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A STUDY IN MEDIEVAL SPANISH SYMBOLISM

(WITH ELEVEN PLATES)

By
HERBERT FRIEDMANN
Director, Los Angeles County Museum



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Since the earliest records of his self-consciousness, man has tended to look upon himself as more than a mere physical being, as a bipartite but yet coordinated union of body and soul. Early in his ascent from savagery to civilization he began to choose natural objects from his surroundings as symbols to convey thoughts or feelings that his language was as yet unable to convey. Much later this long-ingrained habit of "talking in symbols," coupled with the very slow rise of literacy, was accentuated by man's submergence of objective interest in the world about him with the rise of the religiously inspired allegorical and mystical approach that dominated Europe during the long centuries of the Middle Ages. Natural objects, animals, plants, stones, the elements, were not considered interesting in themselves but were looked upon chiefly as the bearers of meanings significant to man, and it was the chief task of scholars to decipher these hidden messages and not to waste time upon their carriers.

It was not until the dawn of the Renaissance that a new interest in the natural world began to assert itself. We must realize that the proliferation and growth of all the natural sciences that we know today would never have come about without this all-important, originally gradual but accelerating mental reorientation from mysticism to objectivity. One of the most fascinating but least explored chapters in the history of science is this transition from the allegorical and the symbolic to the observational and the direct approach to nature. Before this chapter can be written with satisfyingly sympathetic understanding, we need to explore and to elucidate more fully what each specific object really meant to the people who used them, and to trace the alterations in their use and the additional and often unharmonious implications that came to be attached to them. The study of symbolism is a vital part of the history of the emergence of natural science, to the elucidation of which it is hoped the present paper may make a small contribution.

The painting (fig. 1) with which this study deals is a small one ($18\frac{3}{4} \times 10\frac{1}{4}$ inches), painted on a panel about 1480 by Bartolomé Bermejo. It came to the Art Institute of Chicago a number of years ago as part of the M. A. Ryerson collection. The figure portrayed has not been identified, and none of several suggested solutions is convincing. The saint, richly robed and mitred and with a radiant nimbus, is seated on a narrow, high-backed throne at a desk on which is a manuscript he has been writing. In his upraised right hand is a quill pen; his attitude is that of a writer pausing to think about what to put down next in his text. The decorative inscriptions carried by the figures embroidered on the saint's pluvial identify them as prophets, but this hardly enables us to identify the wearer.

Iñiguez (1935, p. 302) identified the saint as St. Augustine, but Post (1938, p. 874) considered that the habit beneath his cope and the garb of his two companions in the background of the painting were Benedictine. Post, a better art historian than an iconographer, went on to say

the bird behind his desk may be intended as the raven that is one of St. Benedictine's emblems. The Satanic dragon who snarls in the lower right corner would be suitable to Benedict instead of his frequent attribute of the aspergillum by which he discomfited the devil, but it must be remembered that the crushed dragon is the constant symbol of a saint who was appropriated by the Benedictines, Macarius. Sto. Domingo de Salos, also a Benedictine, and the subject of Bermejo's extant picture in the Prado, likewise won many victories over the arch-fiend. The bird certainly looks more like a barnyard fowl than a raven, and may signify still another Benedictine saint—another Domingo—Sto. Domingo de la Calzada, whose ordinary emblems, as tokens of his most stupendous miracle, are a cock and a hen. . . .

However, the bird is neither a raven nor a barnyard fowl but is a very accurate, naturalistic rendition of a European swamp-hen or purple gallinule, the Spanish name for which is *calamón* and the classical name *porphyrio*. The bird has appeared in art very rarely, and then chiefly in faunal and floral compositions by artists such as Roelandt Savery, Jan van Kessel, and Jan Brueghel the Elder, or in decorative tapestries of natural subject matter. Illustrating this here are a detail from an early 17th-century painting by Jan Brueghel the Elder (fig. 2) entitled "Noah's Ark," now in the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, and a detail from a French Gobelin tapestry of about 1764 to 1771 (fig. 3) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (S. H. Kress collection).

In the painting by Bermejo the *porphyrio* (fig. 4) is standing on the floor behind the desk, in the passage between the saint's room and



FIG. 1.—Bartolomé Bermejo. *A Saint*. Art Institute of Chicago.



