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The Wall Painting in the Chapel of Sainte-Radegonde at Chinon in the Historical Context

In my article « Aliénor d'Aquitaine conduite en captivité »¹, I interpreted the murals at Sainte-Radegonde in Chinon within a historical context. I argued that the paintings depict the royal cortège led by King Henry II. The king is riding at the cortège's head, pointing toward himself. Eleanor of Aquitaine and their daughter Jeanne are riding behind him. The two sons of Henry and Eleanor, the two princes – the Young King Henry and Richard – are represented riding at the end of the cortège, with the prince approaching the queen and attempting to give her the hawk he is holding. The expressions on the faces of all the participants are grim, and this prominent feature gains further emphasis when compared with the expressions on the faces in the scene depicting the cortège of King Harold riding toward the coast in the Bayeux Tapestry or in numerous scenes representing the Magi on their journey to Bethlehem.

In my article, I interpreted this solemn cortège of the five riding figures as a representation of Eleanor of Aquitaine being led into captivity in 1174 after the revolt against King Henry by her and her sons. Now I would like to add that the mural may be read from the centre outward – to the left and right. The centre of the mural features the empty space which separates the queen's horse from those of the two princes, so that the first prince's outstretched hand cannot reach that of the queen, which is straining toward him. There are thus two distinct parts to this representation : the king, queen and their daughter on the left, and the two princes on the right.

I believe that Eleanor of Aquitaine was the patron of this mural, commissioning it at least 16 years after she had been taken prisoner. The painting could have been commissioned either after her liberation from prison and the death of Henry II in 1189, or perhaps in the early 1190s when Richard was still in prison. Moreover, I consider that this painting was intended to commemorate that most dreadful moment for Eleanor – when she lost her freedom. It may have been a kind of a votive picture that she commissioned to be painted not in Chinon Castle where she had been held captive, but in a nearby chapel dedicated to Sainte-Radegonde. I believe that Sainte-Radegonde, a patron saint of prisoners, became meaningful to Eleanor in her later life. Radegonde, the Merovingian queen, left her husband to found a monastery in Poitiers (to which later Eleanor restored the rights taken away by Richard). On her way to Poitiers, after a long journey, Radegonde visited the hermit John who lived in the chapel that was later dedicated to her.

¹ Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, « Aliénor d'Aquitaine conduite en captivité. Les peintures murales commémoratives de Sainte-Radegonde de Chinon », *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 41, 1998, p. 317-330.

Jean Flori, in his book *Richard Coeur de Lion*, agrees in general with my identification, adding the suggestion that Eleanor was probably giving Richard the hawk and not vice versa². Yet only Richard is wearing gloves, and hawk-holders are typically depicted as wearing them. My hypothesis has not been accepted by all scholars, however, some of whom have interpreted the cortège as representing Henry II and his sons riding together after making peace³. Such an interpretation appears to be the result of a schematic visual reading, which does not acknowledge an image as being that of a woman if she is not wearing a veil. According to the same conception, women are considered to have been depicted in the Middle Ages only in a woman's riding position (side-saddle). These two presumptions have thus led to the reading of the mural as a cortège solely of men.

Indeed, in the present roundtable discussion Ursula Nilgen argued that the figure that I read as Eleanor of Aquitaine is in fact a male figure, as it is not portrayed riding in the feminine way. Furthermore, she argued that the hair arrangement – a crown without a veil beneath it – is that of a male.

A very detailed description of women riding in male fashion however is found in the chronicle of Nicetas Choniates, who describes the crusader women appearing in Constantinople during the Second Crusade as follows :

Females were numbered among them, riding horseback in the manner of men, not on coverlets side-saddle but unashamedly astride, and bearing lances and weapons as men do ; dressed in masculine garb, they conveyed a wholly martial appearance, more mannish than the Amazons. One stood out from the rest as another Penthesilea and from the embroidered gold which ran around the hem and fringes of her garment was called Goldfoot⁴.

Several scholars identified this figure of Goldfoot with Eleanor of Aquitaine⁵ Furthermore, the image of the countess depicted in the mural in Sant Pere del Burgal⁶ mentioned to me by Montserrat Pages, shows very similar features to those of the figure I identified as Eleanor of Aquitaine in Sainte-Radegonde in Chinon.

