



NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC

HISTORY

APOCALYPSE

MEDIEVAL VISIONS OF
THE END OF THE WORLD

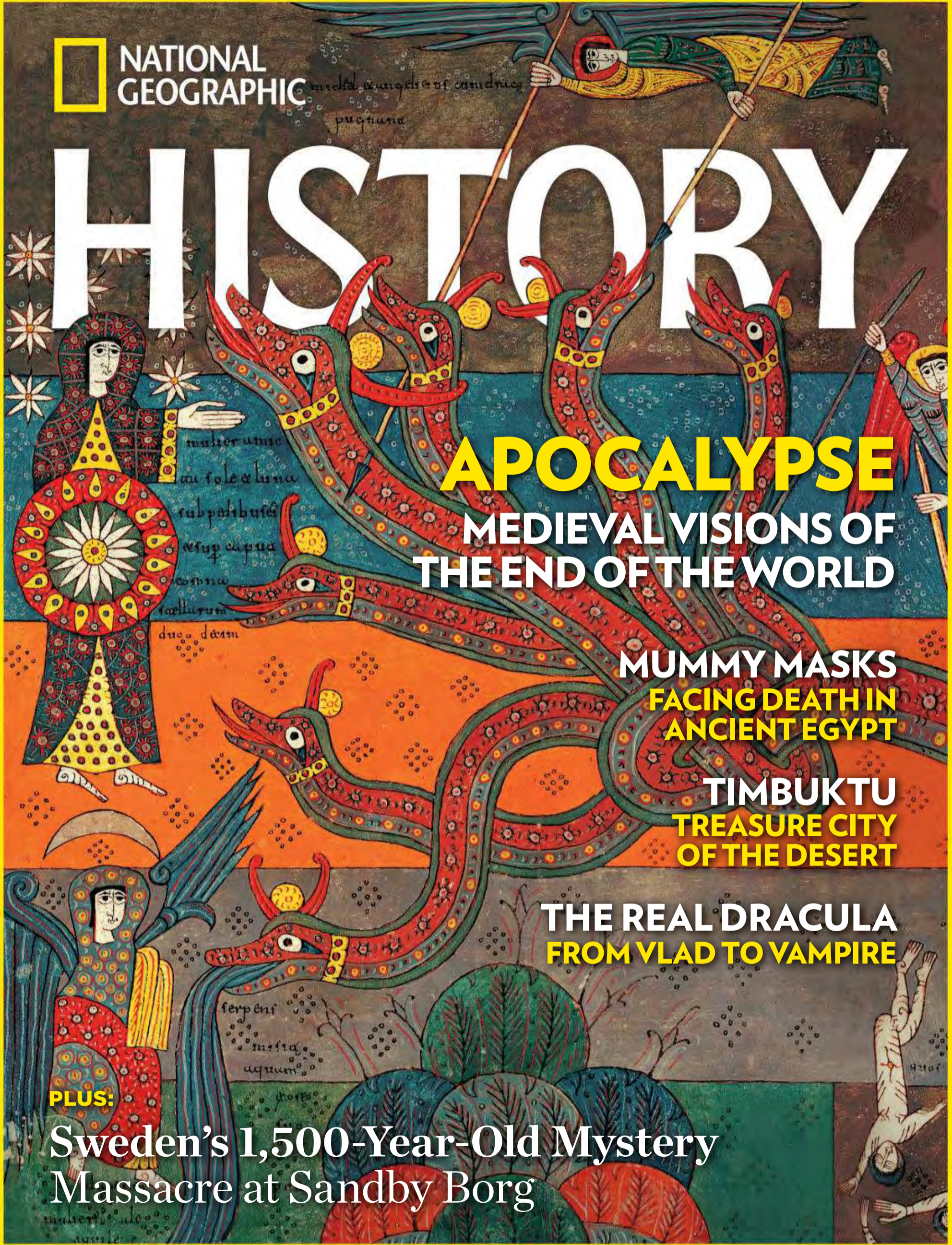
MUMMY MASKS
FACING DEATH IN
ANCIENT EGYPT

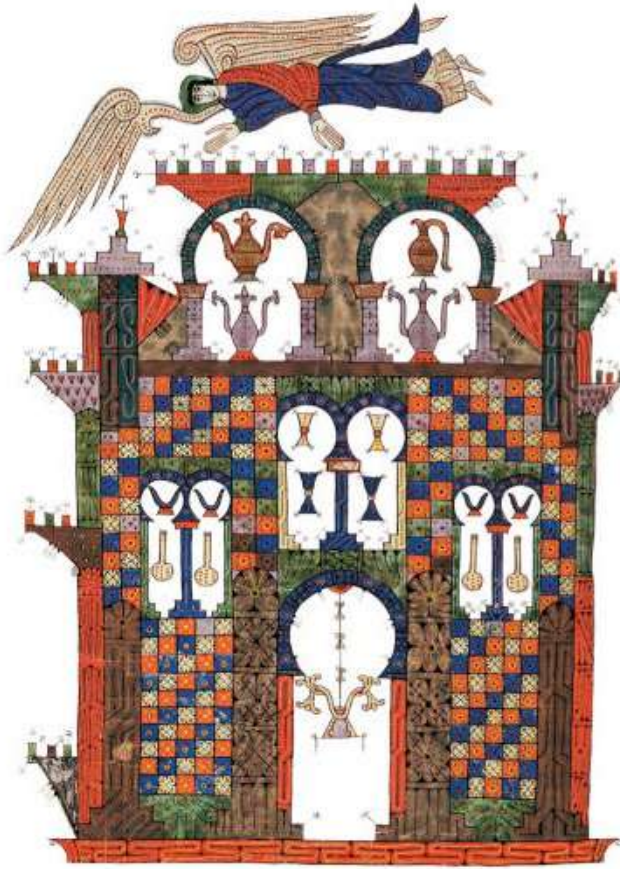
TIMBUKTU
TREASURE CITY
OF THE DESERT

THE REAL DRACULA
FROM VLAD TO VAMPIRE

PLUS:

