

The Bible of Borso d'Este: A Profile of Princely Magnificence and Christian Piety

Amy J. Wright

The Bible of Borso d'Este, commissioned in 1455, is one of the most beautiful and lavishly illuminated manuscripts of the fifteenth century. It was conceived both as an *objet d'art* and as a symbol of Christian piety and princely splendor. Its two volumes measuring 675 cm x 586 cm, with 650 parchment folios and over 1,000 miniatures, took ten miniaturists more than six years to complete.¹ From the contracts in the archives and in the Este library at Modena, Italy, where the Bible is now located, it is apparent that from the beginning the Bible was considered a *livre de luxe*, and is described in the contract as “*magnifico*.”²

The text on each page is divided into two columns and fills approximately one-half of the surface area. The remaining area is filled with intricate floral, vegetal, or geometric motifs. Particularly prevalent are the so-called *bianchi girari*, a white vine-stem motif, and stylized flowers interspersed with paired animals. The upper margin contains the title of the book. The left margins of the text contain historiated initials, generally one to a page and measuring one to six inches. The *incipits*, or opening pages of each book are particularly elaborate, and the *incipit* of Genesis is the most lavishly decorated in the Bible (Figure 1).

The colors are strong primary hues. Magenta and royal blue with golden highlights dominate, reflecting the use of precious materials such as gold and lapis lazuli. Examples of *trompe l'oeil* illusionism are found in the ribbons at the top of some of the pages. Painted jewels appear in several borders and are reminiscent of Carolingian Bibles, particularly the cover of the Lindau Gospels, encrusted with gems set in gold. The inclusion of these illusionistic gem stones on the pages of the Borso Bible lends a sense of opulence to the *work* and reflects on the royal prestige and Christian piety of the patron.³

Within the lavish illumination is a subtly manipulated thematic program clearly conceived to link the rule of Borso d'Este

with concepts of Old Testament leadership and sanctification. Until now, however, the iconographic significance of the specific motifs and their placement in connection to the biblical text has remained unexplored. In this discussion, by focusing on these motifs and their relation to the political aspirations of Borso d'Este in his role as *signore* of Ferrara, I will suggest that Borso d'Este's commissioning of the Bible, like his art patronage in general, was directly linked to his political agenda.

Despite popular support and ratification by Pope Nicholas V, Borso's succession in 1450 to the *Marquisate*, the highest judicial office of Ferrara, was technically illegal. His half brothers, Ercole and Sigismondo, as well as his nephew, Niccolo, the son of his brother Leonello, had prior claims. Recognizing the precariousness of his position, Borso responded by designing a broad program of social reform including changes in administrative and judicial systems, education, land reclamation, and revitalization of religious institutions, all intended to improve his image and to strengthen his claim to rule. This broad program resulted in and was reinforced by Borso's artistic patronage.

In addition to the necessity of developing the image of a wise and just ruler in Ferrara, Borso was governed in his artistic patronage by the social position of the Estensi in fifteenth-century Italy. Through marriage, the Este family was related to all the great houses of Italy and a respected part of the “aristocratic family” that set implicit standards of courtly style. Book collecting and the commissioning of illuminated manuscripts were integral to princely magnificence and the creation of an extensive library was highly desirable. By the mid-fifteenth century, collections of princes in Italy, such as the Visconti-Sforza at Padua, Federico do Montefeltro at Urbino, and the Argonese kings at Naples, and especially significant in our context, the library of Niccolo III d'Este, father of Borso, at Ferrara, were models of princely magnificence and erudition.

This paper developed out of a seminar under Dr. Jack Freiberg to whom I am indebted for his guidance, encouragement, and uncompromising standards for excellence. I wish to thank Dr. Cynthia Hahn and Dr. Maria Phillips for their generous advice and support.

¹ Charles M. Rosenberg, “The Bible of Borso d'Este: Inspiration and Use,” *Cultura Figurativa Ferrarese tra XV e XVI Secolo* 1 (1981): 53.

² Rosenberg, “The Bible of Borso d'Este,” 53.

