

CHAPTER 16

EUROPE AFTER THE FALL OF ROME

Early Medieval Art in the West

Summary:

This chapter presents the Early Medieval Period, no longer known as a dark period simply existing between classical Rome and Renaissance Italy. This chapter deals with Europe after the Fall of Rome. It discusses the split of the Empire into two distinct units, the East and the West. This chapter chronicles the development of medieval Europe from ca. CE 500-1000. *The student will be reacquainted with Imperial Rome and how this icon, Rome, redefined the “barbarian” lexicon.* This period, roughly 500 years in length, describes the development of Europe into separate states and entities. It was not yet fully formed as Europe is today; however, this period does slowly lead to that formation. There are migrations from the East that account for much of the unrest. Powerful groups of peoples migrated and settled in the remnants of the domain of the Roman Empire; *there was a fusion of images, motifs and perceptions synthesizing together the heritage of the Christian, Greco-Roman and the barbarian.*

I. Lecture Model

Again a social approach might be more useful in gaining an understanding of the diversities that coexisted during this longer period of social, political and artistic evolution. It will also be very useful to use an iconographic methodology in order to explain the very rich religious tradition, which flourished at this time as well.

- Two things were necessary for the development of medieval civilization. The first was the Christianization of the barbarian tribes invading Europe.
- The second was the partial unification of Western Europe. The Roman Empire had repelled the barbarian influx into Europe, but now, by the 5th century CE, the empire had collapsed and it no longer guarded the “gates of the city.”
- The Migration Period in Europe is generally dated from the 5th century A. D., the date of the arrival of the Huns. During this period new barbarian groups were on the move; they were gradually settling and were being converted to Christianity by missionary monks.
- *These peoples were generally centered on the Baltic Sea in northern Germany and southern Scandinavia.*
- Developing a higher technology, the use of iron, caused them to seek more land for settlement, and, thus, they were brought into the purview of the Roman Empire.
- The appearance of the Huns, a tribe from Mongolia in the 5th century A. D., caused the Goths, now Arian Christians, to split into two groups.
- The Lombards and the Burgundians established permanent kingdoms in Italy and France, while the Angles and Saxons moved across the Channel and established their presence in England.
- The Angles and the Saxons pushed the Celts, then known as Britons, to the western shore of Great Britain. The Celts had once occupied a large geographic area expanding from Central Europe into France and Spain and then into England, Ireland, and Wales.

■ The Ostrogoths moved west into Italy where they came as allies of the Byzantine Emperor, Zeno. Their leader, *Theodoric*, established a kingdom in Italy that lasted from 489 to 540 A. D.

■ The other group, the Visigoths went on an unbelievably long journey. First they moved south to the tip of Greece, then across the full length of Italy and finally on to Spain, where they established a kingdom that lasted from 412 to 672 A. D.

■ Although the Vandals started farther south, they crossed Europe, down into Spain and then across to North Africa where they established a kingdom from 429 to 523 A.D.

■ After North Africa was re-conquered by *Justinian* in the 6th century A. D. this group disintegrated and were heard from no more, leaving only their name “vandal” as a legacy signifying wanton destruction.

Eventually these peoples were to become civilized and that civilizing process led them to create permanent monuments.

■ Yet they were all aware of Imperial Rome, and the impact this had on these peoples led them to mimic the richness of Imperial Rome, both artistically and politically.

The boundaries of Europe were being laid out and established. They were settling themselves and were becoming the heirs of the Empire; *along with that inheritance was the need for a visual statement of their patrimony (legacy, inheritance).*

■ The art objects, which remain, are small and portable. These works have been excavated from graves and it is not implausible to suggest that they were, in fact, precious works and status objects.

There is precedent from *previous cultures*, which *also had a history of burying not only precious items; but also utilitarian goods as well.*

■ This period also saw the emergence of the Church as a secular (worldly affairs) power.

■ Europe was now open to invasion and conquest, not only from without but also from within. *The struggle for power was a constant and often bloody conflict.* The invasions of the barbarians led to alliances between the papacy and the settled groups who could provide protection.

■ The acknowledgement of the spiritual and economic power of the Church assisted in gaining more barbarian converts to Christianity and they provided even more substantive protection from the invading hordes.

