

# A Corpus of Veneto-Bolognese Costume and Grotesques

Holkham Ms. 206

Notes written by Dr. W.O. Hassall

Publication no. C00500

MICROFORM ACADEMIC PUBLISHERS

Main Street

East Ardsley

Wakefield WF3 2AP

United Kingdom

MAP@microform.co.uk

microform.co.uk/academic

# A Corpus of Veneto-Bolognese Costume and Grotesques

## *Azo, Holkham MS. 206*

Adviser : W. O. Hassall, M.A., D.Phil., F.S.A.

### Introduction

Extremely fine and typically Bolognese vignettes with borders of great beauty ornament a great manuscript of Azo's *Summa super Codicem, Institutiones, Novellas et Collationes* (MS. 209). From this book was taken one of the plates to illustrate Roscoe's Catalogue of the Manuscript Library at Holkham in 1835 and M. R. James considered that not much better Italian illuminations were to be seen. He considered that they were executed very near to the year 1300.

Sir Frederick Madden noted that "throughout the MS. almost every page is decorated with exquisite illuminated borders and drawings, the designs of which are grotesque in the highest degree, forming a singular contrast to the profound nature of the work itself . . . The MS. opens with an Index . . . after which is the Preface . . . Below this is a fine illumination, representing the deposition of the Codex in a rich coffer, in the presence of the Emperor". The title of the first book "is followed by another illumination, in which the Emperor is seated, surrounded by his Archbishops and Councillors. The outline is rather harsh, but conceived with spirit and fidelity, and the colours (chiefly blue and red) are so delicately disposed as not to offend the eye. A similar sized illumination precedes each of the succeeding nine Books, and one of them, viz., that at the commencement of the 8th Book, has been selected for engraving". Similar miniatures precede the Preface and each of the four books of the *Summa* of the *Institutiones*, the *Materia ad Pandectam* of John Bosianus and his *Summa* on the *Novellae*, the Preface and books on 10 and 11 of the *Summa trium librorum codicis*, and the Preface of the *Collationes Novellarum* of Accursius. In addition to these major illuminations all the initials of the numerous *tituli* into which these books are divided are illuminated, almost always with figures.

The miniatures had an extraordinary partiality for pale greens and blues, and even consistently uses pale green though not without a little pink in rendering flesh. Dark blue, vermilion, yellow-brown, rose, grey, black and occasionally brick red are also used, but gold is conspicuously absent, except to represent metal.

The initials of the *tituli* have blue backgrounds with a white filigree with which contrast the colour of the letter and the upper half of a human figure. Parts of the letters and sometimes of the figures protrude into the margins to link at right angles with marginal designs, multi-coloured but of simple form. This seldom occupies more than a small proportion of the margin except where several *tituli* occur on a single page and then a candelabrum-like stem runs the full height of the margin (or of the space between the two columns into which the text is divided) and is linked to each of the initials. Such stems are sometimes adorned with standing figures and branch into a pattern of simple formal tapering foliage at both ends.

The miniatures at the beginnings of the various books are of rectangular pattern. Each shows a suitable scene with between five and seven figures, including the emperor seated generally on the left crowned and in red robes over blue. There is an architectural setting of yellow-brown and pale green or pink buildings, some of which have scarlet or black roofs. The robes of the actors are pink, grey, pale green, pale or dark blue, yellow-brown or scarlet, occasionally with embroidered borders, mitres and stoles. They are sometimes barefooted and sometimes in black or occasionally scarlet hose, occasionally in black or scarlet hats but generally bare-headed. The buildings are set against deep blue backgrounds of which the edges are often outlined with a thin border of white filigree. Three soldiers in armour are shown in the miniature preceding the first book of the *Summa* of the *Institutiones* and the miniature for the second book is wholly exceptional in showing no buildings. This is a hunting scene on a rocky yellow-brown mountain with four trees. These have twisted trunks and their isolated carefully outlined black leaves are symmetrically spotted with red and grey dots and dashes. A figure in pale green with horn and ragged staff and hound climbs from the left. An archer in pink on the summit has shot a bird which is falling transfixed from the sky in the right margin while in front of him a pale blue hound kills a little animal. The leaves of the two trees at the edges of the

miniature project into the margin and beneath the one on the right a youth in red stands in the margin with a hawk on his wrist. On the leaf above him perches a pale green bird. Below the left-hand corner of the picture an initial I contains another figure, in pink, standing with his left hand raised above his head holding a black hawk secured by a scarlet jess.

Each of these miniatures is placed directly below a rubricated title and directly above the illuminated initial of the ensuing *titulus*. A candelabrum-like stem extends the full length of the left side of the text and takes a rectangular turn at its two extremities in order to decorate the top and bottom margins of the page. The right-hand side of the text is left unornamented. The first and second books of the Summa of the Institutiones are alike exceptional in that both the left-hand margin and the space between the two columns of text are both thus decorated instead of only one. This is because the miniature preceding the preface happens to be in the column adjoining the miniature preceding book 1 and because the column which precedes the opening of book 2 happens to contain as many as four *tituli* with ornamented initials.

Several tall initial I's serve as the backs of chairs for a king, an angel and old men dressed and naked. A soldier, seen from the back, goes into another initial I as if it were a door.

