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ON SOME PAINTINGS OF ODONATA FROM THE LATE MIDDLE AGES (14TH AND 15TH CENTURIES)

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Painted representations of Odonata from the 14th and 15th centuries, found in the masterpieces cited below, are described and commented on: "*Belleville Breviary*", Paris (J. Pucelle, ca 1323-1326); "*Allegory of Good Government*", Siena (A. Lorenzetti, ca 1338-1340); "*The Two Lovers*", Southern Germany (anonymous, ca 1470) and "*Hastings Hours*", Flandres (anonymous, ca 1480). The symbolic meaning of the Odonata representation in each work seems to be different. The damselfly painted in the "*Belleville Breviary*", probably based on a male *Calopteryx* specimen, represents the oldest known European representation of Odonata yet.

INTRODUCTION

European works of art displaying insects from the late Middle Ages are rare and include portraits and illuminations in books; also in paintings and frescoes representing secular and biblical scenes. The insects more commonly represented are butterflies and flies. Their representations are not essentially figurative, having often a symbolic meaning in the scene. In general, in this period, butterflies were symbols for the soul and eternal life, and flies were symbols for the brevity of the earthly life (DICKE, 2000). Useful insects such as bees and silkworms were represented in some books, as in the *Tacuinum Sanitaris* (ca 1370-1400) (BARTLETT, 2001) and in the "rich" Codex of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* (ca 1280-1284) (Codex Ms. T.I.1, Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, El Escorial) by Alfonso X, the Wise, where they were drawn in scenes describing miracles. Conversely, in some *Haggadot* from the 14th and 15th centuries, one of the most beloved books in Judaism, locusts and lice were represented among the

plagues brought upon the Egyptians (SHIRE, 1998).

However, only a few representations of Odonata are known. RUDOLPH (1991) recorded five paintings of Zygoptera in a copy of the Gutenberg Bible of 1453, illuminated in 1456 in a Saxonian workshop. It contains illustrations of four adult specimens, based on coenagrionids, and one larva. In the context of the European medieval period, he cited four other formerly described representations of Odonata: three illuminations in different manuscripts dated from the late 15th and early 16th centuries (maybe some of these manuscripts would be better attributed to the Renaissance period), and a stone relief from Italy dating from the second half of 15th century. Rudolph considered the paintings described in his paper the oldest known representations of European Odonata. DICKE (2000) commented on a painting made by an anonymous Frankfurter Master (ca 1400) that shows "the Virgin Mary in an enclosed garden among strawberries on which rest a white butterfly and two dragonflies". He affirmed that dragonflies (and damselflies), as well as butterflies, were symbols for the soul and eternal life in the Hereafter during the 14th and 15th centuries, and the combination of flies, butterflies, and dragonflies in the same work may be a symbol for Christ. LUCAS (2002), in her stimulating book on Cultural Odonatology, briefly comments about a dozen works of art of the period.

Observing works of art from the late Middle Ages *in loco* or in reproductions of recent books of art, the present author was able to study in detail representations of Odonata in four works, two from the 14th century and two from the 15th century. They are described and commented on in this paper.

DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

BELLEVILLE BREVIARY

(*Bréviaire de Belleville*, Jean Pucelle, ca 1323-1326, Paris, France) (Fig. 1)

Jean Pucelle was one of the most refined and witty miniaturists of the fourteenth century. He was active in Paris between 1319 and 1335, where he was the head of a workshop during the 1320s. His preserved works suffice to demonstrate the new direction taken by manuscript illumination in that time, where the Gothic tradition was combined with news of the Italian *Trecento* painting and humour. The "Belleville Breviary" is a kind of liturgical prayer book for celebration of Mass, composed by two volumes with 876 folios and very small in dimension (24 × 17 cm). This breviary was probably intended for Jeanne de Belleville, the wife of Olivier de Clisson, a famous French soldier. Now it is deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris (Ms Lat. 10483 / 10484). The folio 24 v. of the first volume (summer prayers) is so special that it has been reproduced a number of times in recent books of art (e.g. CHASTEL, 1994; LAJTA, 1980; WALTHER & WOLF, 2001).

