

PAINTINGS OF ZYGOPTERA IN THE GUTENBERG BIBLE OF 1453

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Received November 23, 1990 / Accepted November 29, 1990

A copy of the very first book printed in Europe, the Gutenberg Bible of 1453, preserved in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin, contains four coloured paintings of coenagrionid damselflies and one of a zygopterous larva. These are described and their position within the volume of unnumbered pages is mentioned. They represent the oldest known European paintings of Odonata.

INTRODUCTION

In Europe books were manuscripts and multiplied only by handwriting until about 1450, when the first attempts of Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz to use leaden types for composing printing blocks had turned out to be technically promising and, on the other hand, had yielded a noteworthy profit to the Church. By order of the Church, Gutenberg had printed tickets of indulgence in editions of many thousands (RUPPEL, 1980).

The very first book printed by this method was a bible, produced by Johannes Gutenberg by the end of 1453 in an edition of probably 180 copies, as we learn from a contemporary recension by a high ranking clergyman (CORSTEN, 1979; MEUTHEN, 1982; KOENIG, 1983). This bible comprises 1282 unnumbered pages measuring about 41x30 cm.

Medieval incunabula and manuscripts were delivered to the purchaser unbound and in plain condition, to which coloured initials as well as other decorations could be added by an illuminator according to the purchaser's individual taste. In consequence, the 48 copies known today of the Gutenberg Bible differ distinctly in their illuminations. The copy preserved in the Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin under the catalogue number INC 1511 is considered the most profusely decorated one, having been illuminated

1456 in a well known workshop in Saxony (SCHMIDT, 1980).

In view of Dr B.F. Belyshev's profound interest in the history of odonatology, I am pleased to be able to contribute this note to this Tribute Issue.

DESCRIPTION AND DISCUSSION

Apart from the richly gilt initials, which in many cases depict human figures in the letters' outlines, the florid illumination of this copy consists of polychrome floral ornaments and edgings, liana-like fantastic plants twining between the columns, and of deeply hued blossoms, among which roses and columbines prevail. Added to these floral elements are animals.

Many times the illuminations of various copies of the Gutenberg Bible have been reflected upon from viewpoints of artistry and aesthetics (see bibliography in KOENIG, 1983), but none of the works listed by Koenig has pointed out that the Gutenberg Bible of Berlin is noteworthy for the large number of realistically painted birds of both European and exotic origin which are included in its illumination. The species can easily be determined. Monkeys are climbing among the lianas on six pages. Only a few insects are depicted, yet the artist's special liking for Odonata is obvious. There are just three tiny flies and one small butterfly in the whole volume, while four pages are beautified with damselflies of natural or, in one case, nearly natural size. From their realistic blue colour and dark abdominal marking they are clearly identified as coenagrionid species. Even pseudopupils are painted to their eyes. Slightly prolonged antennae give their heads a somewhat neuropteroid appearance. This, however, is a common feature of early Odonata illustrations.

Two of the damselflies are settled on a leaf with wings neatly clapped together, while in two others the opened and somewhat blurred wings with their multiplied contours give the impression of flight. Pterostigmata as well as reflections on the wing surface and, in one case, a few dark markings add to the realistic appearance. Even wing nervature is subtly indicated.

A zygopterous larva, measuring 1.6 cm with its appendices, was revealed only by thorough inspection among the tendrils. The position of the paintings within the volume is described here by quoting the beginnings of the Latin text of the respective pages:

- (1) "*Hec sut noia filiar isrl...*", Second Book Moses: Exodus
- (2) "*Beatus vir qui...*", Psalms: Psalm 1 (Fig. 1)
- (3) "*Parabole salomonis...*", Proverbs of Solomon: Chapter 1
- (4) "*Matheus ex iudea...*", Gospel according to St. Matthew
- (5) Larva: "*Dixit deus...*", Psalms: Psalm 110

This bible, with its illumination dating from 1456, contains the oldest known European paintings of Odonata. Three more illustrations of Odonata in medieval manuscripts have already been described. An *Aeshna* is illustrated in the Italian "*Breviario Grimani*" dating from 1495-1500 (PICHETTI, 1949). Another prayer



Fig. 1. A damselfly painting in the Berlin copy of the Gutenberg Bible (1453).

book, the *"Livre d'Heures d'Anne de Bretagne"*, dating from about 1500, holds a dragonfly illustration (FRAIN, 1989), and *Calopteryx* species are illustrated in a Portuguese handwritten book dating from the period 1508-1532 (AGUIAR, 1983). In this context one should also mention the dragonfly on a stone relief from Italy, dated between 1450 and 1500 (CONCI, 1979), and also the Odonata engravings on sealstones from the Late Bronze Age of Crete, ca. 1500 B.C. (YOUNGER, 1983).

Another copy of the Gutenberg Bible is preserved in the Huntingdon Library and Art Gallery in San Marino, California. According to SCHMIDT (1980) this copy has been illuminated along with the copy from Berlin in the same Saxonian workshop. It might be worthwhile to inspect also this copy for Odonata paintings.

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