³ By the middle of the fifteenth century, the illuminated manuscript had reached the status of a precious object and was considered a suitable gift for

royalty. There is evidence of Borso having had a breviary bound for presentation to Emperor Frederick III upon his visit to Ferrara in 1452, at the time of Borso's investiture as the Duke of Modena and Reggio. Borso also presented a breviary to the Bishop of Adria while in Rome in 1471. See Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara During the Reign of Borso d'Este (1450-1471)*, diss. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1974, 150-1. The *Codex Tabulae Astrologiae* of Giovanni Bianchini, although ostensibly presented to the emperor by the astrologer himself in the miniature from the frontispiece, bears at the bottom the Este coat of arms, suggesting Borso was the true donor. See Rosenberg, “The Bible of Borso d'Este,” 61.

The tradition among Italian princes of commissioning deluxe Bibles illuminated on a large scale was a revival of earlier monastic and imperial commissions. Formerly large-scale luxury Bibles in one or two volumes had been owned by wealthy monasteries for reading in the refectory. Bibles for Carolingian kings, such as the ninth century San Paolo Bible commissioned by Charles the Bald as a papal gift,⁴ set the standard of splendor for a *livre de luxe* that was a model for King Charles V of France and his Valois brothers, most notably Jean, Duc du Berry. The Borso Bible was conceived to reflect this royal heritage and to integrate its owner into this august tradition, focusing attention on his princely magnificence and Christian piety.

To accomplish this, the lavish decoration of the Borso Bible included symbols of antiquity and early Christianity intermingled with those of the Este family and of Borso himself. Heraldic symbols such as the *fleur-de-lis* appear in the Este coat of arms and reflect the connections through marriage with the court of France (Figure 2). The imperial eagle, a symbol of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick III, refers to Borso's imperial connections in his rule of Modena and Reggio, and it appears along with the other emblems of the Estensi, such as the hydra, the carnation in a ring, and the flaming fountain.

Borso's personal *impresa*—the unicorn, the font, and the *paraduro*—also appear in the decoration. The unicorn in medieval legend was said to purify water with a touch of its horn (Figure 3). This image is a frequent device in the Borso Bible and reflects the patron's deep concern for issues of water management, particularly irrigation and flood control for the Po River, so critical to the economy of Ferrara.

The image of the font with the floating bowl appears throughout the Bible and symbolizes the dukedoms of Modena and Reggio (Figure 4). Its shape suggests a Christian baptismal font. The *paraduro*, a wattle structure for damming water for irrigation, also relates to Borso's improvements in hydraulics (Figure 5). By combining the modern *paraduro* with the word *Fido*, Latin for "I trust," Borso imbued this worldly image with association of the Christian faith. The miniature above the *paraduro* on the *incipit* page of Numbers depicts the female figure of Justice seated next to King Solomon on his throne. The juxtaposition of that image with Borso's personal *impresa* at the opening of this book, the Wisdom of Solomon, associates Borso's reign with that of King Solomon.

The lavish use of personal symbols in fifteenth-century manuscripts was a frequent practice among fifteenth-century

Italian princes. The iconography in Borso's Bible, however, expands self-glorification and portrays Borso himself, both symbolically and graphically, as the contemporary incarnation of the concept of Old Testament justice and wise leadership.

The figure of Justice Enthroned on the *incipit* page of the book of Numbers holds a shield featuring the Este emblems (Figure 6). Behind her stretches a verdant background landscape. The location of this image at the beginning of the book amplifies the meaning of the text. The opening chapters of Numbers contain the first account of the organization of the Israelites in preparation for their journey to the Promised Land: "the Lord spoke to Moses at the Tent of the Meeting in the wilderness of Sinai in these words: 'Number the whole community of Israel by families in the father's line'" (Numbers 1:1-2). It is this political organization through dynasties that provided the stability which made the development of Mosaic law possible. The figure of Justice, therefore, personifies the sacral qualities of leadership which God had invested in Moses and would have been recognized by a fifteenth-century audience as alluding also to Borso d'Este. The Este shield, prominently displayed by the figure of Justice, is the visual link between Moses's rule as the embodiment of Old Testament concepts of organization, stability, and justice and the rule of Borso d'Este in fifteenth-century Ferrara.