Sweden's 1,500-Year-Old Mystery
Massacre at Sandby Borg



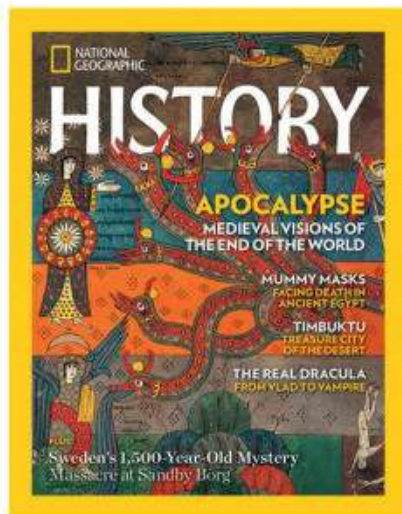


The “stuff as dreams are made on” is among Shakespeare’s most beautiful, evocative phrases and perhaps the polar opposite of the Book of Revelation, which I would describe as pure nightmare fuel. Filled with beasts, blood, and a bottomless pit (among other horrors), the text is what historian Elaine Pagels has called both the “strangest” and “most controversial” book in the Bible.

Written around A.D. 98, Revelation foretells the end of the world, and many scholars believe the author was a war survivor, John of Patmos, who witnessed Roman forces destroy Jerusalem in A.D. 70. The text can be interpreted not only as a spiritual work but also as a contemporary condemnation of Roman power. The city of Babylon and all its evil creatures symbolize Rome and its emperors, and their destruction expresses John of Patmos’s hopes that Jerusalem will be avenged and Rome punished.

There’s no disputing Pagels’s assertions about the Book of Revelation. It is strange and continues to be controversial, but seeing it as a testimony to the horrors of war grounds the text, humanizing its monsters to bring them out of the realm of nightmares and into the annals of history.


Amy Briggs, Executive Editor



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BEASTS FROM THE BOTTOMLESS PIT

Revelation 13 describes the victory of two seven-headed monsters. One is a dragon; the other has the body of a leopard, the feet of a bear, and the jaws of a lion. Earth's inhabitants prostrate themselves before them. Silos Apocalypse, early 12th century, British Library, London

Folio 152





THE END OF THE WORLD

IN THE MIDDLE AGES

In 784, as the armies of Islam occupied the Iberian Peninsula, a Spanish monk wrote a commentary on the Book of Revelation. After his death, copies of his work were adorned with terrifying and strange images, reflecting the zeal and upheaval of the age.

MONICA WALKER VADILLO

THE IMAGES THAT APPEAR IN THIS FEATURE
COME FROM THE FACSIMILE EDITION OF
THE SILOS APOCALYPSE PRODUCED BY
SPECIALIST PUBLISHER M. MOLEIRO.



he word “apocalypse” conjures images of the destruction of the Earth, and the end of time itself. In

the early medieval period, the year 1000 was believed to herald the end-time. As it loomed ever closer, apocalyptic visions occupied the minds of Christian Europe.

For Christians living in what is now Spain in the eighth century, the visions were intensified by the cataclysmic events sweeping through the Iberian Peninsula. Those events inspired a monk, Beatus, to write a commentary on the Book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament that vividly describes how the end-time will unfold. Beatus’s work spread through Europe, and went on to inspire some of the most richly illustrated manuscripts of the medieval age.

Beatus, whose name means “the blessed one,” lived and worked in northern Spain in highly turbulent times. In 711, two decades before his birth, Berber armies from North Africa brought the new faith of Islam into southern Spain. These Muslim forces rapidly toppled the local Christian Visigoth leaders.

One of the few Christian-controlled territories that remained was a mountainous strip in the north, comprising the duchy of Cantabria and the new kingdom of Asturias. Beatus probably grew up in Muslim-controlled regions of Spain and fled to the Christian north.

Accounts of Beatus’s life attest to his erudition. He served as the confessor of the daughter of Alfonso I, the king of Asturias, and as abbot at the Abbey of Santo Toribio de Liébana, high in the Picos de Europa mountain range. There, he wrote his Commentary on the Apocalypse sometime between 776 and 784.



CIRCLE OF AGONY. A MINIATURE FROM THE 12TH-CENTURY SILOS APOCALYPSE SHOWS FOUR DEMONS SURROUNDING A WEALTHY MAN WITH THE ARCHANGEL MICHAEL ABOVE. BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON

A Book for the Times

Beatus’s commentary presents the biblical Book of Revelation. It was authored on the Greek island of Patmos by a man who called himself John. Tradition holds that this writer is the Apostle John, Jesus’s beloved disciple who is credited with writing the biblical Gospel of John. Modern scholars argue

that the author was most likely another John, possibly a preacher from Ephesus, who composed the work around A.D. 90.

In the Book of Revelation an angel reveals to John how the end of the world will unfold: The destruction of the Earth is followed by a final battle between the forces of heaven and hell. The book concludes with a Christ enthroned in majesty following the Last Judgment.

The Book of Revelation has always been a controversial book among Christians because of the ambiguity of its language and the complexity of its symbolism. From the fourth century on, when it was included in the canon of the Bible in the Western church, numerous church fathers and theologians used it to predict when the world would come to an end, based largely on this passage: “When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth” (Revelation 20:7-8).