FIG. 2.—Jan Brueghel the Elder. Detail from *Noah's Ark*. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.



FIG. 3.—Detail from a Gobelin tapestry of about 1764-1771. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

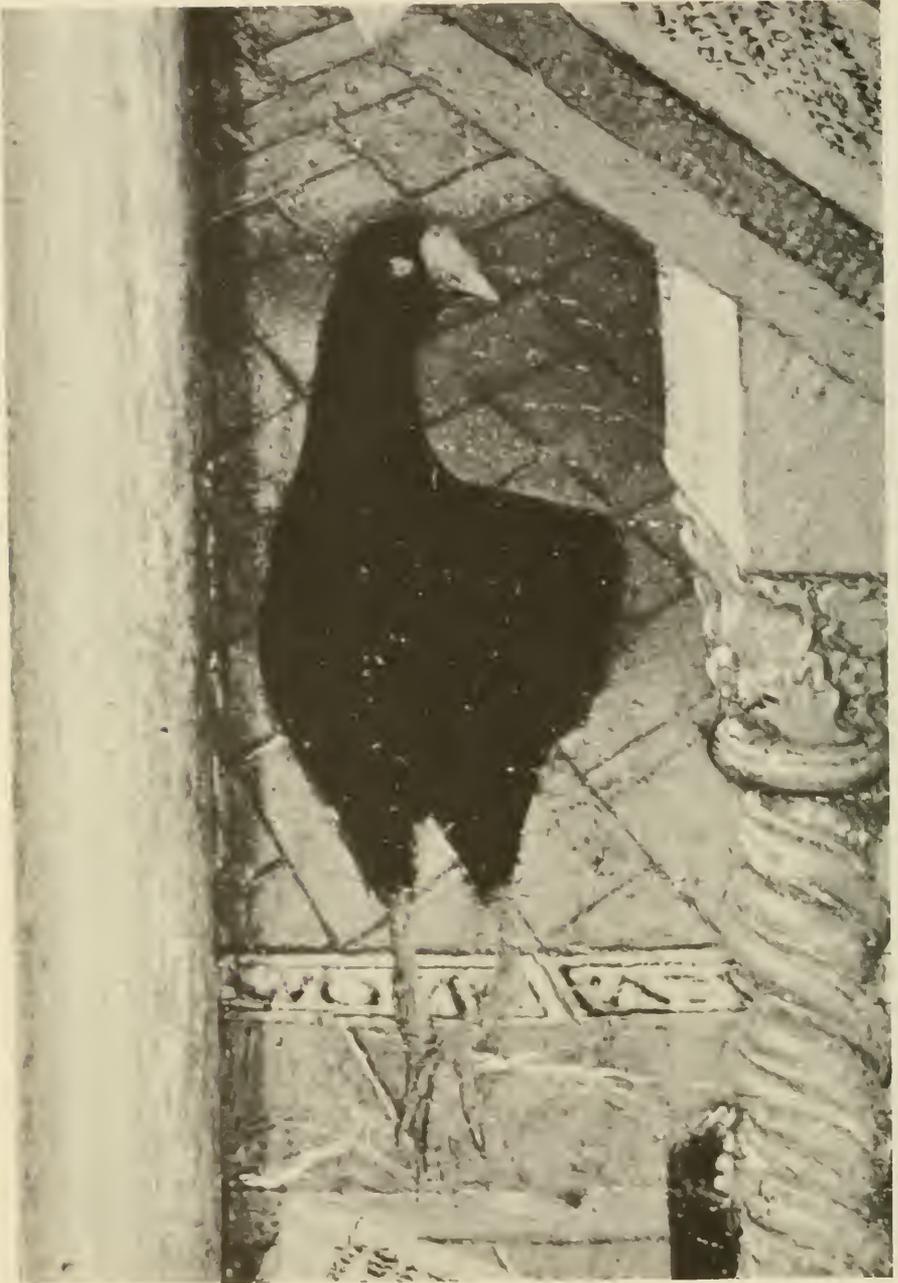


FIG. 4.—Detail from Figure 1.

the outdoors. Its head is turned toward the seated bishop as if watching him. Among the objects on the desk, besides the manuscript on the lectern, are a large book, another sheet of manuscript, a bag of dusting powder for drying the ink, and a compass, while still another book, clamped closed, may be seen through the open door of the base of the desk.

