las Viñas, late seventh century**



Photo: Hamid Shams

owes its character to an emerging Romanesque aesthetic. By the seventh century, however, peninsular style had already transformed from a Late Classical aesthetic into a more abstract medieval style, as confirmed by figural reliefs

like those in the church of Quintanilla de las Viñas (Fig. 5). The schematic treatment of figures and space in the Silos fragment is almost certainly closer to the style of Beatus's original illustrator than the sophisticated illusionistic techniques employed by Garsia, the artist-scribe responsible for the Saint-Sever Beatus. Indeed, it is apparent that the latter's primitive text is accompanied by a set of images belonging to the tenth-century evolution of the illustrations.

### Monasteries and Scriptoria

The premier sites in the dissemination of Beatus's Commentary after it was launched from Liébana were all in north-central Spain (Fig. 6), in the kingdoms of León, Castile, and Aragon.

**Figure 6 Map of Iberian sites connected to the history of the Beatus Commentary**



Map: Amelia Williams

Strangely enough, none of the surviving copies originated in the region that sheltered Liébana, although, as we saw, the ornament and color of the Silos Commentary (No. 1), the earliest example, is linked to manuscripts from the Asturian region. Beatus's Commentary was born in a monastery, and nurtured by monastic and conventual culture throughout its history. As the original dedication of the Commentary states, it was designed for "the edification of the brothers." Some of these monasteries would have a special place in the history of the Commentary, themselves producing copies for other foundations into the thirteenth century.

Not all monasteries had a scriptorium, a space set aside for the copying of books. In the Beatus tradition, three are especially worthy of close attention because each produced multiple copies: Tábara, Sahagún, and San Millán de la Cogolla. San Salvador de Tábara had one of the most important, having produced at least six copies: three survive and three others are implied by the family tree of texts (see Fig. 4). Indeed, the illustrators of the Tábara Beatus of 970 (No. 5) honored their scriptorium in an extraordinary manner by including a portrait of it (see Fig. 41), the only such image from early medieval Europe. The scriptorium is attached to one side of a five-story bell tower whose masonry construction is indicated by the convention of a pattern of polychromed blocks. This early medieval tower may still survive, wrapped within the twelfth-century tower of the church of Santa María at Tábara, which replaced San Salvador (Fig. 7). In the painted image, it is topped off by a tile roof with two projecting belfries, a bell suspended in each. The tower is populated to a surprising extent: four men, of lay status to judge by their dress, occupy the wooden ladders that provide a means of communication between the floors, while another figure at ground level handles the ropes that allow

**Figure 7** Santa María (formerly San Salvador) de Tábara, consecrated 1137



Photo: Hamid Shams

one of the bells to be rung. In the scriptorium are two scribes dressed as monks: the one on the right wearing the larger hat is identified as Emeterius, the other as Senior. Each holds with one hand what appears to be a book or a page attached to some support; with the other hand each applies a long pen or stylus to the surface. In an adjacent room another seated figure cuts the skin of a sheep or calf with a pair of shears, an earlier stage in the process of producing a manuscript. No windows are represented, but the space must have been well lit.

The scriptorium depicted in the Tábara Beatus is a modest studio in comparison to the space allotted on the ninth-century plan of St. Gall in Switzerland, our earliest graphic witness to scriptorial space.<sup>18</sup> The plan dedicates a generous upper area of 1600 square feet, reached by a monumental set of masonry steps, to the copying of books. Within are seven desks, illuminated by seven windows; each desk is large enough to serve a pair of scribes. St. Gall's idealized (though realistically conceived) plan includes sleeping accommodations for just over 100 monks plus some 130 to 150 servants. At Tábara, the writing room is also depicted as being on the second level, but is a far smaller and more cramped wooden structure communicating with ground level by means of a ladder. Yet if we accept the account in the *Life of Froilanus*, who founded Tábara around 900, this monastery housed "600 souls devoted to God."<sup>19</sup> Since this was a duplex foundation, this number would have included both monks and nuns; male and female lay figures, such as servants and laborers, could also have been included. Even so, it is an incredible number. As we shall see, Tábara's scriptorium played a seminal role in the history of the Beatus tradition.