To support my thesis, and in accordance with the title of this round table, « *Est-il possible de contextualiser l'image autour de la fresque de Sainte-Radegonde de Chinon ?* », I would like to tackle the murals once again, this time in the context of medieval pictorial traditions related to the patrons who ordered or donated the works.

At least from the sixth century onwards it is possible to observe in medieval art several pictorial traditions that relate to the patrons in various ways and point to their role, whether allegorically, symbolically or concretely. In these traditions it was the particular image used that provided the viewers with a clue in relating to and reading the narrative. Thus the murals at Chinon will be examined in the framework of the following pictorial traditions :

- (1) Christological narratives referring allegorically to the patrons ;
- (2) Historical narratives or images referring to the patrons ;
- (3) Historical events – past or present – referring to the patrons.

² Jean Flori, *Richard Coeur de Lion, le Roi-Chevalier*, Paris, 1999, p. 48, et 496 n. 44.

³ Cf. Ursula Nilgen, « Les Plantagenêts à Chinon », in *Iconographica. Mélanges offerts à Piotr Skubiszewski*, éd. Robert Favreau et Marie-Hélène Debiès, Poitiers, 1999, p. 153-159.

⁴ *O City of Byzantium, Annals of Niketas Choniates*, trans. Harry J. Magoulias, Detroit, 1984, p. 35.

⁵ *Ibid.*, note 153.

⁶ Joan Sureda, *La Pintura románica a Catalunya*, Madrid, 1981, p. 282-283.

The various elements of these traditions could appear either individually or – more frequently – in combination. I would like to suggest that the mural at Chinon carries on a dialogue with each of these traditions while handing the observer a clue how to read the new, secular painting.

(1) *Christological narratives.* The narrative of the journey of the three Magi to Bethlehem was in common use as an allusion to royal patrons. An increasing number of scholars consider the representations of the three Magi in medieval and post-medieval art in various sculpted and painted cycles as referring to royal patronage, in addition to their Christological meanings⁷. The Magi are often represented – on their journey to Bethlehem and then in the scene of the Adoration of the Child – as kneeling and extending their gifts to Mary, enthroned as *sedes sapientiae* holding the Christ Child. A parallel exists between the Magi, each bearing his gift to Christ, and the royal patron making his donations to Christ and the Church. The image of the Empress Theodora, probably the patron of the church, is already depicted in the sixth century in the mosaic preceding the apse of San Vitale in Ravenna. She is shown turning towards the altar, holding a goblet covered with gems and pearls, and is dressed in a surcoat on whose lower part the images of the three Magi are represented as if embroidered⁸. Thus the empress demonstrates her fidelity to Church and Christ as did the Magi. Furthermore, monumental representation of the three Magi as an allegory or symbol of the donors is prominent in Ravenna in the mosaic cycle on the northern nave wall of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, in which they lead the martyrs-virgins procession towards the Virgin Mary, and where an inscription on the wall relates to the donor, Emperor Theodoric, and his predecessors the Emperors Constantine the Great and Justinian⁹. The images of the Magi continue to feature in the twelfth century in various contexts. Their appearance on the west façade on the left frieze in St. Trophime, Arles, for example, has been connected to the coronation of Emperor Frederick I in Arles in 1178. Their depiction on the portal of St-Gilles-du-Gard is equally meaningful¹⁰.

It seems to me that in artistic projects carried out under the patronage of the Plantagenets the role of the Magi is significant and in several of the scenes the riding Magi assume a prominent place. I shall discuss here the ceiling murals in the chapel of Petit-Quevilly, which was erected in the year 1182 as one of the projects carried out under the patronage of Henry II¹¹. The narrative on the quadripartite ceiling starts with the Annunciation and ends with the Flight into Egypt. Each of the ceiling's four parts contains two round medallions enframing the narrative scenes. The depiction of the riding Magi's journey and the scene of the Magi in front of King Herod, is figured on one part of the vault. The narrative continues within the two medallions in the next part (the Magi asleep together on their way to Bethlehem, and the Magi offering their gifts to the Christ-Child, held by the seated Virgin). Half of the ceiling is thus dedicated to the narrative of the Magi, while only one part of the vault is taken up by Nativity

⁷ Richard C. Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi, Meanings in History of a Christian Story*, Princeton, 1997.

⁸ Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, « Theodora, Harlot Queen or Oriental Empress : A New Interpretation of Her Image in San Vitale », in *On Interpretations in the Arts*, ed. Nurith Yaari, Tel-Aviv, 2000, p. 99-115.