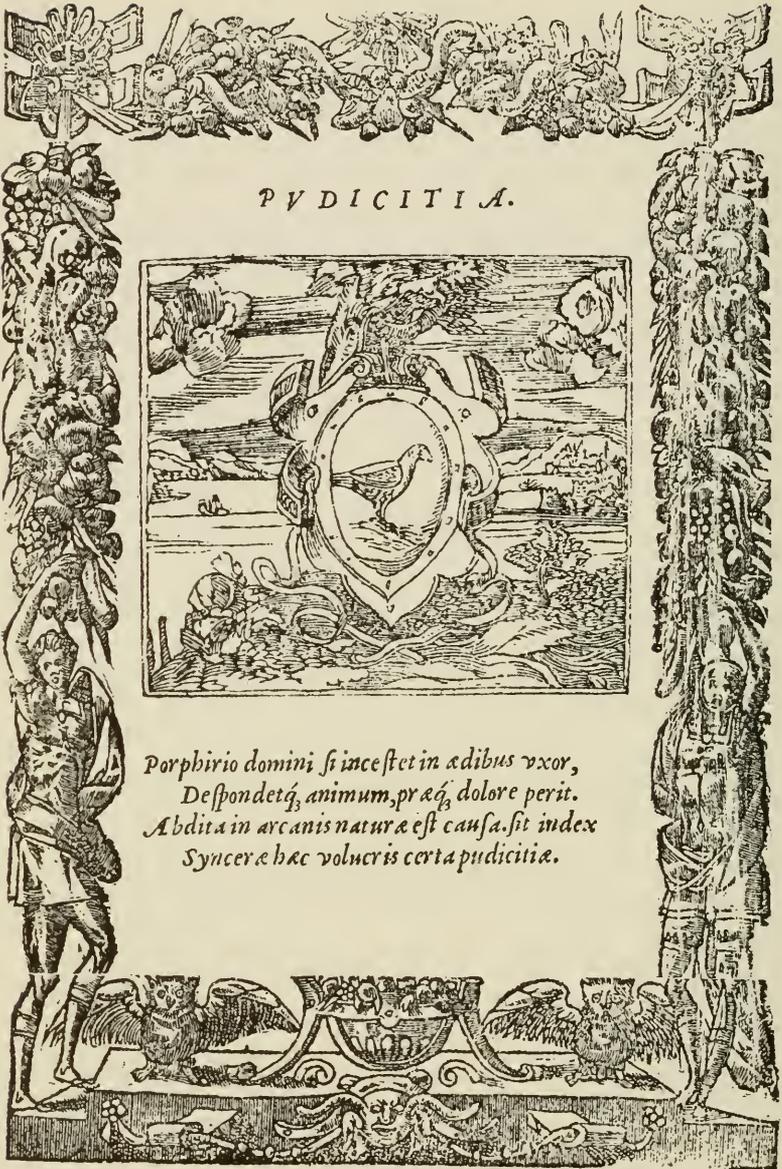
In his study of the legends and descriptions of the birds of the ancient Greek authors, Thompson (1895, p. 152) writes that the porphyrio was considered a bird of lofty morals and great vigilance. He refers to pertinent statements in the works of Aelian (XXXV, 14), who considers the bird to be very chaste and modest, and notes that the bird was said to be held sacred in Lybia. He also cites Dionysus as another describer of the virtues of the porphyrio but does not mention Aristotle. In the latter's writings (*History of Animals*, trans. R. Cresswell, 1902, pp. 45, 206) I find only that this bird has a long neck and, unlike other birds which imbibe water at intervals, raising their heads in order to swallow each mouthful, it gulps down directly and continuously without lifting its bill from the water. The virtues ascribed to the porphyrio by Aelian, Dionysus, and others could easily apply to a great many saintly individuals serving in high church offices. Of more immediate pertinence to its usage in this painting is the identification of the porphyrio with Pudicitia, representing modesty and chastity, in the famous emblem book of Andrew Alciati (fig. 5), a primary source of concepts and symbols for many artists painting after the middle of the 16th century. This book was hardly completely a personal invention of Alciati's and must have included and reflected the thoughts and emblems that had been current for some time before then.