Of the figures in the margins one has a six-storeyed head-dress and the hat of another turns into foliage. One sinuous human head and shoulders emerges from a bird's body, but in spite of the artist's love of the sinuous, most of the figures are not grotesque. Many hold books or scrolls, a frontally drawn lady with diamond-shaped feet holds a goblet and a youth with hawk on wrist stands at the base of tree with four great leaves and three birds. There is a figure, naked save for hose, with a long neck supporting a head back to front and a snake-like trumpet issuing from his mouth, who is leaning against one initial; and another rests his elbow against a second initial. The trumpet of one figure protrudes into an initial, another figure stands on a dragon's head (whose knotted neck develops out of the stalk of a leaf) and raises a hand to grasp an initial. One shakes hands with the occupant of an initial and another carrying a bundle on his back rests on a stick to gossip with the occupant of another. Less fortunate are the inhabitants of initials whom a man in a flying cape is going to strike with a club

and the one who is held in the grip of an assailant from the margin with sword raised to strike.

The bottom margins contain an angel with outspread wings, a grotesque kind of brown marine creature, and a man hammering a wedge. The volutes of foliage contain a sceptred cherub leaning backwards on the back of a bull (with right foot projecting in front of its tail and right hand touching the root of its tail) and a man naked save for a cloak sitting on an ostrich with his arms and legs stretched forward. The ostrich is shown on a solid blue background and the inhabitant of another volute, similarly filled with blue, waves a scroll outside the medallion thus formed.

When the volutes are arranged in pairs their occupants sometimes do not merely sit writing or stand bowing with scrolls but bear a definite relationship to each other. Thus the bent back of a naked man is pierced with an arrow discharged from a twin convolute opposite, an armed hero in one thrusts a lance into the mouth of a blue knotted serpent in another and elsewhere there stand confronted a couple of grey and yellow-brown centaurs with only two legs each and snakes' tails.

In one lower margin a youth in blue holding a scabbard has raised his sword to decapitate a bird with an excessively long coiled neck, one coil of which is in its beak.

The composition of the first page of *Summa trium librorum apdicis* is exceptionally symmetrical because the preface happens to occupy a column all but for five lines. This has meant that the miniatures preceding the preface and book 1 each come at the top of an adjoining column. The junction of the vertical ornament between the columns and the horizontal ornament of the top column is suitably occupied by a running figure in pale pink, whose front leg is vertical while his other leg stretches out horizontally behind him so as to conceal the decorative structure. His left arm is, of course, stretched out before him. At the bottom of the page the terminal of the ornament divides into two tendrils in whose convolutions are two figures facing each other so that their curved backs describe segments of circles concentric with those of the surrounding foliage. As the first column does not quite reach the bottom of the page a bird occupies the corner between the ornamentation of the centre and bottom of the page.

The ornamental borders are of variegated colour and are

relieved by various ornamental knobs, formal foliage, or standing figures, birds, beasts, or human heads. Each terminates in a single elongated leaf with serrated edges and a tapering point terminating in a tendril. The stems of the leaves are occasionally knotted, and sometimes the stem of one is arranged at an acute angle with the tip of another to which it is tied. The leaves are often from one to two inches long and it is rare to find a page containing as many as a dozen of them. The stem of one often cuts at a right angle the convolution which terminates its neighbour and sometimes the tip of one forms an acute angle with the stem of an adjoining convolution. The general effect is one of freshly coloured and uncrowded angularity and grace.

The figures in the initials are generally human though some have long ears or beasts' heads. Arms, legs and even a serpentine neck with its head back-to-front issue out of the frames of some initials to trespass in the margin. Such a hand holds a rod from which an enormous fish dangles in the bottom margin, a tonsured figure raises a hand to hold an imperial footstool in a miniature above, a hand extends to grasp a stem in the margin or to wave or dangle books, scrolls or vases or even a bearded head, to grasp a sword, to caress a figure, hold a hawk or other bird, or lop a tree. One blows a horn in the margin and another has evidently been right outside for he is stepping into an empty frame out of the margin. One initial contains a couple embracing and in many others a single occupant seems content to remain within the limits of his frame.

The centre of one upper margin is decorated by a head with a forked beard and the upper corner of another page has a head with long hair sticking upwards and a long beard sticking downwards and occasionally there is a vase containing a tall dark leaf in the margin. But apart from human beings, animals and birds are the chief subjects and inanimate objects are scarcely found.

Birds are well rendered and often stand on the thin tendrils in which the leaf decorations terminate as well as elsewhere. Some stags are drawn with curious horns like two letter f's with curved backs turned inwards. A frog serves as centrepiece of a leafy design in a lower margin and another frog is devoured by a long-necked bird which stands on a hand which has been thrust into the margin by a figure in an initial. An elongated blackbird pecks at the base of a naked head and shoulder.

Animals do not figure in the initials though a knotted serpent in one takes the place of the usual human being. It is developed out of the pattern in the margin, and a stag leaps into another initial and yet a third is invaded by a ravening wolf. A cock has a tug-of-war for a scroll with the occupant of one initial, but the occupant of another amiably holds out into the margin a goblet so that a long-necked bird may drink.

The builder of Holkham obtained this splendid manuscript not at Bologna but at Lyon from the Augustins déchaussés.

It has not seemed right to increase the length of these introductory notes by giving separate notes on each frame. The illustrations are not related to the matter in the text and do not tell any stories which need explanation. As examples of costume or as grotesques they all come from one place and one period, and will accordingly be of especial value to anyone who wishes to design costume and décor for pageants or puppet-shows with a proper preservation of the right unity of space and time.