■ The Franks, who moved from Germany into France, established what was to become the powerful Frankish or *Merovingian kingdom.*



16-01 Merovingian looped fibula, from Jouy-le-Comte, France, mid sixth century. Silver gilt worked in filigree, with inlays of garnets and other stones, 4" long. Musée des Antiquités Nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

- **The Frankish fibula (16-1), 6th- 7th-century A. D., is such an object that defines this early period. It is small and ornate. The color of the set stones hearkens back to Imperial Rome. The color red was thought to be an imperial color.**
- **The surface is fully involved in the entire design, and the shape hints at a fantastic animal, a heritage from the Frankish barbaric past.**
- **The small fish attached to the surface of the pin also indicates the conversion to Christianity. *The fish was a quiet symbol used during the period of Persecution in the Roman Empire to unobtrusively show religious preference.***
- **The Merovingians adapted this symbol not only to indicate their religion but also to join in the mandate set forth by Christ, “become fishers of souls.”**
- ***The symbol, fish, was now used as a testimonial of the preference rather than its earlier use as an inconspicuous sign.***
- ***The color could also be attributed to the Christian Church as a symbol for the Passion of Christ and Martyrdom.***
- **The small fish set on the surface of the fibula (fastener or buckle or pin) does indicate the religious inclination of the owner. At this time the population, both aristocratic and peasant, were illiterate, so it was essential for signs and symbols to be used. As previously stated *the stones in the fibula take on iconic value.***
- **The garnet (red gemstone) is aligned not only with the Passion of Christ but also is used in reference to the Virgin as well as the Early Christian martyrs. It is also a reference to Imperial Rome.**



11-15 Christ as the Good Shepherd, mosaic from the entrance wall of the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna, Italy, ca. 425.

A small medallion of a triumphant Christ ca. CE 750, illustrates even more the impact Imperial Rome and the Church had on these newly Christianized Frankish peoples.

- A youthful Christ, reminiscent of the *Good Shepherd* from the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (11-15), is depicted in cloisonné (partitioned areas filled with enamel and high fired).
- The color reflects the glory of God and also repeats the colors of Imperial Rome. This work also shows a connection with the Byzantine East. Yellow, blue, and red are frequently used colors in the Byzantine mosaic programs designed for church interiors.
- This imitation does indicate a contact between the East and the West. What these objects show, even more, *is the evolution of an iconic style and theme that was to become a blueprint for this period.*
- These newly settled groups of peoples, who became Christian, adopted the visual motifs that defined and explained the teachings of the Church.
- These small objects made the philosophical tenets of this new religion more real and believable. It would be much easier to believe in an “unseen” god if one had in hand an image or reasonable likeness of that god.
- *Even more important it is easier to acknowledge a Supreme Being if the associated works reflect a heavenly glory and power, and the richness of these small metal objects do mirror that glory.*
- These Frankish peoples also wanted to show an allegiance to Imperial Rome and their role as the rightful heirs of the Roman Empire.



16-02 Purse cover, from the Sutton Hoo ship burial in Suffolk, England, ca. 625. Gold, glass, and enamel cloisonné with garnets and emeralds, 7 1/2" long. British Museum, London.

The Sutton Hoo treasure assembled for the ship burial of an Anglo Saxon king who died in 656 CE contained objects from Luristan and Byzantium, as well as magnificent gold jewelry decorated with garnets, mosaic glass, filigree and animal interlace made in England.

- The motif of the man and lions seen on the Sutton Hoo purse, ca. CE 625 (16-2), may ultimately derive from the ancient Near East, like the representations of Gilgamesh and his lions (2-10),



- The old symbol of the hero's conquest of the forces of Nature. For Christians, this motif had come to represent Daniel in the Lion's Den.
- It is now generally believed that the Sutton Hoo ship burial was given in honor of King Raedwald who became a Christian; if that is the case, this motif could also be interpreted in the Christian sense.



16-03 Animal-head post, from the Oseberg, Norway, ship burial, ca. 825. Wood, head approx. 5" high. Vikingskipshuset, Oslo.

■ The Sutton Hoo treasure was originally placed in a wooden ship, much like the 9th century Viking ship from Osberg. The swirl and infinite knot patterns, motifs that have roots in the barbarian figural body of design elements, is evident in Hiberno-Saxon manuscripts.