Thus, even though Bermejo's picture was painted some decades prior to the first appearance of Alciati's work, it is important to give serious consideration to the concept of chastity as embodied in the porphyrio in the picture of the episcopal saint. For if, as seems highly probable, the porphyrio does connote chastity, this would cast doubt on the correctness of Iñiguez's assumption that the writing bishop was intended to be St. Augustine, whose difficulties with continence caused him to utter his famous prayer "Lord, give us chastity, but not yet."

One further point about the porphyrio may be made: Its Greek name Porphyrion, its Spanish name Calamón, and its French name Poule Sultan all refer to its purple color. Aside from its other connotations, its coloration makes it peculiarly fitting as a companion bird to a bishop, who traditionally has purple vestments as part of his garb.

PUDICITIA.

35



D 4

FIG. 5.—Page from the emblem book of Andrew Alciati.

In the upper left portion of the arch framing the door leading from the saint's room to the corridor beyond is a small cage with a bird in it. This is a borrowing from Italian, Flemish, and Germanic iconographic usage and is a motif that appears to occur very rarely in Spanish painting. The concept of the small bird in a cage is a symbol of the human soul imprisoned in the body, awaiting the release that comes with the promise of redemption after death. Bergström (1957) and, earlier, Male (1928) have shown that this concept stems from medieval allegorical representations of Hope (Spes), often shown as a woman standing on a cage containing one or more small birds, and sometimes with a ship on her head, a spade in one hand, and a bee-hive in the other, as in our figure 6, taken from a miniature of 1511 in the royal library in The Hague (Ms 76E13), reproduced in Bergström's study of the symbolism of the caged bird. In this illuminating paper Bergström demonstrates that the motif of the caged bird probably entered into the iconography of the Madonna before that of Spes. That it became associated with the concept of Hope undoubtedly strengthened its usage in connection with pictures of the Madonna. We can also point out, as collateral argument, that the Madonna was frequently referred to as "Sancta Maria, nostra spes vera" (Holy Mary, our true hope). A somewhat later, more mundanely philosophical parallel concept, but not demonstrably derivative, is expressed by Leonardo da Vinci on a sheet of drawings of birds in cages (Codex Atlanticus, 68, v., b.) where he writes "the thoughts turn toward hope" (*I pensieri si voltano alla speranza*).

In the present picture the bird in the cage is definitely identifiable as a goldfinch. As shown in an earlier study (Friedmann, 1946, pp. 46-51) this bird was used in Spanish art from the middle of the 14th to the middle of the 17th century. It was the most frequently chosen bird in Italian devotional art because it not only represented the human soul but was a symbol of resurrection as well, and particularly because it came to be used as a sign of protection from the plague. From Italy this use of the goldfinch was carried to Spain by the early Florentine painters, such as "Starnina" and his contemporaries, and by the Sieneese artists who worked nearby in southern France, chiefly at Avignon, whence their influence spread westward. Post (1930, pp. 177, 182) was led to conclude that the Italianization of late Gothic painting of the 14th century was more noticeable in Spain than almost anywhere else in Europe. The little goldfinch was one of the pictorial devices these Italian artists introduced into Hispanic art.

The caged goldfinch in the Bermejo picture reminds one of the detailed intarsia panel (see fig. 7) by Fra Giovanni da Verona in the



Esperance sur un nomme theolozalle
 Compaignie a son aussi de charite
 Et toutes trois d'une vertu esgalle
 Je vous prometz sommes en verite
 a voir tresaveulle sas que tu merite
 Qui ferite
 Ne tint de gens par telz cas fortunez
 En estant cil qui les a justreuz
 Bien les destruyz
 Et de toi ont moult cause de ce ylandre
 Faisant clameure et piteables cries
 Et leurs habitz touz de noir faire tandre

FIG. 6.—Miniature of 1511 in the royal library at The Hague.