The figure of Justice as an alter ego for Borso was established early in his reign. An illustration accompanying a poem written to honor Borso applied the model of ancient Triumph to celebrate his rule. Borso is portrayed as the figure of the Just Ruler enthroned under a baldachin and accompanied by four women who bear the symbols of office. This image in small-scale illumination was given more dramatic form in 1453, the year after Borso was made Duke of Modena and Reggio by Emperor Frederick III. In the procession that formed part of the festivities to celebrate the event, the throne of Justice set atop a festival cart was dramatically left vacant for the Duke. The equation of Borso and Justice was given even more permanent form in a medal cast after 1452 in which Borso's image on the obverse is paired with the figure of Justice on the reverse accompanied by the epigram, *Haec Te Unum*, "You and she are one." In one of the boldest statements of this theme, a statue of Borso enthroned and holding the scepter of rule was raised in the main civic piazza of the city, in front of *Palazzo della ragione* (a modern copy of the original is now in place); this statue bore a striking resemblance to the figure of Justice enthroned in the Borso Bible.⁵

⁴ For a discussion of this commission, see William Diebold, "The Ruler Portrait of Charles the Bald in the San Paolo Bible," *Art Bulletin* 76 (1994): 7-18.

⁵ The original monument, erected in December 1454, represented Borso posed on a ceremonial chair set on a platform atop a marble column. He held the baton of his office in his right hand. The figure of the seated ruler with the badge of his office is an emblem of power which goes back to ancient Egypt and to the figure of *Justicia* in classical statuary. More recently, it may refer to the figure of Frederick II, the central image of the decoration of the Capuan Gate, with which Borso was familiar. The equation of Borso with the image of the just ruler was another

example of his personal iconography and the location of the statue in the piazza in front of the *Palazzo della ragione*, the seat of the communal government and the main law court, was directly related to the political agenda underlying his art patronage.

With the renovation of the piazza by Borso's successor, Ercole I, the Borso monument was shifted to the left side of the *Arco del cavallo*. In 1796, with the French occupation of Ferrara, the statue was pulled down and melted to make weaponry. The present statue is a modern reproduction. See Charles Rosenberg, *Art in Ferrara During the Reign of Borso d'Este*, 1-75.

Supporting this argument is another image from the Book of Numbers in which Moses prays outdoors next to a blooming tree and a wattle fence appears nearby. The adjacent text contains God's instructions to Moses: "These are the words with which you shall bless the Israelites: The Lord Bless you and watch over you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord look kindly on you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:23-26). The visual images of the flowering tree and wattle fence draw an unequivocal thematic link with the landscape of Ferrara made more fertile by the land and water reforms that Borso effected during his reign. Like a contemporary Moses, Borso, finding favor with God, also brings God's blessings of prosperity and peace to the Ferrarese through his leadership. In addition, the thematic association of Borso with Moses provides the dynastic link of legitimacy so integral to Borso's reign, beset by filial rivals.

A more elaborate example of Borso's assimilation of the Old Testament *persona* of the just and chosen leader appears in the miniature accompanying the first chapter of Deuteronomy. It is Moses who leads the Hebrews to the Promised Land. In this scene, however, the long-suffering Hebrews are depicted as modern fifteenth-century Ferrarese arriving at the crest of the hill to catch their first glimpse of the valley below. The text reads, "I have laid the land before you; go in and occupy it, the land which your father swore to give to your forefathers . . . and to their descendants after them" (Deuteronomy 1:8). The Promised Land is depicted with wattle fences, verdant vegetation, and a walled fifteenth-century city reminiscent of Ferrara and the surrounding countryside. We find a metaphorical correlation between the text and the image, which implies an extension of the narrative to portray Borso's reign as the Golden Age of Ferrara, a veritable Promised Land of peace and prosperity.