■ The Irish monks utilized motifs from both Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Germanic traditions, blending the two into richly interlaced ornamental compositions.



16-06 Cross and carpet page, folio 26 verso of the Lindisfarne Gospels, from Northumbria, England, ca. 698-721. Tempera on vellum, 1'1 1/2" X 9 1/4". British Library, London.

■ A splendid interlace covers the cross from the so-called “carpet page” (16-6) from the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, a manuscript that was illuminated at the monastery of Lindisfarne in the late 7th century.

■ This manuscript combines Germanic rigid organization of the page with the swirling Celtic decorative filling. The page becomes a rich pattern and design. The monks who created this work sought to craft a purpose, which would encourage meditation and thoughtful prayer.

■ Another rationale presented for this surface treatment is thought *to be a trap for the devil or evil*. The creature or evil once trapped within the endless and infinite knots would forever circle with no prospect of escape.

■ Another argument posed for this richly ornamented page is a visual illustration for the “*infinite goodness of God and his boundless love for humanity.*”

■ The continuous pattern seen in the carpet page has been suggested to represent “*boundless love*” and *the infinity of heaven.*

The pattern of endless design does trace its roots deep into the past. Bronze mounts found in Emilia, Italy, dated to the late 4th century B.C. illustrate the heritage of the Irish manuscript page. Not as richly involved, nevertheless, the knotting pattern is clearly seen and it does encompass the entire surface of the mounts.



16-05 Man (symbol of Saint Matthew), folio 21 verso of the Book of Durrow, possibly from Iona, Scotland, ca. 660-680. Ink and tempera on parchment, 9 5/8" X 6 1/8". Trinity College Library, Dub

- Another carpet page, from the *Book of Durrow*, ca. CE 645, illustrates this endless pattern as well.
- In the border medallions, the artist-monk has included the Gordian knot pattern, again reminiscent of the infinite goodness of God.
- The surface ornamentation of both manuscripts indicates the strong use of design, but they also point to the interchange and exchange of stylistic motifs and ideas.
- We know that precious manuscripts were brought to monasteries in order to be copied, for we have a record that the *Codex Amiatinus* was one of three copies made at the English monastery of Jarrow from a manuscript brought to the monastery by the Bishop of Jarrow. The original manuscript came from Rome.



6-07 (left) Saint Matthew, folio 25 verso of the Lindisfarne Gospels, from Northumbria, England, ca. 698-721. Tempera on vellum, 1'1 1/2" X 9 1/4". British Library, London.

(Right) "Scribe Ezra" from the *Codex Amiatinus*

- In comparing "St. Matthew" (16-7) from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* to the "Scribe Ezra" from the *Codex Amiatinus*, (left) we see the monk who made the Jarrow copy had a better understanding of the original work than the monk who made the Lindisfarne copy.
- The Jarrow copy (*Codex Amiatinus*) depicted the furniture more effectively in space, giving it volume and substance; he also articulated the human body more effectively than the patterned body of St. Matthew from the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (16-7).

■ However, *the foundational idea of both manuscripts is the “act of writing”*. Both characters are seen in the act of writing, in St. Matthew’s case he is writing the actual gospel, and in Ezra’s case, he is transcribing the gospel.

■ It could be argued that the difference between Mathew and Ezra is philosophical as well. Matthew, as an evangelist and recorder of events, first-hand witness during the life of Christ and subsequent years after his death, can be seen as the originator of the written word, both the spiritual Word and the record of the actual events.

■ Whereas Ezra is a scribe, a transcriber, a copyist and therefore is seen in a chamber containing a bookcase with manuscripts. His work is not original in the sense of originality as applied to Matthew.

■ *The intensity of the work of transcribing is in itself the description of the image as much as the act of copying.*

■ Matthew is in a room void of bookcase or manuscripts. The intensity of his work is amplified by the presence of the angel, also his symbol; it could be suggested that this is, indeed, the original creative process of writing and not copying.

■ A further indicator of the *importance of the process*, not only of writing the gospel; but also, of copying the gospel, can be found in the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.

■ A colophon (information relating to the manuscript) has been added to the manuscript indicating the individuals involved in its production. The history of the period has been documented by this entry and we also gain an understanding of the importance of this activity to the community and to the geographic area.