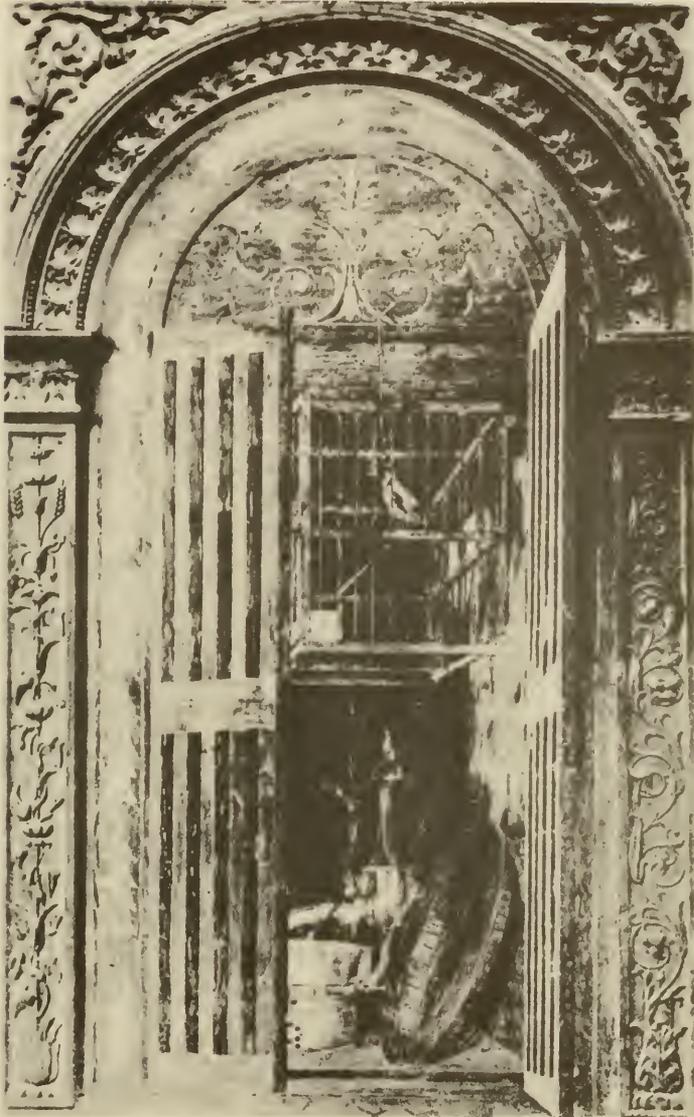


FIG. 7.—Fra Giovanni de Verona, intarsia panel in the choir of the church of Santa Maria in Organo, in Verona.

choir of the church of Santa Maria in Organo, in Verona, said by Bergström to date from 1499, somewhat later than our painting. It also recalls the early German portrait of a man with a caged bird, practically synchronous with the Bermejo, in the fine arts museum of Strasbourg. This picture, discussed at some length by Naumann (1934) and by Bergström (1957), has a caged bird, not a goldfinch but apparently a thrush, above and behind the man's head, and has the words "Ora pro me" (pray for me) in conspicuous letters placed near the mouth of the sitter, certainly an indication of hopefulness.

It is significant that a "healing" bird, or a "savior" bird in time of plague, should be the kind used by Bermejo, as there is other evidence that the saint reproduced was a person who, in addition to being a great scholar, was obviously much interested in the natural sciences, as indicated by the compass on his desk, and especially in medicine, as suggested by the activities of his underlings in the background—one monk apparently concocting some kind of herbal medicine over a fire and the other sorting plants brought in from the garden.

The floor of the arched opening at the back of the room leading to the outdoors is raised. There are letters on it forming incomplete words which are quite undecipherable, although one word, interrupted by the stand of the bishop's lectern, might be completed to read "medicus." If this is the case, it complements the ideas suggested by the presence of the healing bird and by the activities of the two monks. The combined implications of a scholarly, literary bishop, interested in natural science, particularly those aspects of it that relate to medicine, all suggest that the man portrayed is Saint Isidore of Seville, the author of one of the earliest and greatest of the medieval encyclopedias, the *Etymologiae*. Some years ago, when I first became interested in this possible identification, Dr. Erwin Panofsky reminded me (*in litt.*) that the medically pertinent sections of the *Etymologiae* were known and separately copied as *liber Isidori episcopi de medicina*, as, for example, in the Durham Ms. Hunter 100.