At the time the Book of Revelation was written, Christians living in Rome had suffered severe persecution under Emperor Domitian, who reigned A.D. 81-96, and Emperor Nero, who ruled 13 years before. By marking the end of the age of temporal power and announcing the beginning of God’s eternal kingdom, Revelation offered a message of hope. Surrounded by Muslim armies nearly 700 years later, Beatus and his fellow Christians found the same hopeful message in the themes of Revelation.

CA 98

The Book of Revelation is written, a series of prophetic visions on the Apocalypse.

4TH CENT.

Revelation is included in the biblical canon, inspiring multiple interpretations.

784

Amid the Muslim invasion of Iberia, a monk, Beatus, writes his commentary on Revelation.

1109

An illuminated commentary is completed at the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos.

1840

Napoleon’s brother Joseph who had acquired the Silos Apocalypse, sells it to the British Library.



THE BEAST FROM THE ABYSS (REVELATION 13). ILLUSTRATION FROM THE SILOS APOCALYPSE, 12TH CENTURY. BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON

AUTHORED IN THE ABBEY

Light fills the altar of the church of the Abbey of Santo Toribio de Liébana in Cantabria, northern Spain, where Beatus wrote his Commentary on the Apocalypse in 784.

PAUL QUAYLE/ALAMY



Kingdoms ca A.D. 730

- Christian kingdoms of Asturias and Cantabria
- Umayyad caliphate



MUSLIM SPAIN

Muslim forces first landed at Gibraltar in 711, rapidly occupying the land they called Al Andalus. By the time of Beatus's birth in around 730, much of the peninsula was under Muslim control except for a sliver of mountainous territory along the northern Atlantic coast.

NG MAPS

At the time of Beatus's birth around 730, Muslim troops were relentlessly advancing northward, pushing over the Pyrenees and deep into France. In 750, when Beatus was about 20, the Umayyad caliphate in Damascus was toppled by the Abbasid dynasty. Fleeing the new rulers, an Umayyad heir, Abd ar-Rahman, came to Spain and overthrew the existing Muslim regime in the south. He created his capital at Córdoba, later to become one of the biggest and most cultured cities in Europe. The arrival of Abd ar-Rahman consolidated the power of Muslim Spain. The Christians of Asturias and Cantabria had to dig in for the long haul.

Beatus's commentary reflects internal struggles among Spanish Christian communities during the rise of Muslim Córdoba. A highly orthodox thinker, Beatus used his work to express opposition to the teaching of Elipandus, the archbishop of Muslim-controlled Toledo. Elipandus was a supporter of "Adoptionism," the belief that in order for Jesus to have the attribute of humanity as well as divinity, it was necessary for him to have been the adopted son of God.

Controversial beliefs could be seen as grave threats to Christian unity. Beatus's work references Elipandus's dangerous beliefs alongside the Muslim invasion. He seems to equate them with the kinds of heresies that would set in motion the end of the world as described in the Book of Revelation. In his view, Beatus predicted that the catastrophic events that would bring about the end-time would fall in A.D. 800.

Everything Was Illuminated

The Commentary on the Apocalypse consists of twelve books in which the original text of Revelation is transcribed in Latin (a section known as the *storia*) followed by an explanation (*explanatio*). Also included are selections from earlier scholarly interpretations (*interpretatio*) written by Christian thinkers such as Jerome and Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Beatus's scholarship is highly orthodox, with little personal interpretation. In his dedication to a Spanish bishop, he wrote: "What has been put into this little book is not by me; instead, you find here what is found and explained by the holy Fathers . . . you may believe this book to be the little key to all the books in the bookcase."

After his death, Beatus's commentary became popular in one monastic community after another. Between the 10th and 13th centuries lavishly illustrated versions, known as Beatus Apocalypses, were created. About 27 of these illustrated versions have survived to today.

Most copies were made in northern Spain in the Mozarabic manner: a highly colored, geometric style that borrowed from Arab and Islamic art. In the 11th century monks of the Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos (near Burgos, northern Spain) created one of the most splendid: the Silos Apocalypse. Dominico and Munnio began the texts and some illustrations, but their work halted on April 18, 1091. It was not until 1109 that a third monk, Petrus, completed the astonishing illustrations: Human figures are depicted with bodies in profile and heads face-on. Their distinctive wide-eyed expressions, bring the strange texts of Revelation to vivid life.

The use of fine parchment, as well as gold and silver for the text and illustrations, made the Silos Apocalypse a luxury object. In the early 1800s, it was acquired by Napoleon Bonaparte's brother Joseph perhaps while he served as king of Spain (1808-1813). Joseph Bonaparte sold this edition to the British Library in 1840, where it is held to this day. ■

MEDIAEALIST MONICA WALKER VADILLO IS A TUTOR AT THE DEPARTMENT FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, ENGLAND.

Learn more

Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation

Elaine Pagels, Penguin Books, New York, 2013.

Kingdoms of Faith: A New History of Islamic Spain

Brian Catlos, Basic Books, New York, 2018.



CLOISTER OF COMPLETION

Reliefs depict scenes related to the Passion of Christ in the cloister of the Abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos near Burgos in northern Spain. The lavish illustrations of the Silos version of Beatus's commentary were completed here in 1109.

LEIVA/FOTOTECA 9X12

BEGINNING OF THE END

The battle between the forces of heaven and hell is an important focus of the Book of Revelation. This theme resonated strongly in the Christian enclaves of northern Spain, where Beatus completed his Commentary on the Apocalypse in 784. On the following pages, details from the early 12th-century Silos Apocalypse (held today in the British Library) display the intensity and vibrance of the Mozarabic artistic style that conveys the destruction unleashed. God possesses a scroll bound by seven seals. As each seal is opened by the Lamb (representing Christ), a catastrophic event occurs, such as the arrival of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse—Conquest, War, Famine, and Death (opposite).



