The Isabella Breviary

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The Isabella Breviary

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Conceived of as the most luxurious Flemish breviary, with each page masterfully illuminated by the finest Flemish painters: the Master of the Dresden Prayerbook, Gerard Horenbout, Gerard David, etc. An outstandingly magnificent manuscript of peerless beauty.

Having more texts than a book of hours, the breviary allows illuminators more artistic license, resulting in a greater variety of images.

Isabella the Catholic was given the manuscript in 1497 by her ambassador Francisco de Rojas on the occasion of the double marriage of her children, the Infante John of Asturias and Infanta Joanna, to the children of emperor Maximilian of Austria and duchess Mary of Burgundy, Margaret and Philip.

“...this transaction ranks as one of the most significant purchases of illuminated books in the entire history of the British Museum and Library.”

Janet Backhouse (†)
Former curator of illuminated manuscripts in the British Library

f. 191v, David and Goliath
f. 174r, Pharaoh’s soldiers overwhelmed by the Red Sea
f. 177v, Adam and Eve cast out of Paradise

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f. 436v, Coats of arms of the Catholic Monarchs and their children and children-in-law

f. 437r, The crowning of Our Lady
This impressive miniature features the coat of arms of the Catholic Monarchs upon a mauve ground. The imposing eagle of St John, the tetramorph eagle of the Apocalypse, is present not only because Isabella was crowned on this saint's feast day but also because of her great devotion to St John the Evangelist. Whilst still an adolescent, Isabella said she wanted this eagle to be the support for her own coat of arms, as revealed by a drawing of hers dated May 15th 1473 (Madrid, RAH, Co. Salazar y Castro, K-37, f. 112v).

The fact that she called her only son John and her second daughter Joanna (the female version of John in Spanish) is also due to this devotion. In this miniature, the eagle's head is flanked by two phylacteries inscribed with the words sub umbra alarum tuarum protege nos (in the shadow of your wings protect us). Undulating beneath the coat of arms are another three phylacteries with quotations from two psalms:

- *Pro patribus tuis nati sunt tibi filii. Constituisti eos principes super omnem terram* (Ps. 44: 17)
  (In the stead of your parents shall your children be born unto you, and you shall make them the princes of all the earth)

- *Potens in terra erit semen eius: generatio rectorum benedicitur* (Ps. 111: 2)
  (Powerful is the lineage of this seed on the earth: blessed be the generation of the righteous)

Both quotations are particularly eloquent taking into account the Breviary's enormous political significance. By marrying the children of Maximilian of Austria and Marie of Burgundy – at a time when America had just been discovered – these two children of the Catholic Monarchs did indeed become virtually “princes of all the earth”. In particular, this image of the coat of arms is a splendid tribute to the culmination of an extremely important political strategy achieved thanks to that double marriage.

The counterquartered coats of arms underneath are those of the two pairs of spouses. The arms of the children of the Spanish monarchs are the same as those of their parents, and those of the Hapsburg dynasty are quartered with inescutcheon.

The breviary was undeniably a splendid gift, the best possible, not only because of the first-rate technique and artistry of its images but also because of its political significance and because it is the best symbol of the culmination of a political project on a world scale. Miniatures like this one of the coronation demonstrate not only how important the events following the death of Henry IV were to Isabella (her efforts to obtain the crown and her yearning to be acknowledged by her subjects), but also the determined desire to unify the Iberian Peninsula that characterised her reign.
APOLOGY OF THE CONQUEST OF GRANADA IN 1492, f. 173r

Abraham saves Lot and is rewarded by Melchizedek

This painting of Psalm 109 may be interpreted as the protection of God and a prefiguration of the Messiah as a king and priest. The Holy Trinity is shown overhead in a rather unusual form: God the Father, on the right with a papal tiara, holds the orb, whilst God the Son, on the left in a warrior’s garb, wears the imperial crown of the Holy Roman German Empire. Between the two are the Holy Scriptures instead of the usual dove of the Holy Ghost.

The battle scene underneath, as told in Genesis 14: 14-16, shows Abraham in the centre with a golden helmet and breastplate striking down one of the kings and followers of Chedorlahomor who were holding Abraham’s nephew, Lot, captive. A downcast, bearded Lot can be seen on the right of the scene with his hands tied and the inscription “lod” upon his helmet. Abraham’s followers fight the other three kings and their armies. The continuation of the previous tale can be seen in the background: Abraham (portrayed as the first horseman in the battle beneath the word “abraham” in gold) being blessed by a tonsured Melchizedek (identified by the inscription “melchisedech”), the high priest and king of Salem with a loaf in his right hand and a container of wine in his left. The army in the background, amongst which four figures on horseback can be distinguished, shown emerging from a fortified city probably represents the four kings who captured Lot as he left Sodom.

The reference to the need to resort to military force to safeguard the purity and solidity of the Christian faith is probably most noteworthy aspect of this miniature, undoubtedly intended to irrefutably justify the conquest of Granada in 1492. The historical significance of this is enormous, not only because of what it represented after eight centuries of Islamic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula but also in a Christian Europe afraid of the proximity of the powerful Islam.
f. 3r, Calendar: April

f. 112r, Jerusalem is rebuilt under Nehemiah
f. 309r, St John the Evangelist

f. 412v, St James the Great
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