In identifying the saint as Isidore the following thoughts are worth mentioning. In Medieval and early Renaissance culture a certain degree of interest and significance was attached to some words having more than one meaning. What today would be dismissed as a play on words or a pun was then looked upon by some as meaningful, as a common denominator, as it were, between otherwise divergent concepts. I have already noted that the porphyrio was known both as *calamón* and as *porphyrio*, both names referring to its purplish color. It so happens that in his *Etymologiae*, Isidore makes frequent reference to some of the writings of the noted Latin author Por-

phyrio, especially to the *Isagoge* of this 3d-century writer (ca. 233-304 A.D.). The *Isagoge* had been translated with a commentary by Boetius, and this became one of the favorite textbooks of the early sermonizing scholastics (Sarton, 1927). Porphyrio was originally named Malchos, but his teacher, Longinus, considered him worthy of a nobler name and called him Porphyrio, "the purple clad." It may thus be that the bird porphyrio, watching the writing Isidore, is also a remembrance of one of his sources, the author of the *Isagoge*.

Furthermore, in his *Etymologiae* (libro VI, "de la retorica y dialecta," capitulo xiv) Isidore describes the quill pen by saying "Se llama calamo porque pone la tinta sobre el papel" (it is called calamo because it places the dye [ink] on the paper). Calamo (really a quill), a Spanish word no longer in use, was apparently still a part of conversational vocabulary in Bermejo's time. Thus the common name of the gallinule in Spanish, *calamón*, may have served to reflect the very act in which the saint is engaged in our painting.

It must be admitted that although Isidore describes and discusses a number of kinds of birds in the *Etymologiae* (libro 12, capitulo 7, "de las aves") he does not mention the gallinule or refer to the names *calamón* or *porphyrio*. Nor was the *porphyrio* used emblematically by such "source authors" as Ripa or Camerarius, although it was by Alciati.

Boetius's translation and commentary on Porphyrio's "*Isagoge*" or "*Introduction to the Categories of Aristotle*" served as a major force in the introduction into the cultural, intellectual life of western medieval Europe of the basic concepts and data of much of Aristotelian philosophy. Taylor (1938, p. 45) refers to the *Isagoge* as a "corner-stone of the early medieval knowledge of logic." That Porphyrio's writings were so thoroughly accepted and absorbed into the compilations of ecclesiastical encyclopedists like Isidore of Seville is all the more noteworthy since Porphyrio was not only a pagan, non-Christian writer of the early centuries of Christianity but was also known as the author of an admittedly rational and penetrating book directed against the Christians and their beliefs. In spite of this probably uncomfortable fact it was recognized that in some of his discussions he reached heights as truly spiritual as those of any "safer" authors secure within the embrace of the Church. His idea of sacrifice is a case in point. In one passage ("De abstinentia," ii, 34) he wrote (translated by Taylor, 1938) that the perfect sacrifice is to disengage the soul from passions. Chastity and asceticism were adhered to rigorously by him. The use of the purple gallinule

as an emblem of chastity certainly adds to its fitness as a sign of Porphyrio, whose name it shares. The same virtue was also a characteristic of St. Isidore, with whom the bird is associated in Bermejo's painting.

At the end of the left arm of the saint's throne is a gigantic snail (fig. 8), unusual iconographically for its great size and in that the animal is shown largely extruded from the shell. The exaggerated size seems due to the artist's intention to use it as a decorative up-curved knob-like ending of the throne arm as well as to place it in the picture for its symbolic content. The fact that the snail itself is shown coming out of the shell and moving up the arm of the chair, away from the direction of the lectern on which the saint's manuscript is lying, suggests that the text of the manuscript is something from which the meaning implied in the snail is trying to escape, or, in more general terms, that the content of the writings and the symbolism of the snail are mutually incompatible.

The snail had two quite different connotations. It was a symbol of sloth, and especially of those souls who, by their sluggishness, appear to attach themselves too greatly to the good things of the world and do not attempt to seek after the higher things of the spirit. This concept may be looked upon as something not in accord with the writings being penned by the saint. The snail was also used in quite an opposite sense, as is so often the case with symbols. It became looked upon as a symbol of Christ, for the following reason. One of the earliest and most influential of the early Church writers, Tertullian (*Apologeticus*, xlviiii), took over from the old classical source of the Delphic oracle the judgment that the snail is the emblem of those who die and rise again from the tomb (cited by Charbonneau-Lassay, 1940, pp. 930-931, as taken from Dom. H. Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'Archaeologie chrétienne*, t. 3:2:col. 2906). The belief that the snail remained for three months in the ground during the winter, and then, when the warmer weather of spring began to make conditions more equable, it came out again, was used as a parallel to the three days of the entombment of Jesus prior to the resurrection. Furthermore, the fact that the snail shell has a lid, or operculum, which it keeps closed while lying in the earth but which it is able to open when it wishes to emerge and move about, was seized upon as akin to the raising of the cover of the tomb at the time when Christ rose from the grave. The shell of the snail thus came to signify the tomb whence man shall arise on the Day of Redemption. The snail emerging from the shell thus would seem to imply the act of Resurrection. That the artist chose to show the