The *bas de page* on the *incipit* of Ecclesiastes makes this association more explicit (Figure 7). The king, sitting on his throne, is an idealized portrait of Borso himself, who, enframed in a round arch, turns to look at the verdant landscape bathed in soft golden light behind him. Wattle fences, abundant streams, and ample vegetation reflect the concrete improvements Borso introduced. The imagery clearly relates to the civic themes of Good Government, which had their origins in Roman political thought as *Pax* and *Concordia*.⁶ The most famous visual example is in the fourteenth-century frescoes in the *Sala dei Nove* in the *Palazzo Pubblico* in Siena by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Here too, dancing figures suggested the peace and order of Good Government. The inclusion of this scene at the opening of the

Book of Ecclesiastes implies an extended association of the reign of Borso with the wisdom and justice of King Solomon, who was often credited with writing this book of the Bible.

The images thus far discussed associate Borso d'Este with Old Testament models of wise and just leadership in an indirect manner. The *incipit* for the book of Judith, however, features a portrait of Borso d'Este himself enthroned with scepter in hand, among advisors in his court (Figure 8). Two of the accompanying figures who are depicted with eastern headgear may allude to the fact that Borso's reputation for princely magnificence was so widespread that eastern princes sent ambassadors with offerings to him in the mistaken belief that he was the sovereign of the territory of Italy.⁷

The meaning of this miniature is revealed through a subtle coordination with the text which describes King Nebuchadnezzar in conference with his advisors and princes: "Assembling all his officers and nobles, the king laid before them his personal decision about the region and declared his intention of putting an end to its disaffection (Judith 2:2)." Nebuchadnezzar ascended the throne of Persia in 605 B.C., successfully thwarting the royal aspirations of a younger brother. During his forty-three year reign, his skillfully planned military operations gained him an empire larger than that of any other ancient people, including the Assyrians. He followed his conquests with measures to ensure law and order, which consolidated his position and characterized him as a model of just administration. He was mythologized as superhuman, more powerful than Hercules in Greek histories, and he was reputed to have diverted a river and rebuilt the old city of Babylon.⁸ Nebuchadnezzar was a pagan king, generally thought of as an evil persecutor of God's Chosen People in Babylon. In the Book of Daniel, however, we are told that after being stricken by God with physical and mental disabilities, and the subsequent loss of his kingdom, Nebuchadnezzar came to praise God as the "King of heaven" (Daniel 4:36-37).⁹ It is for this reason that he was linked prominently in the traditions of just kingship.

No doubt Borso saw himself as a fifteenth-century model after Nebuchadnezzar, for like Nebuchadnezzar, he too had had to draw together various factions in his territories. He was the second consecutive bastard *signore* to assume power over legitimate male heirs, thus there was disaffection among those who resented his usurpation of power from his nephew and brothers, and several conspiracies were uncovered. Swift retaliation through the newly-reformed legal process served to suppress the opposition and maintain good government and

⁶ Justice and common good were twin elements of Aristotelian political philosophy. St. Thomas Aquinas associated justice and common good with concord and peace. See Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, vol. I (London: Oxford UP, 1936) 364-65. Pax and Concordia were twin ideals of Roman political thought which would have been familiar to the Humanist scholars of Borso's court through the writings of Cicero and Sallust.

⁷ Edmund G. Gardner, *Dukes and Poets in Ferrara* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1903) 81.

⁸ For a more extensive discussion of Nebuchadnezzar and his reign, see D.J. Wiseman, *Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

⁹ After a period of madness described in Daniel 4:28-33, King Nebuchadnezzar describes himself as returning to his right mind and "praising and glorifying the Ever-living One." Also see Daniel 4:34-37.

peace throughout the realm. This image of Borso surrounded by his advisors at the opening of Judith signifies his assimilation of the royal persona of Nebuchadnezzar, as well as an extended association with the opulence and power of ancient Eastern empires.¹⁰

The symbolic association of Borso with three biblical figures: Moses, Solomon, and Nebuchadnezzar, was clearly designed to link him to Old Testament concepts of justice, kingship, and legitimacy in a fashion that to the modern eye appears nothing short of audacious. In cultivating the metaphorical image of Justice for his rule, Borso created a personal mythology which linked him to noble and antique origins in the Old Testament and graphically appropriated God's sanction and blessing of his political agenda.