There are three main images represented in that folio. In the scene placed at the top of the left text-column, Saul throws his javelin at David (1 Samuel 18, 10-11). The scenes of the *bas-de-page* show Cain murdering his brother Abel and the allegorical figure of the Caritas, Christian Love, feeding a pauper (WALTHER & WOLF, 2001). Besides this, fantastic musicians and animals emerge from the marginal garland, formed of interlaced foliage and flowers. Among the insects illustrated two butterflies clearly identified as *Aglais urticae* (L.) can be distinguished as well as a flying damselfly (Fig. 1), somewhat caricaturised probably due to its very small size (ca 12 mm). It is presented dorsally, bearing the following features: a large head with the face and a pair of separated eyes; two pairs of wings similar in form and length, long and uncommonly acuminate, with the distal third to half black; two pairs of legs, directed forward; abdomen long and clearly segmented; body green.

The presence of a damselfly in the Belleville Breviary was interpreted by CHASTEL (1994) as Jean Pucelle's cryptic signature, as "damsel" - maiden - is *pucelle* in French. As every element on the page was an occasion for the author's personal ironic whimsy, it was probably important to sign the work. As signing was not a usual practice at that time, it was probably not made in an explicit manner.

The detailed representation allows the identification of the damselfly model as a specimen of *Calopteryx*, probably *C. xanthostoma* (Charpentier) or *C. splendens* (Harris). The most common *Calopteryx* in central and northern France is *C. splendens*, but the dark stripe does not reach the apex of the wings in this species. The representation of the dark stripe in the wings is more similar to the pattern found in *C. xanthostoma*. However, the current geographical distribution of this species does not include the Paris region, where Jean Pucelle lived and certainly obtained his models. It is restricted to the Iberian Peninsula and western Mediterranean, with records only from Spain, Portugal, southern France, South of Switzerland and North of Italy (BOS & WASSCHER, 1997). It is possible to speculate that *C. xanthostoma* could have had a wider distribution during the late Middle Ages, including the North of France. The average temperature of Europe was probably hotter than today at the beginning of the 14th century, allowing the spreading North of species adapted to warmer climates. Currently, Europe is still under the effect of the Little Ice Age that occurred between the 15th and the 19th centuries (FAGAN, 2000; TKACHUCK, 1983), which cooled most of the Northern Hemisphere. This illumination could be one more find of evidence for this phenomenon.

ALLEGORY OF GOOD GOVERNMENT
(*Allegoria del buon governo*, Ambroglio Lorenzetti, ca. 1338-1340, Siena, Italy) (Fig. 2)

Ambroglio Lorenzetti (ca 1290-1348) frescoed the sidewalls of the Council

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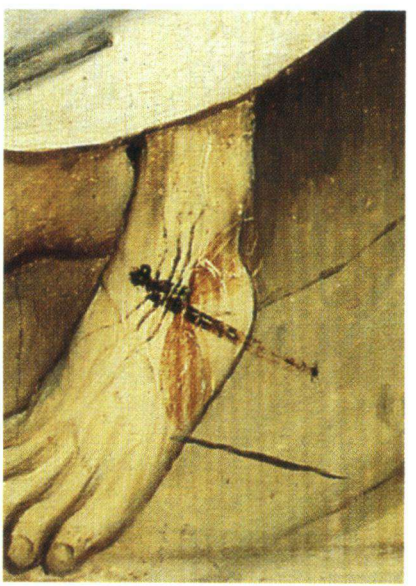

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Room (Sala dei Nove) of the Siena's City Hall (Palazzo Pubblico). The size of the room is 2,96 × 7,70 × 14,40 m. The subject of the paintings is Good and Bad Government and their effects on the life of the cities and villages, and they are in a relatively good state of preservation. More information about the paintings of this Palace can be found in STARN (1995).

The panel known as "The Effects of Good Government" (or "The Good City-Republic") is situated on the longer, eastern, wall of the room. This panoramic fresco represents several scenes of Siena in the 14th century, both inside and outside of the city walls. In a feast scene detail, positioned low on the left side, nine dancing young women are attended by a woman singing and playing a tambourine. They are represented in a kind of square situated in the centre of the city. These women wear long dresses, tied hairs adorned with tiaras, belts and light shoes. One of the dancers, with its back turned, has a brownish dress, adorned with dragonflies in dorsal view intermingled with composed geometric figures.