⁹ Giuseppe Bovini, *Ravenna, seine Mosaiken und Kunstdenkmäler*, Ravenna, 1991, p. 77-94.

¹⁰ Dominique Rigaux, « Pour la gloire des hommes. Le programme iconographique du portail de saint Trophime », in *Le portail de Saint Trophime de Arles*, Actes Sud, 1999, p. 19-57. Carra Ferguson O'Meara, *The Iconography of the Façade of Saint-Gilles-du-Gard*, New York and London, 1977.

¹¹ Lindy Grant, « The patronage architectural d'Henri II et de son entourage », *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 32, 1994, p. 78-79.

scenes and another by the Flight into Egypt and the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan. Thus the allusion to the royal donor is prominent throughout, as suggested by the preoccupation with the narrative of the Magi. The figures of the riding Magi pointing at the Bethlehem star are meaningful in exemplifying the role of the « pointing » gesture in medieval art, as intended to draw special attention¹². The pointing gesture of the Magi should thus be compared to the pointing gestures in the Chinon murals.

An additional representation of the Magi theme under plausible Plantagenet patronage is the sculptural program of the Saint Michel portal of Saint Pierre Cathedral in Poitiers¹³. Most scholars agree that the portal is to be dated to the first campaign of the cathedral building between 1163 and 1173. The program has not survived completely, but it has been retained on the left hand side of the entrance and in large parts on the right hand side. Reading the left hand side (from the observer's point of view) from the upper part to the lower, the story of the Magi is depicted on the upper right frieze. It starts with the Magi in front of King Herod, goes on to the consultation of King Herod with his courtiers, and ends in front of the door with the representation of the three Magi riding their horses, with the two front ones facing each other and pointing toward the Star. The story continues on the lower frieze with the Massacre of the Innocents and ends with the Flight into Egypt, which is situated under the images of the three riding Magi. On the right hand side of the door the images of the Magi are represented in front of the Virgin holding Christ on her knee. This image is located in the middle between the Annunciation scene to its right and the Visitation scene to its left¹⁴, and not in the regular sequence of Annunciation, Visitation and Adoration of the Magi. In most cathedrals the northern portal is used for royal and princely advents¹⁵. Here in Poitiers the portal has never been associated with such an entry. However, on the one hand, the depictions of the riding Magi accompany the entering people, while on the other hand, the prominent depiction of the Adoration of the Magi in the midst of the other scenes makes it possible to assume that an allusion is also being made to Eleanor and Henry as patrons.

A depiction of the three Magi on the capital sculpted on the entrance portal appears on the left side capital of the Ascension portal of the west façade of Chartres Cathedral, with the Massacre of the Innocents appearing on the right side¹⁶. The Magi similarly appear on the lower right part of the archivolt of the southern portal of Le Mans Cathedral, which was built according to the model of the west façade of Chartres Cathedral, and inaugurated in 1158¹⁷. Eleanor's involvement as patron in the creation of this west façade was probably prominent. As I have suggested elsewhere¹⁸ the transformation of its plan for use in Le Mans is thus highly plausible. The use of the motif of the three Magi on the northern portal of Poitiers Cathedral may also indicate the donors. A comparison between the images of the riding Magi in Chartres, Le Mans, Petit-Quevilly and Poitiers may be meaningful.

¹² « La chapelle Saint-Julien du Petit-Quevilly », in *Images du Patrimoine*, n° 96.

¹³ Elisa Maillard, *Les sculptures de la cathédrale Saint-Pierre de Poitiers*, Poitiers, 1921, p. 75-83.

¹⁴ Yves Bloome, *Poitiers, la cathédrale Saint-Pierre*, Paris, 2001, p. 23.

¹⁵ Barbara Abou-El-Haj, « Reims and its Cathedral » *Art History*, 2, 1985, p. 17-41 ; Sara Lutan, « Le porche septentrional de la collégiale Saint-Martin de Candes (v.1180) et l'image dynastique des Plantagenêt », *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 45, 2002, p. 341-361.

¹⁶ Willibald Sauerländer, *Gothic Sculpture in France 1140-1270*, London, 1970, p. 46-47.

¹⁷ Susan L. Ward, *The Sculpture of the South Porch at Le Mans Cathedral*, Ann Arbor, 1984, p. 179-237.