The illuminated Bible served both a private and public role in advancing that agenda. Like other elaborately illuminated texts, it was displayed to visiting dignitaries and carried to other

courts. Records indicate that in 1467 the Borso Bible was shown to the ambassador from Bologna.¹¹ When Borso traveled to Rome to receive the coveted title of the Duke of Ferrara from Pope Paul II in 1471, he carried the Bible with him, and it served as a major piece of propaganda in attesting to his legitimacy as ruler of Ferrara.

Commissioning such a lavish book carried a public message of his princely magnificence and Christian piety. Through its conception and execution, Borso controlled the specific image he wished portrayed for contemporary and future generations. That he was successful is evident in the descriptions of him from court literature. In his time he was called "glorious," "heavenly," and "divine."¹² Upon his death it was recorded that "To the people it seemed as though the Eternal God had died again."¹³

Florida State University

¹⁰ Ronald H. Sack, *Images of Nebuchadnezzar* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 1991) 95. It is certainly possible that in addition to the connection with Nebuchadnezzar and the empires of the Near East, Borso also may have had in mind an association with Hammurabi (c. 1792-1750 B.C.), founder of the Babylonian dynasty, known for his codification of the law.

¹¹ See John J.G. Alexander, ed., *The Painted Page: Italian Renaissance Book Illumination 1450-1550* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995) 11.

¹² Werner L. Gundersheimer, *Ferrara. The Style of a Renaissance Despotism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 127.

¹³ Gundersheimer, 159, n. 52. Quoted from *Diario Ferrarese dall'anno 1409 sino al 1502 di autori incerti*, ed. G. Pardi, in *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores*, rev. ed vol. XXIV, pt. VII, Bologna, 1928, 70-71.

