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Signs of the Apocalypse

Cora Beth Finney

Books of Hours are considered one of the richest sources of medieval apocalyptic imagery and Portland State University's Book of Hours printed by Kerver is no exception. Over seventy images relating to the *Signs of the Apocalypse* appear within the margins of its Hours of the Trinity and the Office of the Dead. Apocalyptic iconography is commonly found accompanying the prayer cycles of the Office of the Dead in late medieval Books of Hours, although it is less common in the Hours of the Trinity, making its placement in this Book of Hours unusual.¹

A variety of established pictorial traditions relating to the apocalypse were already in use while Kerver's printed Books of Hours circulated throughout Europe. Many of these traditions were accumulated and incorporated into Books of Hours in combinations that varied depending on the intended consumer and when a book was printed. In the PSU Book of Hours, marginal imagery depicting the *Signs of the Apocalypse* can be separated into three different iconographic traditions: The *Seven Signs of the Apocalypse*, the *Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday* and the *Apocalypse of Saint John*. Differentiations amongst these traditions are determined by their content, compositional style, location in the book, and by the French or Latin marginal text that accompanies each image.

¹ This is true for both vernacular and Latin versions. Flynn, pp. 709, 711.

The Seven Signs of the Apocalypse

(fols. 14v-17) Photos by author, 2018



Figure 1
(fol. 15)

Angels making ready with
Trumpets: Book with seven
seals opened by the lamb.



Figure 2
(fol. 15v)

Fourth seal: Angel
trumpets: 1/3 of the sun,
moon and stars turn dark.



Figure 3
(fol. 16v)

Fifth seal: Angel trumpets:
Eagle cries, "Woe, to the
inhabitant of earth."



Figure 4
(fol. 16v)

Sixth seal: Angel
trumpets: Horsemen
released with keys.

Within the Hours of the Trinity, images depicting the Latin tradition of the *Seven Signs of the Apocalypse* are organized and illustrated in accordance to the Revelation of Saint John 8:1-6. The iconography consists of seven angels sounding seven trumpets after the book with seven seals is opened by the Lamb of God (Figure 1). Each angel is individuated and placed within the events affiliated to its assigned seal (Figures 2-4). John of Patmos additionally appears in the foreground of each image, observing and writing all he sees and hears in his prophetic visions as commanded in Revelation 1:10-13. Each image is accompanied by a block of Latin marginal text that specifies each of the *Seven Signs of the Apocalypse*.

The Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday

(fols. m2v-m7v) Photos and translations by author, 2018



Figure 5
(fol. m5)

14. The heavens and the earth will burn:
fire & flame will consume all elements.



Figure 6
(fol. m2v)

2. The sea will enter the land then
will wander to scarcely be seen.



Figure 7
(fol. m7v)

6. The trees and grass will
sweat drops like blood.

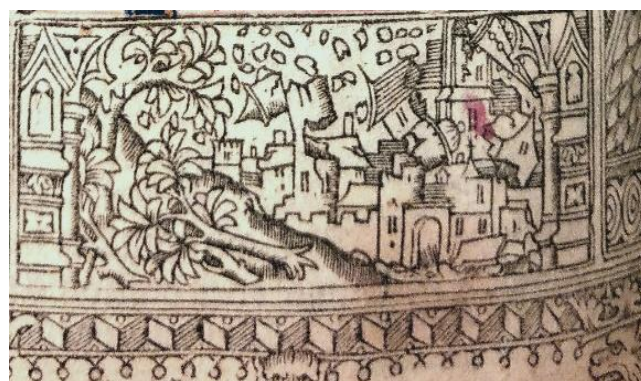
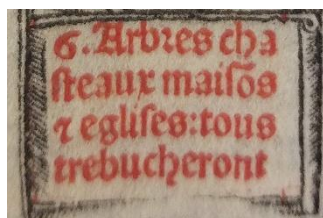


Figure 8 (fol.m7v)

6. The trees, castles, houses and churches, they will stumble.



Figure 9 (fol.m6v)

12. *The stars and the planets will fall enflamed.*

Images associated to the *Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday* are found throughout the Office of the Dead. Here, the Latin custom of seven signs has been extended to fifteen to include an eighth day of Judgment.² This iconography primarily focuses on the sequence of natural disasters prophesized in the Revelation of St. John: the burning of heaven and earth (Figure 5), the receding and flooding of waters (Figure 6), trees that sweat blood (Figure 7), destructive earthquakes (Figure 8) and stars falling from the sky (Figure 9). Although each image is enumerated, the *Fifteen Signs* are not arranged in sequential order in this Book of Hours. The illustrations are generally devoid of human representations, though some additional imagery depicts anonymous men and women receiving the rewards and punishments associated with the Last Judgment.³

This extended iconography possibly originated in Ireland from the *Apocalypse of Thomas* in the 6th century but underwent multiple interpolations before it became popularized in Latin and vernacular texts of the Middle Ages.⁴ Since the *Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday* developed outside the Latin tradition, its supporting marginal text is often in the vernacular language. Moreover, because this Book of Hours was printed in Paris, the marginal text relating to this tradition is in French, a language customarily spoken by nobility throughout the Latin West.⁵

² McNamara, p. 225.