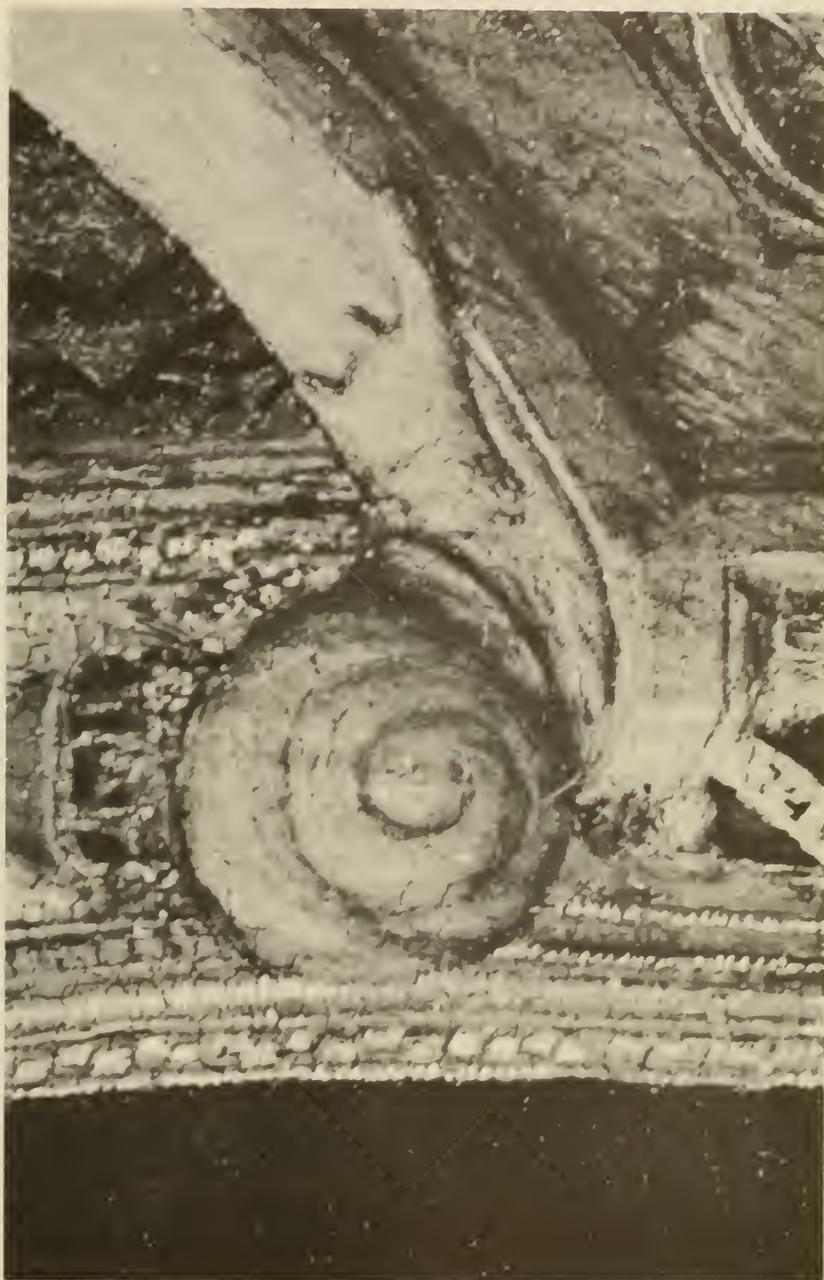


FIG. 8.—Detail from Figure 1.

animal in the act of emerging certainly stresses this idea, as the shell itself would have been sufficient to convey the tomb symbolism and would also have been ample as a naturalistic motif to serve as a part of the decoration of the throne. Furthermore, the artist has given the head of the snail a strikingly tripartite appearance as if to further emphasize the trinitarian number involved in the three months of hibernation and the three days of entombment. For a fuller discussion of the symbolism of the snail, both mundane and spiritual, the interested reader may be referred to Charbonneau-Lassay (1940, esp. pp. 930-931).