¹⁸ Nurith Kenaan-Kedar, « The impact of Eleanor of Aquitaine on the Visual Arts », in *Culture politique des Plantagenêts (1154-1224)*, ed. Martin Aurell, Poitiers, (Civilisation médiévale), IV, 14, 2003, p. 39-61.

The right part of the mural at Chinon, however, can be understood as a reference to this Christological narrative tradition, which refers to the patrons but omits narratives of concrete events in their life, or of their dynasty. The depiction of Henry II riding at the head of the cortège in Chinon pointing toward himself (rather than the Magi who point toward the star of Bethlehem) and with Eleanor and Jeanne in his wake, seems to be a secular depiction transgressing the Christological narrative. The second part of the cortège relates to a different pictorial tradition, as I shall try to show below.

(2) *Historical narratives and images referring to the patrons.* The pictorial tradition of representing historical-allegorical images referring to local nobility and royalty was very common in Aquitaine, where sculptural images of the individual princely rider triumphing over evil are carved on numerous façades. As is well known, the interpretations of their meaning have moved from an identification of the rider as Emperor Constantine the Great to its being a symbolic figure of the *miles Christi*¹⁹. Such individual sculpted images of a noble rider, with or without a hawk, as on the façade of Parthenay-le-Vieux²⁰ were thus known in Aquitaine and the image was used in reference to various noble or royal patrons in a variety of contexts and meanings. Unlike the figures of the Magi, the rider appears as the Defender of the Church who carries out its battles and, as Linda Seidel has shown, also as a crusader and a soldier of the Reconquest. In addition and probably concomitant with these images, very similar historical-symbolical images of the four emperors on horseback were also painted on the walls of the baptistery of Poitiers, dated according to most scholars to before the mid-twelfth century. Only one of the riders can be identified by inscription and this is Constantine the Great. He is seated astride his horse, his head crowned and his surcoat blowing in the breeze, and he holds a globe²¹. Although these paintings have been described and noted numerous times, and the baptistery in Poitiers is part of the episcopal group of buildings, the issue of their patronage has not been raised before. The images of the riders – and mainly the figure of Constantine – have been discussed in connection with baptism, but not with royal patronage²². However, even if there are no extant documents on the role of Eleanor and Henry as patrons of such a mural cycle, and even if they were not the direct patrons of these paintings, it is most plausible to assume that they knew about them. Moreover, a possible ecclesiastical patron could have intended to refer to the royal couple.

The iconography of the mural at Chinon does not reveal a direct link to the representations in the baptistery. It presents a dramatic narrative. However, the image of Richard the Lion-Heart astride his horse and holding a hawk is very close in form to the relief of the galloping rider holding the hawk depicted on the west façade of the church of Parthenay-le-Vieux. Thus, the two parts of the mural at Chinon seem to be relating to two different pictorial traditions, and by carrying out a dialogue with each of them a new composition was created.

(3) *Concrete historical events.* The art under the patronage of the Plantagenêt shows a strong inclination toward allegorical presentation on the one hand, and concrete

¹⁹ Linda Seidel, *Songs of Glory*, Chicago, 1959, p. 70-81.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59, 68, 79.

²¹ Yvonne Labande-Mailfert, « Les peintures murales », in *Le Baptistère Saint-Jean de Poitiers*, Poitiers, 1976, p. 27-37.

²² F. Eygun, « Le Baptistère Saint-Jean de Poitiers », *Gallia*, 22, 1962, p. 361-374.

self-representations, or even portraiture, on the other hand. Particularly famous is the enamel plaque of Geoffroy le Bel, which was a part of his sepulchral monument, depicting him standing erect with his blond hair flowing, with his surcoat and cape, and with images of tigers symbolizing the dynasty painted on the cape shield and surcoat²³. Additional support comes from the crucifixion window in the cathedral of St. Pierre in Poitiers, which represents Eleanor and Henry kneeling at the feet of the cross with their four children²⁴ and from the dynastic sepulchral monuments at Fontevrault²⁵. Thus I assume that Eleanor and Henry were familiar of historical visual renderings when creating new presentations.