Folio 83r

God, enthroned, bears the seals ▲

Revelation 5: "Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals." In this section of the Silos Apocalypse, God sits enthroned surrounded by 24 elders.

◀ **The Lamb receives the seals**

Revelation 5: The Lamb, symbolizing the sacrificed Christ, is worthy of opening the seven seals from God. The angels sing: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!"

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse ▶

Revelation 6 recounts what is revealed when the Lamb opens the first four seals: "I looked, and there before me was a **white horse!** Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest . . . Then another horse came out, a **fiery red one.** Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword . . . And there before me was a **black horse!** Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand . . . When the Lamb opened the fourth seal . . . there before me was a **pale horse!** Its rider was Death, and Hades was following close behind him."



Folio 86v



Equum alium
aquis fidebatur
super eum abebatur
gladium

Equum rostratum
aquis fidebatur
super eum abebatur
gladium

Equus niger
aquis fidebatur
super eum abebatur
gladium

Equus pullus dicitur
aquis fidebatur
super eum abebatur
gladium

UNCOMMON VISIONS OF COMMON FEARS

The everyday fears of medieval Europeans found their way into the illustrations featured in the surviving 27 illustrated Beatus Apocalypses. A vivid scene from the ninth chapter of the Book of Revelation describes how locusts emerge from the bottomless pit when an angel sounds its horn. In the Silos Apocalypse, the “fallen star” who unlocks the “shaft of the Abyss” can be seen as a human figure at the bottom of the frame. Out of the void rises vibrant orange locusts that torment those who have turned from God. Medieval Europeans feared crop-destroying swarms of pests, especially in times of war when food security was of the utmost importance. The agony of the tormented could therefore be understood by comparing everyday agricultural fears with the terrors of the Apocalypse to come.

Tormentors of God ▶

Revelation 9: “The fifth angel sounded his trumpet, and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth. The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss. When he opened the Abyss, smoke rose from it . . . And out of the smoke locusts came down on the earth and were given power like that of scorpions of the earth. They were told not to harm the grass of the earth or any plant or tree, but only those people who did not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were not allowed to kill them but only to torture them for five months. And the agony they suffered was like that of the sting of a scorpion when it strikes.”







Folio 143v

Voices of God ▲

Revelation 11: "And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days' . . . Now when they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the Abyss will attack them, and overpower and kill them. Their bodies will lie in the public square of the great city . . . The inhabitants of the earth will gloat over them and will celebrate by sending each other gifts . . . But after the three and a half days the breath of life from God entered them, and they stood on their feet, and terror struck those who saw them. Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here.' And they went up to heaven in a cloud, while their enemies looked on. At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake, and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven."

DIVINE

The commentary likens the Antichrist to a heretic who will destroy the community of the Christian faithful. In one episode the beast rises from the pit and kills the two heavenly appointed witnesses, which scholars believe could have resonated strongly in an Iberian



Folio 144r



Folio 145v

▲ **Sounding the call**
The angel blasts the seventh trumpet.

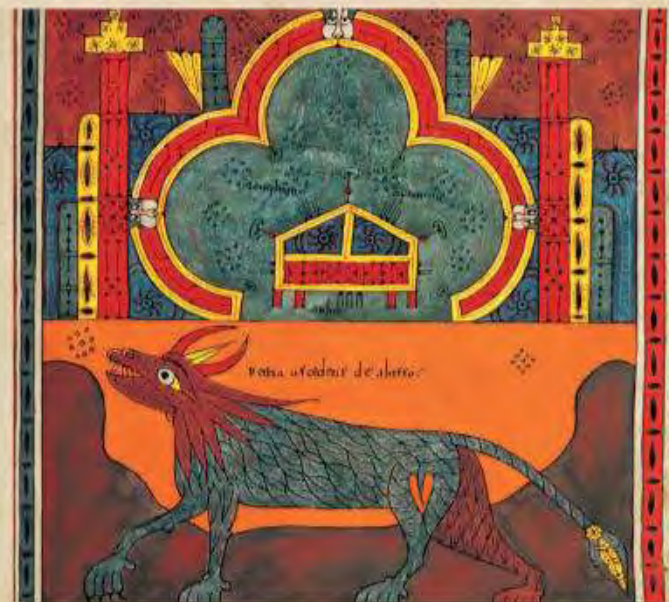
◀ **Saved and sinners**
God takes his two witnesses up into a cloud, while sinners are destroyed in an earthquake.

▼ **The beast**
The beast of hell, which rises from the bottomless pit

TESTIMONY

Peninsula overwhelmed by Muslim armies. In the mid-ninth century, some 50 years after Beatus's death, scores of executions of Christians took place in the Umayyad capital of Córdoba. The Silos Apocalypse was completed in the early 12th century, making it likely that these

events colored the depictions of the righteous witnesses being killed. A Silos depiction (opposite) shows decapitation being used to strike down the witnesses. They are killed with a sword, the method described by the chroniclers of the Córdoba martyrdoms.



Folio 146r

ANGELS AND DRAGONS

Battle for the Heavens

One of the most dazzling compositions in the Silos Apocalypse recounts a great battle in heaven in which the archangel Michael battles the red dragon, as described in the verses of Revelation 12:

- ① "A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth."
- ② "Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth."
- ③ "[The woman] gave birth to a son, a male child, 'who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.'" The dragon waited to devour the baby, "but her child was snatched up to God and to his throne."
- ④ "Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven."
- ⑤ "The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient snake called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."