Although there are only three complete dragonflies represented, it is possible to notice fifteen additional ones on the back and sides of the dress, all of them similar. It is possible to recognize these representations immediately as dragonflies in flight, based on the following traits: a large head bearing a pair of separate black eyes; wings long and clear with very separated pairs, similar in form and length; abdomen long and clearly segmented; antennae and legs not represented; body pale brown. All the geometric figures are similar to each other and were made by intersecting two regular hexagons of the same size, with one vertex of one hexagon superimposed to the centre of the other, delimiting a central lozenge. A bigger lozenge outlines the shorter, central lozenge, forming two triangles, one above and the other below the limits of the hexagons. While all the lines are drawn in white, the region concerning the small lozenge is painted in black, highlighting this area.

This fresco has plenty of possible symbolic meanings. The arrangement composed by nine joined dancing women is probably a reference to the nine Greek Muses (*http://www.kfki.hu/~arthp/html/l/lorenzet/ambrogio/governme/index.html*). The Muses are divine singers, whose choirs and hymns cheer the hearts of the immortals, since their function was to represent all the possible forms of thought. For Hesiod (*Theogony*, ca 700 B.C.), the Muses follow the kings and try to persuade them to calm down the discussions and to re-establish the peace among the men (BRANDÃO, 1991). It is possible to suggest also that the dancer with the

Figs 1-4: (1) *Belleville Breviary* (Jean Pucelle, ca 1323-1326, Paris): detail of the folio 24 v. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris; – (2) *Allegory of Good Government* (Ambroglio Lorenzetti, ca 1338-1340, Siena): detail of the panel "The Effects of Good Government" or "The Good City-Republic". Sala dei Nove, Pallazo Pubblico, Siena; – (3) *The Two Lovers (Rooting Pair)* (anonymous, ca 1470, Southern Germany): detail of the back panel. Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame, Strasbourg; – (4) *The Two Lovers (Rooting Pair)* (anonymous, ca 1470, Southern Germany): detail of the back panel. Museé de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame, Strasbourg.

dress adorned with dragonflies could be a reference to Polyhymnia, the muse of the rhetoric and the geometry. As the geometric figure on the dress fabric clearly outlines the basic form and proportions of the represented dragonfly, the symbolic meaning of these two may well be the same. The geometric figure seems to be derived from the construction of the "Vesica Pisces", one of the more important geometric configurations in the Christian mysticism of the Middle Ages, that inspired the design of gothic cathedrals (LAWLOR, 1996). The "Vesica Pisces" is obtained by the intersection of two equal circles passing through each other at their centres. In this case, the hexagons are direct derivations from this configuration, and consequently the resulting intersection between the hexagons is a lozenge instead of a pointed oval figure. Probably this change was made in order to represent better the outline of a dragonfly. This kind of diagram is a symbol for the balance, proportionality and human conscience, and even for Christ (LAWLOR, 1996). Lorenzetti included in his fresco many symbols of prosperity and good luck, restating the theme of "Good Government" at several different levels of observation, and we could consider the dragonflies one of these symbols.

THE TWO LOVERS (ROOTING PAIR)
(*Les Amants trépassés*, anonymous, ca 1470, Schwaben, Southern Germany)
(Figs 3, 4)

This anonymous diptych panel, that has now been split into two separate paintings, originally formed the front and the back of the same work. The paintings (oil on wood, 62.2 × 36.5 cm) are in the collections of The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland (Ohio), USA (Bridal Pair) and the Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame, Strasbourg, France (Rooting Pair).