The model for narrative representations, and not only portraits, for both Eleanor and Henry was in all probability that of the Bayeux Tapestry²⁶. It is highly plausible that both Eleanor and Henry were familiar with the tapestry, which was kept in their lands, and represented the figures of Henry's ancestors. Moreover, Henry Plantagenet, count of Anjou, had become king of England because of the family ties on the side of his mother, Mathilda. The opening scene of the Bayeux Tapestry depicts King Harold starting towards the coast to cross to England. His hounds are running in front of him and two groups – one of three men and one of two – are riding behind him, with one of the men in the last group pointing with his finger in a manner that can be easily compared to the Chinon mural.

The well-known poem by Baudri of Bourgeuil, *Adelae Comitissae*, describes a similar tapestry in the bedchamber of Adele of Blois, daughter of William the Conqueror and wife of Count Etienne of Blois.

I would like to argue that the Chinon mural relates to the very specific artistic language of the Bayeux Tapestry, where for example the pointing gestures of the riders as an explanatory means are routine. This is also the case in the narrative episode that tells the story of Harold riding towards the coast. I believe that the mural at Chinon conveys a similar atmosphere, but also relates to the dynastic depictions of the Plantagenets. At the same time it also employs additional symbols, thus bestowing the narrative with an air of commemoration.

Furthermore, I would like to suggest that the murals in Chinon be considered in comparison with the *Liber ad Honorem Augusti*, written by Petrus of Ebulo in praise of Emperor Henry VI in the last decades of the twelfth century, and thus contemporaneous with the Chinon murals²⁷. This work is one of the earliest to depict contemporary events in words as well as images. This pictorial chronicle portrays the events of the Sicilian Kingdom, starting with Roger II and going on to the marriage of Constance to Henry VI and the death of William II. This codex reached France probably at the beginning of the thirteenth century and was used as a source of inspiration for writings on the life of Philip II Augustus. One of its illustrations represents Constance handing over her new-born son, Frederick II, to the spouse of Konrad of Urslingen as she her-

²³ Michèle Nikitine, « Le Tombeau et l'épitaque émaillé du comte Geoffroy à Saint-Julien du Mans », 303 *Arts, Recherches et Créations*, 70, 2001, p. 202-203.

²⁴ Jean Louise Lozinski, « Henri II, Aliénor d'Aquitaine et la cathédrale de Poitiers » *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 37, 1994, p. 92-100.

²⁵ Jean-Marc Bienvenu, « Henri II Plantagenêt et Fontevraud », *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 37, 1994, p. 25-32.

²⁶ S. A. Brown, *The Bayeux Tapestry: History and Bibliography*, Woodbridge, 1988.

²⁷ Petrus de Ebulo, *Liber ad honorem Augusti, sive de rebus Siculis. Eine Bilderchronik der Stauferzeit aus der Bürgerbibliothek Bern*, ed. T. Koelzer and M. Staehli, Sigmaringen, 1994.

self rides to accompany the Emperor on his journey to southern Italy²⁸. This scene, in which the queen – on horseback – is handing the infant down to the standing princess, constitutes a very similar composition to that of Eleanor and Richard in the Chinon mural. Here too, as in Chinon, the figure of the receiver is portrayed with still empty hands. This work, using pictures to illustrate contemporaneous events and possibly known to Philip Augustus, may well have been seen or heard of by Eleanor and Richard²⁹.

In another pictorial tradition, Henry II commissioned a mural for Winchester Palace, as reported by Gerald of Wales, in which a large eagle was shown being devoured by four eaglets, and which Henry II explained as representing his four sons devouring himself, the Eagle³⁰. Thus he created an allegorical or symbolical imagery of himself and his sons that differs from the other pictorial traditions I have mentioned. Such a representation must also have been derived from a different pictorial tradition than those discussed above. The eagle with the two heads was the royal emblem of the Plantagenets and the eagle as such was an ancient royal symbol, but the eagle being devoured by eaglets seems to have been an ad hoc invention.

Eleanor's commissioned painting of the mural of Chinon did not adopt the allegorical symbolical representation, but chose to create from within the pictorial traditions we have demonstrated here. Thus I believe that we can perceive the mural at Chinon as probably having been created to commemorate the event of Eleanor being taken into captivity, which had taken place 16 years earlier, rendered in a pictorial tradition that had a well-known past, and was developing in the thirteenth century toward new formulations.

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²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

²⁹ R. Hausherr, *Die Zeit der Staufer. Katalog der Ausstellung*, Stuttgart, 1977, vol. I, p. 646-648.

³⁰ Giraldus Cambrensis, *De principis instructione*, ed. G. F. Warner, London, 1891, p. 295-296.