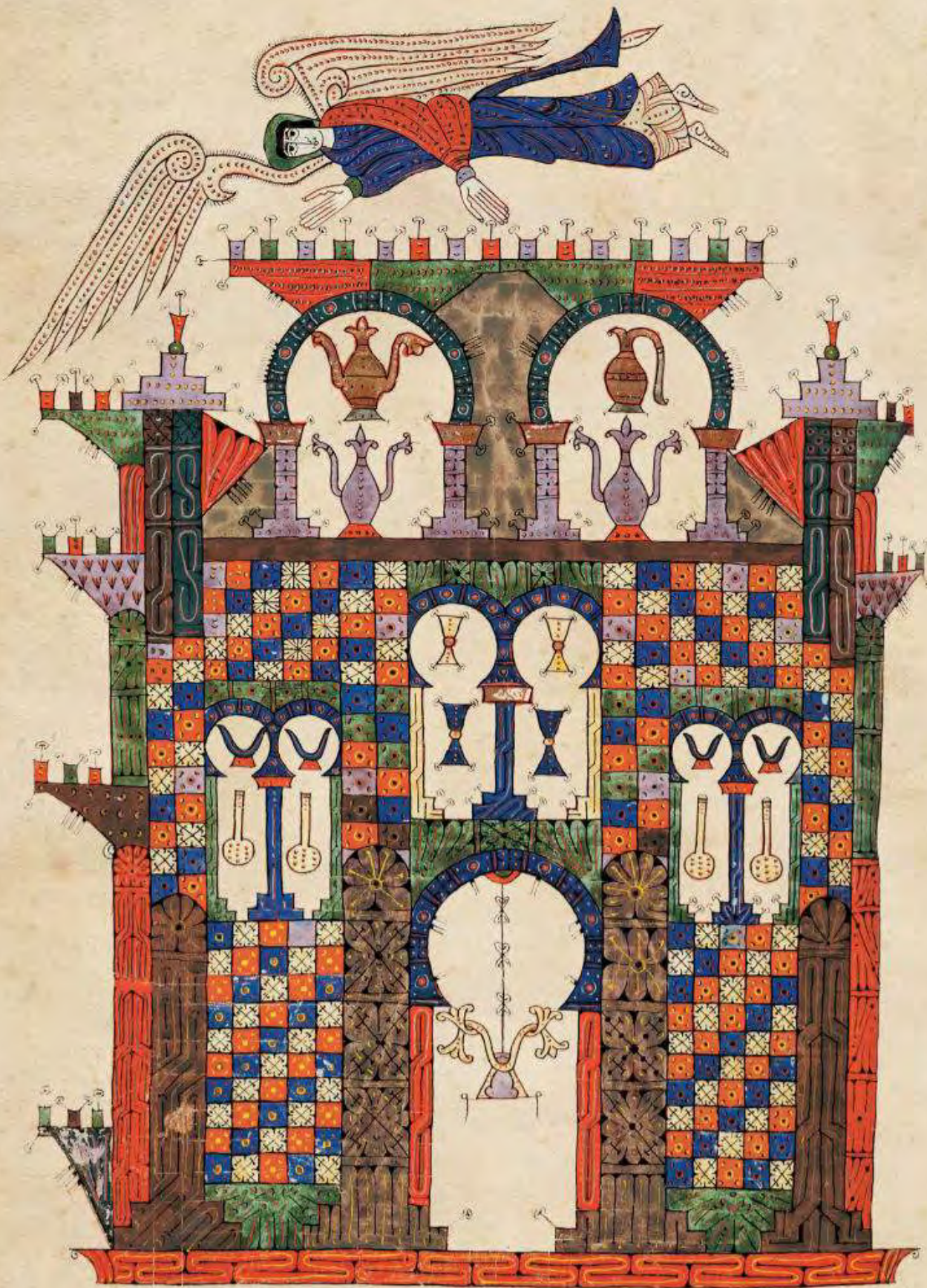
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3

5

ubi dicitur curia
terqum puyctin
gaellurum

angela in bi sty. em in o castra.



Folio 190v

EXPLET LIBER OCTAVUS

TERTIUS NONUS

DE MILLER MER

TRIEBETIAE

Erat una unus de septem angelis
habentibus fialas et loquutus
et mecum dicens. Ueni horam da
tibi damna quoniam meretricis
macone sedenti super aquas mul
tas cum qua fornicata sunt
reges terre et in ebria carum qui
habitantia carum deum forni
catorum eius.
Et percutia me in horam in spm.

EXPLETISTORIA

◀ **Babylon must fall**

An angel appears over Babylon, which the artists of the Silos Apocalypse depict with Islamic architectural elements.

CALL OF BABYLON

Revelation presents Babylon as the antagonist of Christ, God, and his people. In the text, the city is personified as the “Whore of Babylon,” who has made all nations complicit in her immorality. Seduced by the wine of this woman, the inhabitants of the Earth

are led to perdition. When the Book of Revelation was written in circa A.D. 98, Babylon may have been a symbol for Rome, whose extensive persecution of Christians under Emperor Domitian had earned it the ire of Christians. By the ninth to 12th centuries, when the illustrated versions of

Beatus’s commentary were being produced, Spanish Christians associated Babylon with the power of Muslim Córdoba. The Silos Apocalypse artists, when depicting the architecture of Babylon (above), used distinctly Islamic features, including rounded arches, in their work.