The original front panel shows a young married couple wearing jewelled chaplets and matching fine dresses, coloured by red, damask, white and green. The youth has his right arm around the waist of his bride and is offering her a small branch of bluish wild flowers, similar to the ones of his chaplet and of the flowery bushes around them. The back panel, the more important for this note, shows the two lovers turned into corpses (as seen in CAMILLE, 1998 and DUPEUX, 1999). The background is entirely dark. Their positions are now reversed and without dresses, covered in some parts, as the genitals of the groom, by their shrouds. The genitals of the woman's corpse are covered by one frog*. While snakes and worms are emerging from their trunks and flies are perched on the wounds of their legs, two dragonflies, one over each one, can be distinguished. The dragonfly perched

* "... Especially in the Middle Ages, toads [and frogs?] are used in artistic representations of the punishments of the damned ... Those damned by the sin of lust are punished by having their sexual parts eaten by toads and other reptiles ..." (SUZETTA TUCKER, 1997 – *http://ww2.netnitco.net/users/legend01/frog.htm*).

on the right arm of the man's corpse (Fig. 3) is represented dorso-laterally, with a globular head, including a large face; eyes distinctly separated dorsally; strong thorax; long and diaphanous wings positioned dorsally; three pairs of legs, directed laterally; long abdomen, enlarged apically; body black with distinct bright yellowish-green spots disposed as follows: anterior part of face, frontal part of thorax (a pair of stripes forming a kind of inverted "U"), lateral of sinthorax, lateral of base of abdomen, laterals of corresponding 8th and 9th abdominal segments. The Odonata represented over the left foot of the woman's corpse (Fig. 4) is positioned dorso-laterally, with a small and transversally elongate head; thin thorax; long wings poorly defined, reddish, directed laterally; three pairs of legs, directed laterally; long abdomen, apex poorly defined; body dark.

It is possible to attribute that the model for the Odonata representation over the man's corpse was probably a male specimen of dragonfly *Gomphus vulgatissimus* (L.), due to the details of the body form and colour pattern. In the case of the Odonata over the woman's corpse probably a female specimen of *Calopteryx* damselfly, possible *C. virgo* (L.), was used as a model. The uncommon position of the wings and legs of both suggest that probably the models were captured and positioned for representation. The wings of the *Gomphus* specimen may have been broken.

The focus of fascination of this panel for both artist and patron seems to be not the side of love, youth, and beauty, which has an empty, conventional patina about it, but that of death, old age, and decay, which is a far more vivid and modern painting and provides more avenues for a public exploration of the self (CAMILLE, 1998). The moral behind this pair of paintings is to alert that old age and death inevitably overtake youth, that all worldly pleasures are temporary, and to emphasize the present youth and beauty of the young couple. The two Odonata represented in the back panel can be clearly interpreted as symbols for the souls of the couple, consequently implying in their transformation after death and eternal life. The appearance of these Odonata over the corpses can announce a new "spring" (as in the front panel) for the existence of the couple after the "winter" (the old age and death) of their existence. The painter could have used the same model for the two souls, but probably preferred to differentiate them by their temperaments, choosing a strong dragonfly for the man and a delicate damselfly for the woman. As for the first flower still lives, death motifs were originally painted on the reverse side of portraits. Subsequently they became a recurring iconographic component in a large number of variants of the still life genre during the Renaissance period (*Vanitas* still lives). They were intended to symbolize man's mortal nature and to anticipate the future state of the person in the portrait (SCHNEIDER, 1994). Such kind of images, very common in European literature and arts after the Black Death (DUBY, 1998), are known as *memento mori* (reminders of death).

HASTINGS HOURS
(anonymous, ca 1480 [before 1483], Ghent or Bruges [Flandres], Belgium)
(Fig. 5)

During the fourteenth century, the Book of Hours eclipsed the Psalter as the favoured book of private devotion. The central text of a Book of Hours is the Office of the Virgin, and the penitential psalms are almost invariably included (TEVIOTDALE, 1992). The Book of Hours known as "Hastings Hours" was probably made in Ghent or Bruges for use in England by William, Lord Hastings (born ca 1430, died 1483). It was composed originally of 297 folios in one richly illustrated volume, but some of the pages were lost. Now this manuscript is preserved in the British Library, London (Additional Ms 54782) (*http://molcat.bl.uk/msscat/INDEX.ASP*). Some text pages are surrounded by extremely fine examples of illusionist strew-borders, including foliage and naturalistic flowers, insects and other small animals set against gilded or coloured backgrounds.