It is in this sense of a "resurrection" symbol that the snail appears in an inconspicuous place in the lower right foreground of Perino del Vaga's altarpiece *The Nativity* (figs. 9, 10) in the National Gallery of Art (S. H. Kress collection). The inconspicuousness of it in that picture, where it remains unnoticed by the majority of viewers, is in striking contrast to its enlargement and placement in Bermejo's panel.

A further pictorial connection between the symbolism of the snail and the tomb of Christ exists in Bermejo's painting. The decoration on St. Isidore's pluvial that appears immediately above and behind the snail shell depicts a domed tomb-like structure, an omphalos, supported by pillars. As was clearly pointed out by Smith (1950, p. 76) in his study of the use and symbolism of the dome as an architectural design, ". . . the Christians at Jerusalem came to associate the ideas of an omphalos with the domical tomb of Christ, the ciborium over the altar and the Mount of Calvary. . . ."

The crushed, snarling dragon (fig. 11) is an old and widely used symbol of wrath and evil, and, as such, occurs in religious art with numbers of saints as a sign of one of the vices they overcame by their piety and good deeds. Thus, to take but a single example, St. Servatus is usually shown seated at a desk with a dragon under his foot. Other saints that quickly come to mind in this connection are Margaret, Martha, Philip, and Sylvester, and the archangel Michael. St. George of Cappadocia is usually shown in the act of transfixing the dragon with his lance. The dragon is thus of no special significance, other than in its general connotation, in this painting by Bermejo.

Because of the richness of symbolic creatures portrayed in this picture, the rarity in religious art of one of them, the porphyrio, the unusual use and magnitude of the snail largely extruded from its shell, and the rare use by Spanish artists of the motif of the caged bird (and especially the caged goldfinch), one wonders how and



FIG. 9.—Perino del Vaga. *The Nativity*. National Gallery of Art (Kress Collection), Washington.



FIG. 10.—Detail from Figure 9



FIG. 11.—Detail from Figure 1.

where Bermejo obtained this knowledge with which he endowed his painting of St. Isidore. There is nothing in Tormo y Manzo's study (1926) of the artist, the most extensive one to date, that provides any suggestion. He merely categorizes our painter as the last of the primitives, hardly a characterization to evoke assimilative scholarship as one of the artist's traits. Though some students have assumed that Bermejo may have had some contact with early Flemish painters, or, at least, with some of their work, this is only an assumption.

By and large Spanish use of symbolism was more direct, more explicit, and more emphatic than was generally the case with artists in Flanders, France, or Italy. A case in point is the use of the partridge by Juan Pantoja de la Cruz in his painting of St. Nicholas of Tolentino that I had occasion to discuss in an earlier paper (Friedmann, 1959). This almost tediously matter-of-fact attitude makes one truly wonder what an Iberian artist of the last years of the 15th century would have felt constrained to do when designing a picture of the most scholarly and erudite of all medieval Spanish ecclesiastics. It seems that Bermejo responded to this need by introducing into his panel many allusions to the intellectual conceits of learning, surrounding the great encyclopedist with symbols congenial to his work and character. Whether Bermejo did this alone, or with the assistance of more learned advisors, it is impossible to say. The result is, however, an intellectual credit to the final years of "primitive," pre-Renaissance painting in the Iberian peninsula. The picture was intended, in all probability, for a church school or seminary as the use of some of its symbolic contents are sufficiently unusual as to suggest that they might have been beyond the comprehension of the average lay person.

For assistance in gathering the photographs illustrating this paper, I am indebted to the Art Institute of Chicago (particularly to Mr. Waltraut M. Van der Rohe), the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation (especially to Miss Mary M. Davis), New York. I am indebted to Charles P. Parlshurst for calling my attention to the omphalos and to the book by E. B. Smith.

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