Folio 183v

▲ *Beauty and the Beast*

Revelation 17: "One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.' Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery: *Babylon the great, the mother of prostitutes, and of the abominations of the earth.*"



AN ANGEL AND ST. JOHN

Folio 182r

APOCALYPSE NOW AND THEN

Christ defeats Satan and chains him in the Abyss, where he will stay for a thousand years. For Beatus, writing his commentary in the late eighth century, the prediction that Satan would break free after a thousand years reinforced the idea that Christian Spain, beset by the forces of Islam, was approaching the Apocalypse. Beatus (who died in 798) predicted the world would end in 800, basing his calculation not on the thousand years that elapse from the time of Christ, but on the termination of six millennia since Creation. The Silos artists who illuminated his work three centuries later, had already lived through the millennium. Although apocalyptic zeal had faded by then, their depictions have lost none of the fiery urgency of Beatus's vision.



ST. JOHN
GRIPPING
A SPIRAL-
TOPPED STAFF

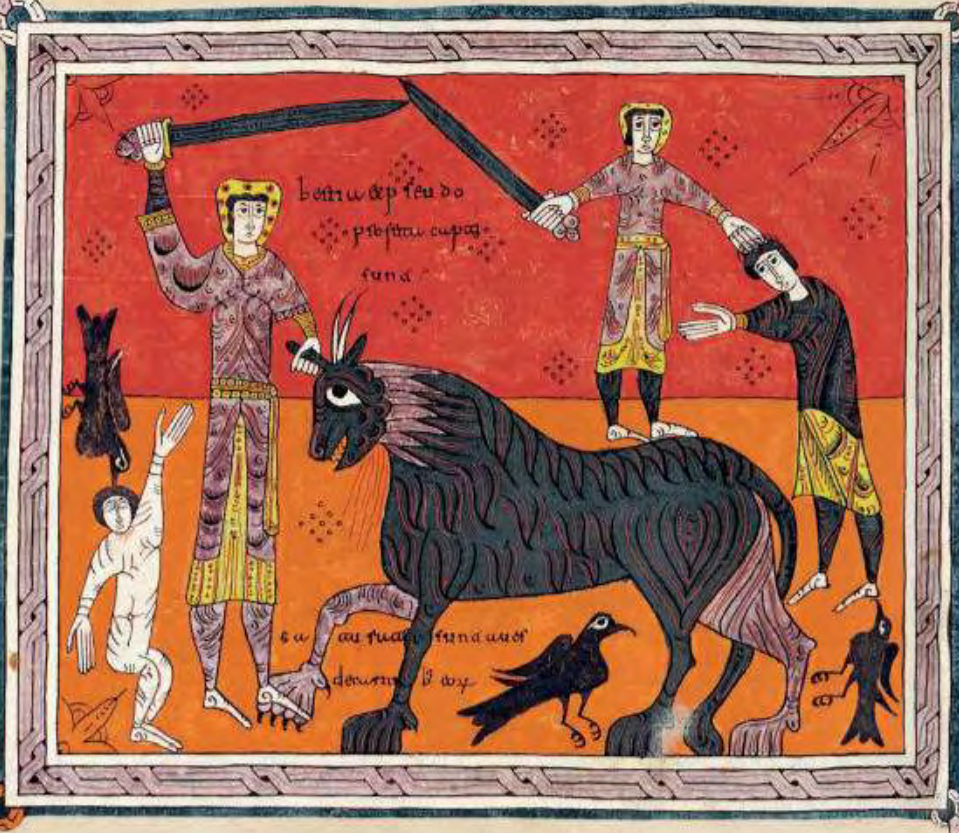
Folio 198r



Folio 177v

Slaying the beasts

The seven-headed sea beast described in Revelation 13 threatens an angel (above), while a scene from chapter 19 (below) shows the righteous defeating the land beast and the false prophet.