³ Lewis, p. 295.

⁴ McMamara, p. 226.

⁵ Camille, p. 39.

The Apocalypse of Saint John

(fols. m3-m4v) Photos and translations by author, 2018



Figure 10
(fol. m3)

*And I saw the beast with 7 heads
and ten horns coming out of the sea.*



Figure 11
(fol. m3v)

*If anyone is to be killed with the sword,
with the sword they will be killed.*



Figure 12
(fol. m4)

*And there was a great battle,
Michael and his angels fought
against the dragon.*



Figure 13
(fol. m4v)

The Flight into Egypt: Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river to sweep away the woman.

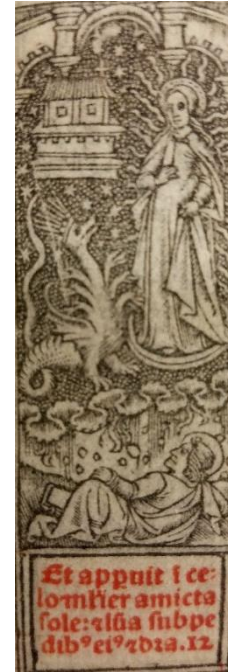


Figure 14
(fol.m4)

And appeared in heaven a woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, and a dragon.

Interspersed between the *Fifteen Signs Before Doomsday* are images related to the *Apocalypse of Saint John*. These two separate iconographic traditions coexist within the same folios of the Office of the Dead and can be discerned by differences in their content and marginal text, which contrast between Latin, found here in the *Apocalypse of Saint John*, and French in the *Fifteen Signs*. Although both depict events prophesized in Revelation, the *Apocalypse of Saint John* focuses on events concerning divine and spiritual figures, such as the two Beasts of Revelation (Figure 10), the Antichrist from the East (Figure 11), and warrior Archangels (Figure 12). As in the Seven Signs, John of Patmos consistently appears in the foreground documenting his visions. On one occasion, he is depicted recording the event of *The Flight into Egypt* (Figure 13). The specificity of this image in the Office of the Dead is explained by the presence of Latin funerary hymns in the text that praise the Virgin Mary as the triumphant victor over sin, represented here as a winged apocalyptic beast. This account of Mary derives from

interpretations of Genesis 3:14-15 which states that a female (or her child) will defeat sin by crushing Satan's head, also referred to as "the head of the dragon."⁶

The abundance of apocalyptic imagery found in the PSU Books of Hours reflects medieval attitudes towards death during the ongoing epidemics of famine and plague beginning in the 14th century.⁷ The overwhelming rate of casualty at this time created anxiety over the fate of the dead and emphasized a demand for the performance of funerary rites over the deceased.⁸ In the event a clerical representative was not available, common Books of Hours containing the Office of the Dead provided accessibility to these funerary rituals and ensured the proper transition of souls from the material world into realms such as purgatory where they would reside until Judgment Day.⁹

The role of apocalyptic imagery in Books of Hours was not only to support the text thematically, by providing visual markers to fix the text into memory, but also to enhance comprehension, by enriching the passages with layers of meaning.¹⁰ In effect, correlating imagery transformed the text into a visual experience and helped facilitate the trend of introspective contemplation concerning the acceptance of death.¹¹ Marginal representations of the *Signs of the Apocalypse* in Books of Hours would have been familiar to the medieval reader and understood--not as a message of pending doom--but rather as the final chapter in the larger narrative of life.¹²

⁶ Anne Walters Robertson, "The Savior, the Woman, and the Head of the Dragon in the Caput Masse and Motet," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59, no. 3 (2006): 546-547.

⁷ Bildhauer and Mills, pp. 9-10, 132.

⁸ Paxton, p. 7.

⁹ Flynn, p. 711-12.

¹⁰ Lewis, pp. 14, 25.

¹¹ Flynn, p. 709.

¹² Paxton, p. 17.

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