The Vikings remained pagan until the beginning of the 11th century. Not only did they continually harass England and Ireland, but they also sailed to Spain and even through the Straits of Gibraltar in order to gain access to the rich Mediterranean ports.

They initiated trade and mercenary alliances with Byzantium. Viking ship burials provide visual evidence of ornament, which reflects their belief systems. *The burials were usually conducted at sea with the ship set afire and pushed out.*

The old Germanic tale of *Beowulf* describes such a burial; however, some were also buried in the ground, for instance, the Oseberg ship found in Norway.



16-03 Animal-head post, from the Oseberg, Norway, ship burial, ca. 825. Wood, head approx. 5" high. Vikingskipshuset, Oslo.

■ The ship was carved with elaborate animal interlace decoration and topped by a ferocious animal (16-3).



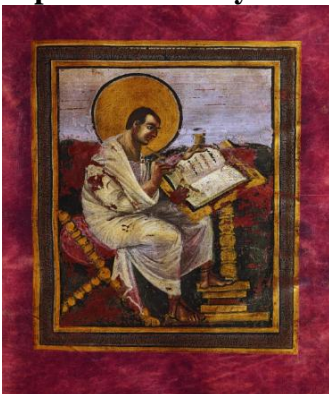
16-03 Animal-head post, from the Oseberg, Norway, ship burial, ca. 825. Wood, head approx. 5" high. Vikingskipshuset, Oslo.

■ When the Vikings were Christianized, they decorated their wooden stave churches with the same motifs (16-4). An interlace pattern of delicacy and intricacy stuns the viewer with an endless repetition of pattern and movement.



16-11 Equestrian portrait of Charlemagne or Charles the Bald, from Metz, France, ninth century. Bronze, originally gilt, 9 1/2" high. Louvre, Paris

Charlemagne (16-11) united much of Europe. He united most of France and Germany, subjugated (conquered) the Slavs north of the Elbe, then conquered Lombardy and most of Italy, and finally he fortified the Pyrenees against Muslim invasion. Charlemagne was 6 feet 4 inches tall, quite unusual for those days, and was renowned for his physical energy. He devoted himself not only to conquest and empire building, but also to learning and political renewal. *He brought manuscripts from Rome* and encouraged men of letters to come to his court. These manuscripts illustrated Roman-painting techniques of modeling and free brushwork in order to create the illusion of depth and solidity.



16-12 Saint Matthew, folio 15 recto of the Coronation Gospels (Gospel Book of Charlemagne), from Aachen, Germany, ca. 800-810. Ink and tempera on vellum, 1'3/4" X 10". Schatzkammer, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



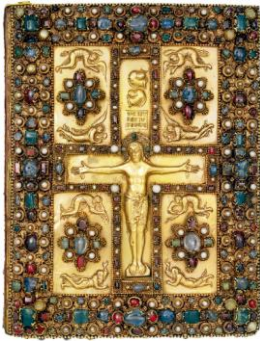
■ This influence can be seen in “St. Matthew” from the *Coronation Gospels* (16-12). A rather different style yet distinctly Carolingian, is the *Ebbo Gospels* (16-13) which shows an energetic St. Matthew, possibly an indirect acknowledgment of the energy Charlemagne brought to his empire.



That same energetic presentation can be seen in another manuscript known as the *Utrecht Psalter* (16-14), which was produced by the Reims workshop.

■ The little landscape seen in the upper portion of the composition blends the modeling of the *Coronation Gospels* and the energetic rhythms of the *Ebbo Gospels*. There is the same combination of nervous line and Roman illusionism.

■ The scenes are illustrations of the Psalms from the Old Testament and are written in Carolingian Miniscule. The illiteracy of the population made reading and writing a very precious activity and the end product, a visually pleasing manuscript was essential. Charlemagne promoted this activity and supported the various schools, which produced manuscripts that not only presented the word of God but also presented it in such a way as to encourage meditation and devotion.



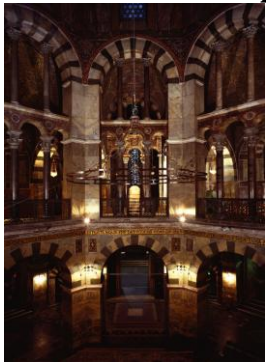
16-15 Crucifixion, front cover of the Lindau Gospels, from Saint Gall, Switzerland, ca. 870. Gold, precious stones, and pearls, 1'1 3/8" X 10 3/8". Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

■ The *Lindau Gospels* cover was in gold set with pearls and precious gems (16-15). The plates of gold are embossed from the back with an image of the Crucified Christ. In this small figure one can see the influence of the Early Christian version of the youthful Christ.