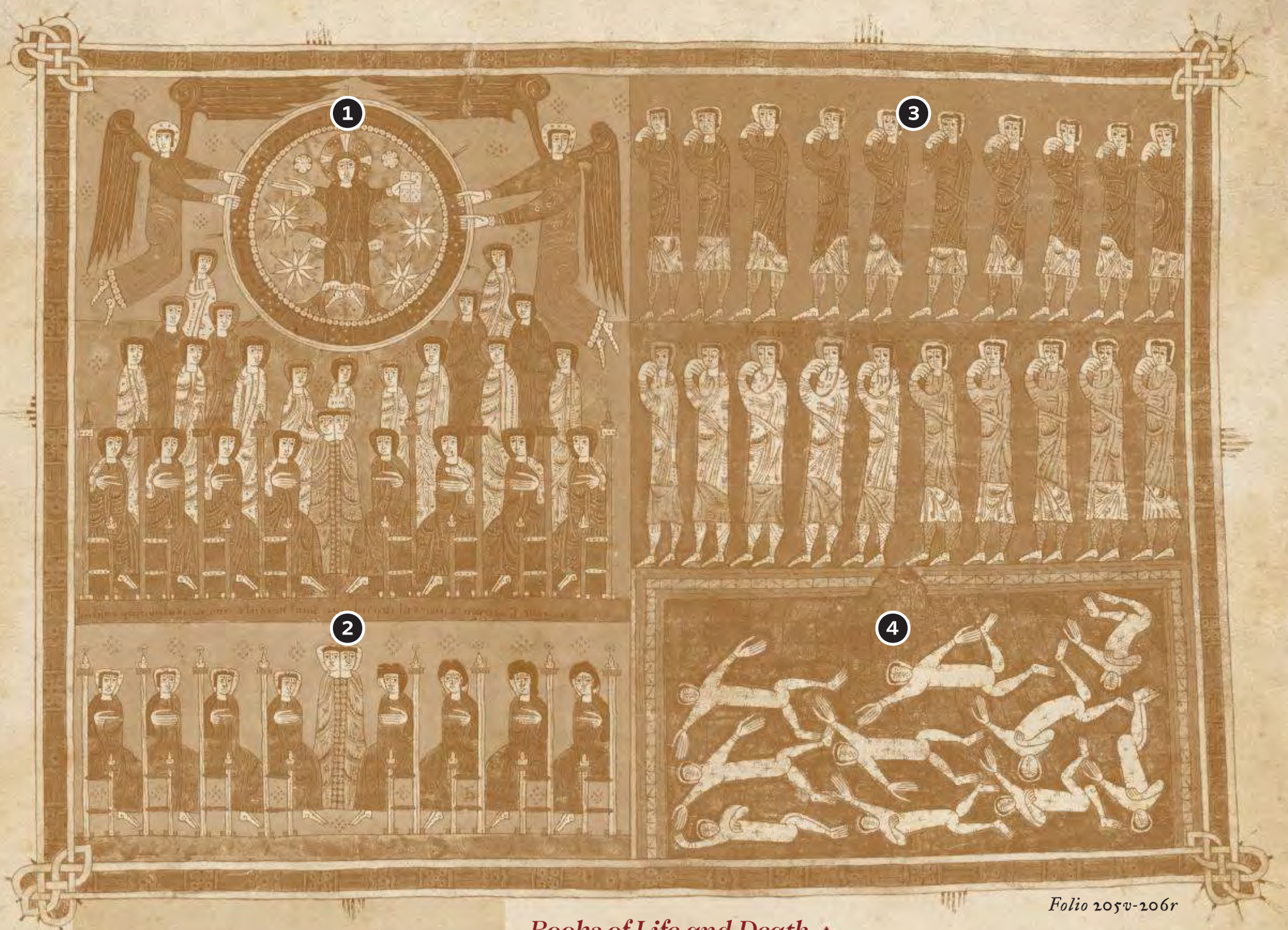
Folio 198v

Locked Up Below ▶

Revelation 20: "And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, that ancient snake, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations any more until the thousand years were ended . . . When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth . . . and to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore."

ut angelus adprehendat
draconem & ligat eum
in abissum. Id est
diabolum.





Folio 205v-206r

NEW BEGINNINGS

Following Christ's triumph over the beast, the Last Judgment must take place during which all the dead will be resurrected and judged. The splendid illustration of the Last Judgment in the Silos Apocalypse, completed in the early 12th century, reveals how expectations about the end-time among Spanish Christians were changing. Since the year 1000 had passed decades before without incident, Christians were beginning to accept that the fiery destruction of the Earth might not happen in their lifetime. There was a shift to a reflection on their natural death, and the divine judgment that eventually awaited them as individuals.

Books of Life and Death ▲

Revelation 20: "Then I saw a ① great white throne and him who was seated on it. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, ② and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ③ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ④ Anyone whose name was not found in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."



Folio 208v

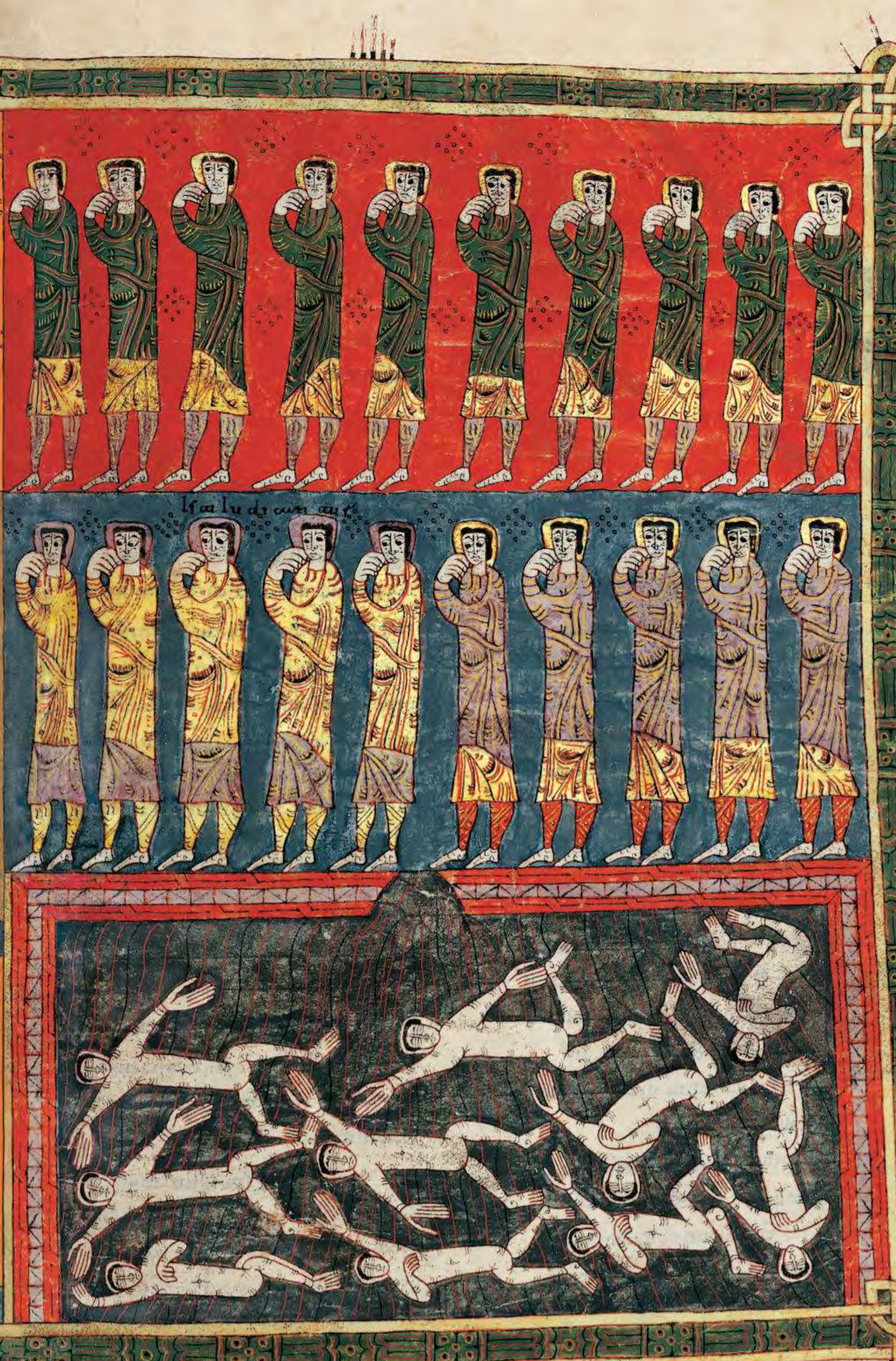
Revelation 21: "Then I saw . . . ⑤ the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God . . . And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them . . . He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'"