Summer was an ideal time for writing and painting. The Beatus Commentary that was copied in 970 at Valcavado (No. 4) seems to have been largely the work of a single monk, Obecus, whose colophon states that the copy was completed between 8 June and 8 September. If a dozen Sundays are subtracted, he wrote the book's 230 folios in 79 days at a rate of at least two and a half folios per day, an impressive achievement. Although Obecus did not complain of the physical cost of this

intensive labor, some of his colleagues did. Two decades earlier the eminent scribe Florentius of Valeránica, a key figure in the development of the Beatus tradition carried out by Maius of Tábara, penned a poetic lament in the colophon of the Book of Homilies by Smaragdus:

A man who knows how to write may think this no great feat. But only try to do it yourself and you shall learn how arduous is the writer's task. It dims your eyes, makes your back ache, and knits your chest and belly together – it is a terrible ordeal for the whole body. So, gentle reader, turn these pages carefully and keep your fingers far from the text. For just as hail plays havoc with the fruits of spring, so a careless reader is a bane to books and writing.<sup>20</sup>

### San Salvador de Tábara

In the following sections, our focus turns to the scriptoria and individual artists whose activities are most important to the development and long chronology of the Beatus manuscripts, beginning with the critical significance of Tábara. It was at Tábara that the Beatus Commentary underwent a pictorial reformation that granted it a second life, and in turn offered posterity a splendid new chapter in the history of book illustration. Although we celebrate the eminence of Tábara on the basis of the three copies that survive, the textual stemma, as noted, testifies to another three now lost. The author of the seminal revision of the format was in all probability a monk named Maius (or Magius). He was responsible for the oldest surviving complete

18 Horn and Born 1979, I: 145–55; [www.stgallplan.org/en/index\\_plan.html](http://www.stgallplan.org/en/index_plan.html).

19 Williams 2011a, 17.

20 Nordenfalk in Grabar and Nordenfalk 1957, 168. This would be repeated verbatim in 1091 by Munnius in a Beatus Commentary written at Santo Domingo de Silos (No. 16). Such laments were a part of European scribal traditions.

copy, today in the Morgan Library & Museum in New York (No. 2). Its colophon reveals that it was made for a monastery dedicated to St. Michael. The prevailing assumption is that this was San Miguel de Escalada, founded in 913 by monks from Córdoba, and that Maius must have headed its scriptorium; this identification is based on the fact that at one time the Morgan Commentary was in Escalada, for on folio 293<sup>v</sup> is a note in fourteenth-century script reading *Obiit Petrus levita CSR*.<sup>21</sup> This reference to the death of a canon of San Rufe has been explained by the fact that in 1156 the monks of Escalada were replaced by canons of Saint-Rufé d'Avignon. It should be noted, however, that around 900, when Froilanus of León founded San Salvador de Tábara, he also founded San Miguel de Moreruela just six kilometers to the southeast (Figs. 8, 9).<sup>22</sup> There is a strong circumstantial case to be made that Maius copied his text at Tábara for this sister monastery of Moreruela and not for Escalada, as we have no evidence otherwise of contact between Tábara and Escalada. Moreruela would have been destroyed when the Muslim general al-Mansur (also known as Almanzor, d. 1002) raided this area of Zamora at the end of the tenth century. If the Beatus Commentary were at Moreruela, it would have been relocated at that time to another monastery in the kingdom of León. Its eventual home at Escalada could well have been made possible by the fact that the royal daughters of the Leonese throne, by way of the inheritance termed the *infantazgo*, came into possession of the monasteries of the kingdom with all their goods. Documentary evidence testifies to gifts awarded by the infantas of León to the monastery of Escalada on more than one occasion.

21 García Lobo 2005, 58-65.

22 Ferrero Gutiérrez 2011; Williams 2011a, 30ff.

**Figure 8 San Miguel de Moreruela, thirteenth century**



Photo: Hamid Shams

What we know of Maius comes from the extraordinarily informative colophon beneath the grand Omega (Fig. 10) at the end of a Commentary completed at Tábara by his disciple, Emeterius, in 970 (No. 5):

O truly blessed man, whose body lies in a coffin in the cloister and who wished to see the book brought to completion and bound. This was Magius, priest and monk, the worthy master-painter. He gave up the work he began when he went eternally to Christ on the feast of St. Faustus, the third day before he departed out of time, era 1006 [AD 968]. Then I, the priest Emeterius, formed by my master Magius, was called to the monastery which was raised under the protection of the Savior when they wished to complete the book for the most exalted Lord, and I took it up once more. From the kalends of May to the 6th kalends of August, I completed the book in all its authority. May he deserve to be crowned with Christ. Amen. O tower of Tábara, tall and of stone, the first place where Emeterius sat for three months bent over and with all his limbs maneuvered the pen. The book was finished the 6th kalends of August era 1008 [AD 970] [in the ninth hour].<sup>23</sup>

23 Pérez 2010, 224-26.