16-18 Torhalle (gatehouse), Lorsch, Germany, ninth century.

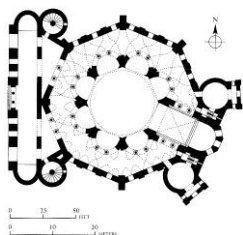
Many of Charlemagne's buildings display his imperial pretensions and his interpretations of Roman architecture. The Torhalle of the Monastery at Lorsch (16-18) is loosely based on a Roman triumphal arch, as was the west front of the palace chapel at Aachen.



16-17 Interior of the Palatine Chapel of Charlemagne, Aachen, Germany, 792-805.

The chapel itself was a two-story construction (16-17), with a throne for Charlemagne located on the upper level. Many of the stones for the chapel had been retrieved from Roman ruins, as were most of the columns.

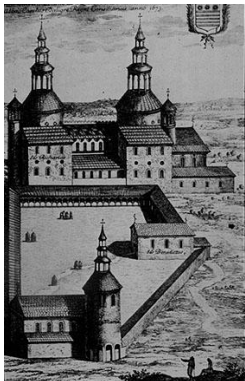
The centralized plan of the building (16-16) bears an obvious resemblance to Justinian's church of San Vitale at Ravenna (12-7); for Charlemagne, San Vitale was just as Roman as the Pantheon. It is quite possible that San Vitale served as the model for Charlemagne's imperial palace chapel (16-16), but it is certainly not a direct copy.



The chapel at Aachen is 16-sided, while San Vitale is octagonal (12-6 and 12-8).



16-20 Westwork of the abbey church, Corvey, Germany, 873-885.



■ Carolingian vertically is apparent in the drawing of the abbey church of St-Riquier at Centula and also the abbey church at Corvey (16-20).

■ In St-Riquier, the great towers are placed at both ends of the building. One of the towers is on the west work while the other is placed over the area of the intersection of nave and transept.

■ In Corvey (16-20), the towers are part of the façade. Both structures are early examples in the development of what is known as “square schematism”, a technique of modular construction in which the proportions of the various parts of the building are strictly related.

■ The basic module is the crossing square that is created by the intersection of nave and transept of equal width. This square is clearly set off by arches, and the length of the nave is precisely double the size of this square.

■ In your book, page 435. In the plan for the abbey church of the monastery of St. Gall (16-19) the crossing square as a basic module is more rigorously applied to the rest of the structure: the transepts are exactly the same size as the crossing square; there is one square between transept and apse; and the nave is 4 1/2 crossing squares long. The aisles are exactly half the width of the crossing square. The entire building is tightly organized and clearly structured.

The unified Holy Roman Empire that Charlemagne established did not survive the rule of his sons. The French segment of Charlemagne’s empire suffered from renewed onslaughts of the Vikings, which eventually led to new and separate political entities.



12-10

However, the idea of the Holy Roman Empire was revived in Germany by the Ottonians in the 10th and 11th centuries. The Ottonians adopted Byzantine trappings to symbolize their imperial power (12-10).



16-29 Otto III enthroned, folio 24 recto of the Gospel Book of Otto III, from Reichenau, Germany, 997-1000.

- The illumination from the *Gospel Book of Otto III* (16-29) clearly demonstrates the imperial pretensions of the Ottonian emperors. Otto I had revived both German political power and learning and had himself crowned Holy Roman Emperor in the year 962.
- Ottonian artists turned much more toward Byzantium for models, perhaps because the rigid formality and protocol of the Byzantine court formed a better model and of course, a Byzantine princess was wife to Otto II.
- The sure lines of Ottonian drapery and flat, clear planes of color seen in the *Gospel Book of Otto III* (16-29) are distinctly different from the earlier Carolingian manuscripts.