World reborn ▶
 The angel describes the heavenly Jerusalem to John in Revelation 22. Christ reigns in majesty and from him springs the river of life. Beside the river is the tree of life "bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations."

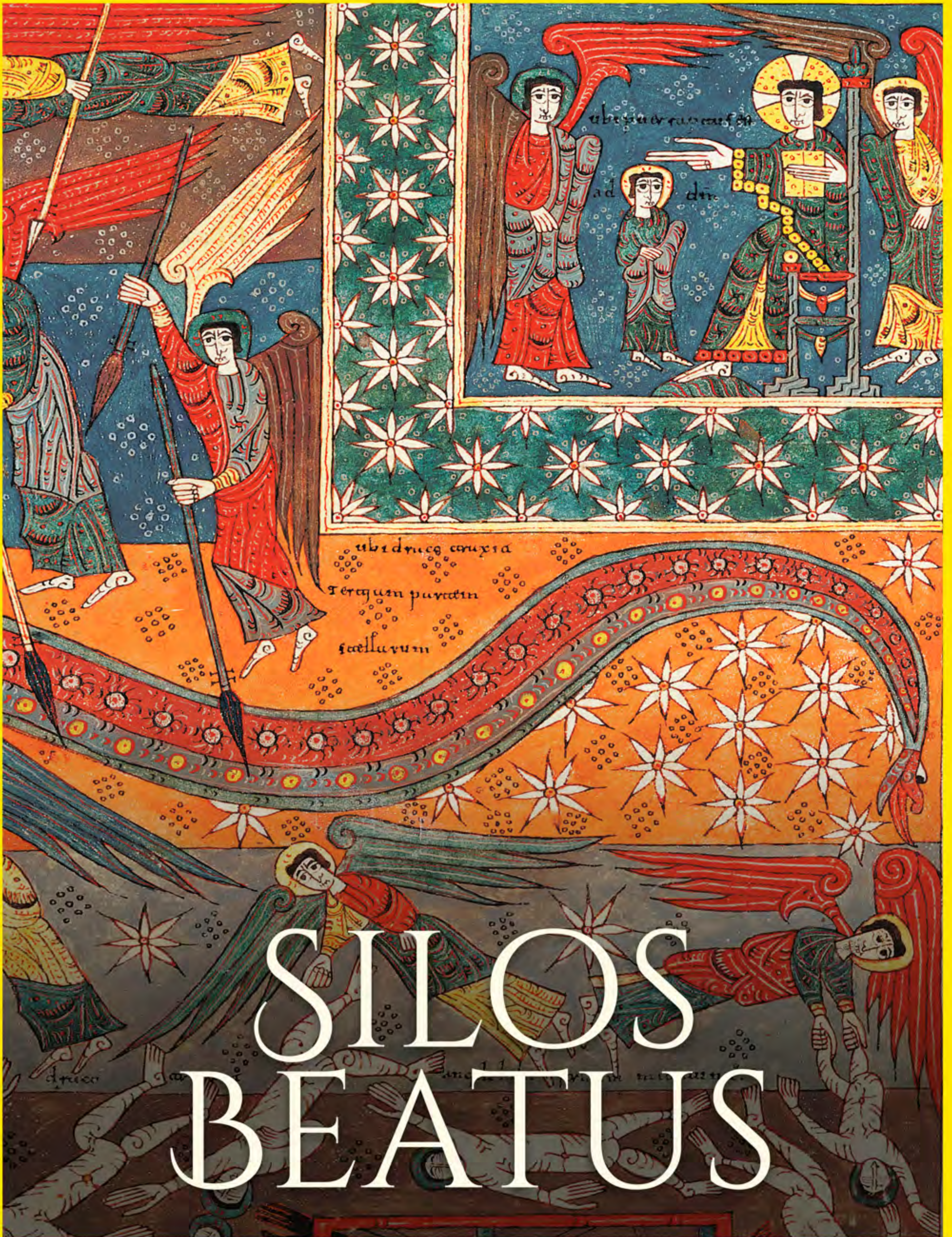




huiusmodi qui non ludicantur et iudices sunt cum his qui ludicantur uerumque regnant



Last Judgment
A magnificent, full-color version of the Last Judgment in the Silos Apocalypse reveals a monastic vision of the world after the millennium had passed.



SILOS BEATUS