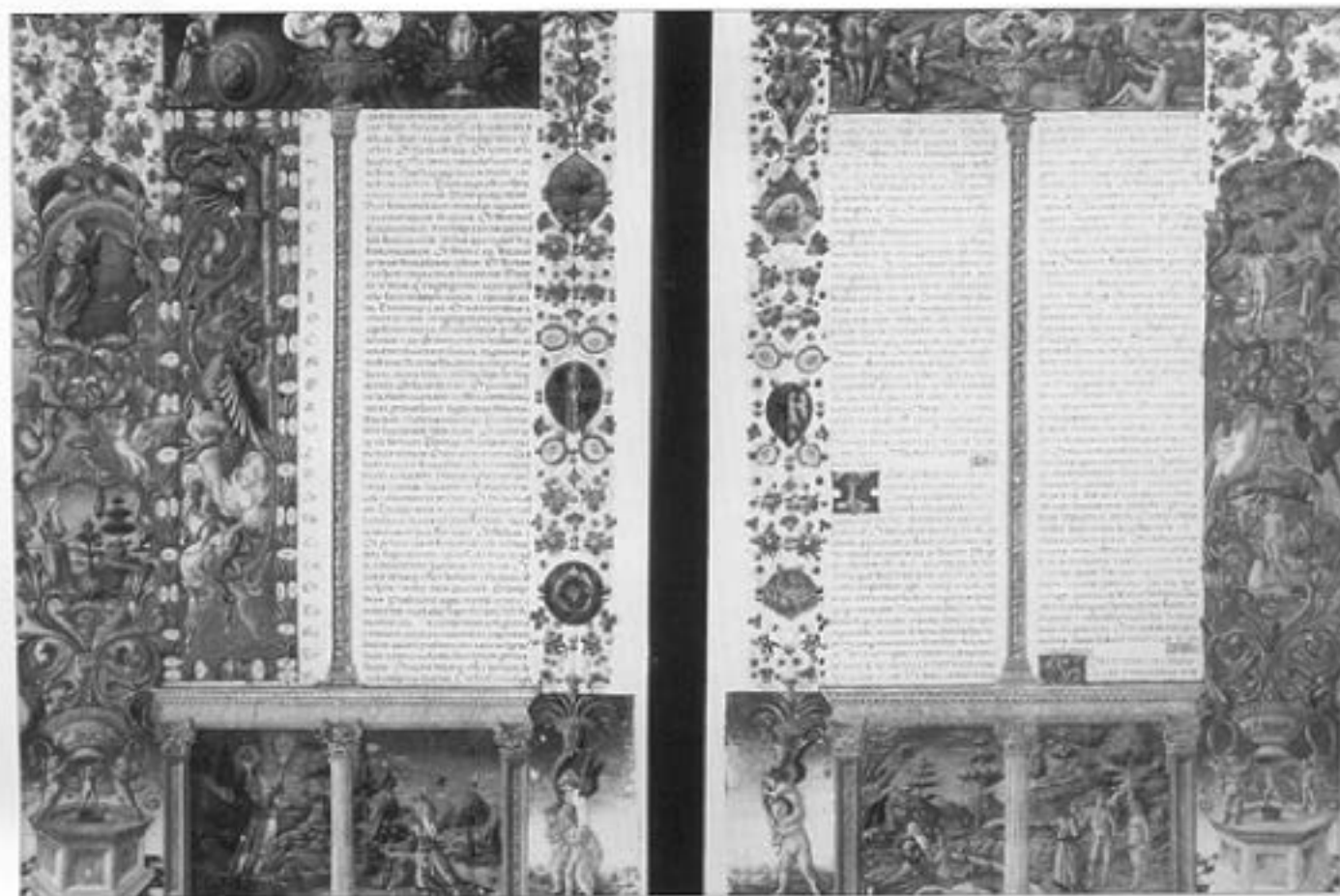


Figure 1. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Opening pages of Genesis: Creation, Vol. I, fol. 5v, 6r. Courtesy of Biblioteca Estense, Modena.

Figure 2. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Este coat of arms. Vol. I, fol. 212r. Courtesy of Biblioteca Estense, Modena.



Figure 3. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Unicorn, personal badge of Borso. Vol. II, 233v. Courtesy of Biblioteca Estense, Modena.

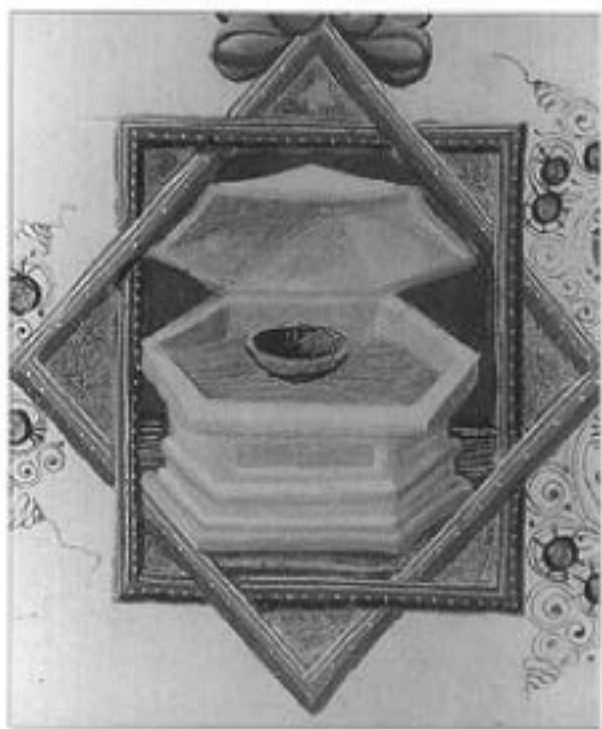


Figure 4. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Font, personal badge of Borso. Vol. I, fol. 32r. Courtesy of Biblioteca Estense, Modena.



Figure 5. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Paradiso, personal badge of Borso. Vol. I, fol. 286r. Courtesy of Biblioteca Estense, Modena.



Figure 6. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Detail from opening page of Numbers. Vol. 1, fol. 56r. Courtesy of Biblioteca Estense, Modena.



Figure 7. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Detail from opening page of Ecclesiastes. Vol. 1, fol. 280v.



Figure 8. *Bible of Borso d'Este*, 1455-61. Detail from opening page of Judith. Vol. 1, fol. 217r.