The folio 132 r., in the section of the book dedicated to the Hours of the Virgin, presents the margins of the text decorated with flowers (iris blossoms and orchids), a snail, three butterflies, two flies and a damselfly (as seen in BARTLETT, 2001). This page presents two Latin texts, the Response "*Deus in adiutorium meum intende...*" ("God, make speed to save me...") and the beginning of Psalm 121 "*Laetatus sum in his quae sunt mihi...*" ("I was glad when they said unto me..."). The damselfly is represented laterally, with a large head bearing a pair of lateral eyes and prominent face; thorax brown; long diaphanous wings closed dorsally, with longitudinal veins subtly indicated; three short legs flexed and directed downwards; long and clearly segmented abdomen, coloured with black and blue stripes.

Fig. 5. *Hastings Hours* (anonymous, ca 1480 [before 1483], Ghent or Bruges): detail of the folio 132 r. the British Library, London.

The possible model for this representation was a specimen of *Coenagrion*. Representations in similar style are found in the printed treatises of animals of the later centuries, as those of of K. Gesner, T. Mouffet and J. Jonston (e.g. GESNER, 1983; JONSTONS, 1976), and in flower still lives of the Renaissance period. The accurate proportions of the small animals and plants represented in the illustration suggest the artist's intention of naturalism and illusion of reality. Illusionism arose in the late Middle Ages and became an important creative principle in the history of still life. This philosophy was a radical variant of the emerging 15th century empiricism in art, which no longer sought inspiration in older masterworks but increasingly in immediate experience and observation. "Imitation of nature" was the motto, which recurred again and again in all Renaissance treatises on art (SCHNEIDER, 1994), and probably this Book of Hours contains some of the first examples of painted flower still lives. The inclusion of some insects and other small "garden" animals, a very common feature in the Renaissance flower still lives, shows a clear intention of furnishing a naturalistic ambience to the painting and, maybe, a kind of encyclopaedic register of the flowers and insects around the artist's living place (SCHNEIDER, 1994). However, the insects seem to be included primarily as symbols for the brevity of life, and were added as a moralistic sign warning that material richness was not the most important things in life. As noted in the introduction, the joint representation of flies, butterflies and dragonflies may even be a symbol for Christ (DICKE, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

As we might expect, the known representations of Odonata from the late Middle Ages, made in different places and ages, do not show any representational pattern or clear symbolism. Their inclusion in a work of art can always be interpreted as a symbol to complement or reinforce an idea, and their meaning in each of the representations studied seems to be different. Be it as it may, probably in the time of J. Pucelle and A. Lorenzetti dragonflies and damselflies were messengers of good fortune and signatures of the soul (life after death, change, rebirth) and love, as the butterflies have been since antiquity (COSTA-NETO, 2002; HOGUE, 1987; *http://www.insects.org/ced4/butterfly_symbols.html*), and their appearance in the works studied may perfectly corroborate the ideas exposed by DICKE (2000). Nowadays in the occidental society is still very common to correlate dragonflies with desincarnate souls (e.g. *http://www.crystalinks.com/dragonfly.html*).

Concerning the representational elements, RUDOLPH (1991) affirms that the slightly prolonged antennae is a common feature of early Odonata illustrations, giving a somewhat neuropteroid appearance to their heads. The five depictions described here are not in accordance with his proposition, since in all of them the antennae are not represented. Maybe the illuminators of the representations observed by him did not use models and mixed elements of neuropteroid insects

(e.g. adult antlions) with those of Odonata. RUDOLPH (1991) considered that a Gutenberg Bible, with illuminations dating from 1456, contains the oldest known European paintings of Odonata, but two of the representations here described are more than one hundred years older. So, the damselfly painted in the Belleville Breviary (ca 1323-1326), certainly based on a male *Calopteryx* specimen, is the oldest known European representation of Odonata yet.

During this study, a reproduction of the 1495 copperplate engraving of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), traditionally known as "The Holy Family with the Dragonfly" (or "The Virgin with the Dragonfly"), was examined. In spite of the current title, the insect represented was not really a dragonfly. The dubious insect representation, positioned in the right corner of the scene, has long, apically clubbed antennae and wide, short wings, like a butterfly. However, the long, thin abdomen and the long legs, especially the jumping hind pair, suggest a grasshopper. This ambiguity was also pointed out by STRAUSS (1972).

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