It was Ottonian sculpture that became innovative. These sculptors created larger works that led the way to the monumental sculpture of the Romanesque period. *Bernward, Bishop of Hildesheim, played a decisive role in that development. In addition to his scholarly pursuits, Bernward was an accomplished bronze-caster.*

In the year 1001, he made a trip to Rome, where he undoubtedly saw the wooden doors of the Early Christian church of Santa Sabina. The idea of combining the relief tradition of the south with the bronze so beloved by the northerners was most likely Bernward's.



16-24 Doors with relief panels (Genesis, left door; life of Christ, right door), commissioned by Bishop Bernward for Saint Michael's, Hildesheim, Germany, 1015

- The casting of the great doors (16-24) was an impressive technical achievement, for each of the doors weighs over 3000 pounds, and each was cast as a single piece.
- The detail of the scene of God condemning Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is clearly understood from the lively gestures of the figures.
- God points to Adam who in turn points a blaming finger toward Eve and she, in turn, points the blaming finger to the dragon-serpent on the ground.
- There is great dynamism in the figures and the space between them becomes real and believable.
- The viewer can easily understand the context of the story as it appears on the door.
- The church now provides visible evidence for redemption and salvation from the original sin of Adam and Eve.
- Yet there is further instruction, the door relief reminds the viewer of the continuing temptations set forth by the devil and the consequences of sin. Bishop Bernward created a teaching instrument as well as a sculptural monument.



16-26 Crucifix commissioned by Archbishop Gero for Cologne Cathedral, Germany, ca. 970. Painted wood, height of figure 6'2".

- The *Gero Crucifix* (16-26) illustrated the influence from Byzantium.
- Christ is a mature man in the Byzantine sense (12-13 and 12-22).
- Unlike the Carolingian *Lindau Gospels* figure (16-15), which follows the Early Christian tradition of a beardless youth.
- The *Gero Crucifix* has more drama and power.
- It becomes more representational of the period; the viewer relives the agony and pain, which is reflected in this work.
- The sculptor has created an image that illustrates the emotion of the Crucifixion; the sagging body and blood are dramatically presented.

The use of modules by the Germanic builders is thought to derive from the technique of constructing a series of uprights, which are tied together by cross beams. As many units as necessary could be added to give the desired length. The basic modular unit of such structures is known as a “bay”, and it is the use of modular bays that essentially distinguished the church of St. Michael at Hildesheim (16-23).



It has the double apse that we saw at St. Gall and the multiple towers integrated that we saw at St-Riquier. Great square towers are placed over the crossings at both east and west, with small towers at the end of each transept arm (16-22).



■ This can also be seen in the exterior of the abbey church of St. Panteleon, Cologne, 966-980. The piers down the center of the nave alternate with columns according to an A-b-b-A-b-b rhythm.

■ This new feature, which is known as an “*alternating support system*”, marks a further step in the development of what can be called “*square schematism*,” for the piers mark the modular units that repeat the size of the crossing square unit in the nave. We can summarize the steps in the development of square schematism as follows:

1. Equalization of the width of the nave and transept that results in the crossing square.
2. Use of the crossing square as the modular unit.
3. Use of alternating supports to mark the corners of these squares.
4. Upward projection of the modular floor plan.
5. Cross projection of the system by transverse arches.

We have already seen the first three steps in this process, with the third step, the use of alternating supports to mark the corners of the squares, appearing at Hildesheim. Although the ceiling of St. Michael’s is flat and the nave wall is unarticulated, the nave of St. Michael’s contained the seeds of the bay system that was to transform the architectural expression in Western Europe.

Resources:

Videotapes

Book of Durrow 26 min. BVL4328 \$89.95

Book of Kells 26 min. BVL4329 \$89.95

Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire 31 min BVL1956 \$159

City of God 39 min BVL1955 \$159

The Dark Ages and the Millennium 48 min. BVL9363 \$149

The Feudal System 36 min. BVL1957 \$159

Lindisfarne Gospels: Masterpiece of Anglo-Saxon Book Painting 35 min. BVL5978
\$89.95

Vikings and the Normans 37 min. BVL1960 \$159

Sign, Symbol and Script 40 min. BVL9299 \$129

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Books

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Theuws, Franz and Janet L. Nelson. *Rituals of Power: From Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages*. Boston: Brill, 2000.

Web Resources

<http://lcweb.loc.gov/exhibits/bnf/bnf0001.html>

<http://www-sul.stanford.edu/depts/ssrg/medieval/mss/gallery.html>

<http://www.netserf.org>