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Bat wings in the devil: origin and spreading of this peculiar attribute in art

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Abstract. In Western culture, for centuries the figure of the bat has been associated with the forces of evil, with demons living in the dark, in the most hidden recesses of human fears. Some characteristics of demons of the pagan world (dark color of the body, wings, etc.) pass into the Christian iconography of the devil. Baltrušaitis has shown several elements that place the origin of bat-winged devils in China. From that area they spread out to the West and soon became common images in Europe starting from the 13th century. In the Middle Ages travelling was frequent and even long-range, from Europe to Central Asia, through the Silk Road network and also attested by the diffusion of the Nestorian Church as far as China, beginning from the 7th century. Some of the artistic images of devils with bat wings are shown also in contrast to the wings of angels with feathered wings. The oldest depiction in Europe of a devil with bat wings is the mosaic representing the fall of Simon Magus in the Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel) in Palermo (1135–1143).

Key words. Chiroptera, demon, travel, Middle Ages, Silk Road, bats, wings, Giotto, Nestorian Church, hare, Simon Magus, simony, Cappella Palatina

Bats (Chiroptera) are the only mammals capable of active flight. Their wings have developed from the substantial modification of the upper limb, where the forearm and, even more, the metacarpal bones and the phalanges of the hand have undergone a considerable lengthening. The toes are joined together by a vascularized skin membrane, called patagium.

Since ancient times, the bat has been regarded as a singular animal: a nocturnal flyer like owls, not a bird but a mammal, which does not produce eggs but gives birth and feeds its young. Considered as a positive symbol, bringer of luck and longevity in the East, and in particular in China, in the West it was instead seen as close to the devil for its life in the obscurity of the caves, considering it a being coming from the darkness of hell (the Tartar) like the Tartars, the Mongols invading Europe. This initial connection with the demonic world has never been cancelled.

Travelling in the Middle Ages

Travel had an important impulse in the Middle Ages, particularly by merchants, pilgrims and missionaries (Gensini 2000, Verdon 2001). In Central Asia, the Silk Road remained the main land trade route for 1500 years (Hansen 2012, Jeong 2016, Liu 2010); it was inaugurated during the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) and represented an important relationship between the Chinese and Roman empires in the ancient times. Silk was one of the most important goods

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carried on the Silk Road because it combined great beauty, light weight, and high value, but many other goods were also carried, including ceramics, glass, precious metals, gems, and livestock. Material goods, in turn, were just one element in the varied traffic of the Silk Roads. Travellers also transported disease vectors, languages, technologies, styles, religions (Christian 2000).

Demons from Asia in the European art

Over time, friars, travellers and merchants increasingly came into closer contact with the Chinese civilization and with the world of Eastern demons, some of which were often showed with wings similar to those of bats (Baltrušaitis 1973). From the mid-13th century, this attribute became a fixed and constant characteristic also of Western demons, as depicted by Christian painters, first of all Giotto.

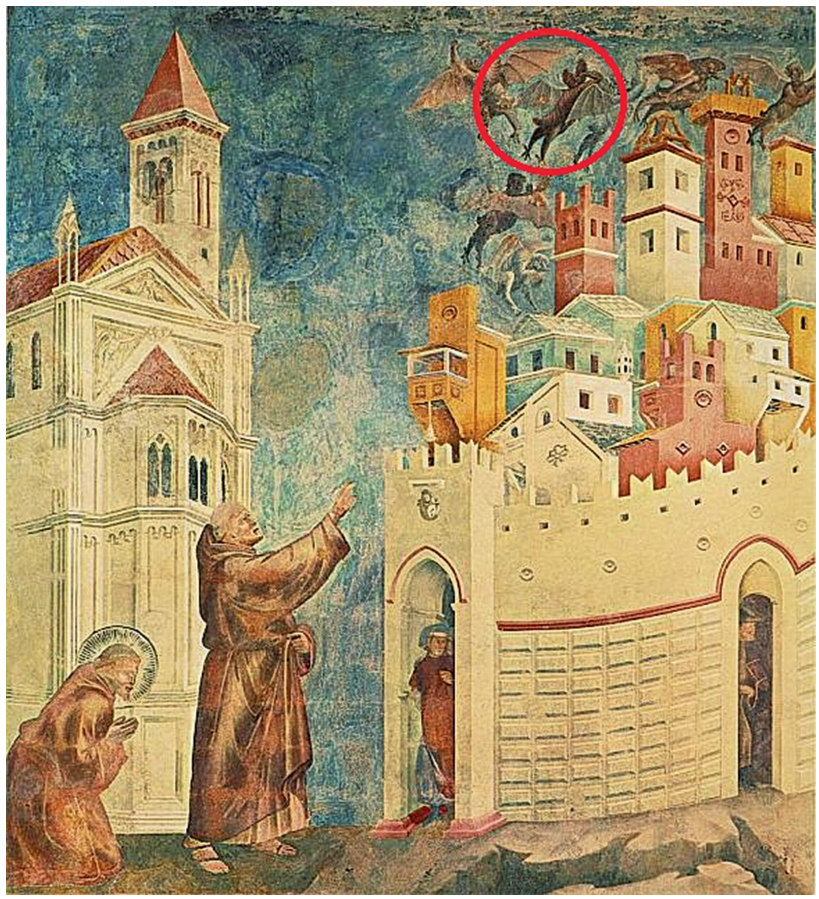

Fig. 1. Cacciata dei diavoli da Arezzo [Expulsion of the devils from Arezzo], 1295–1299.

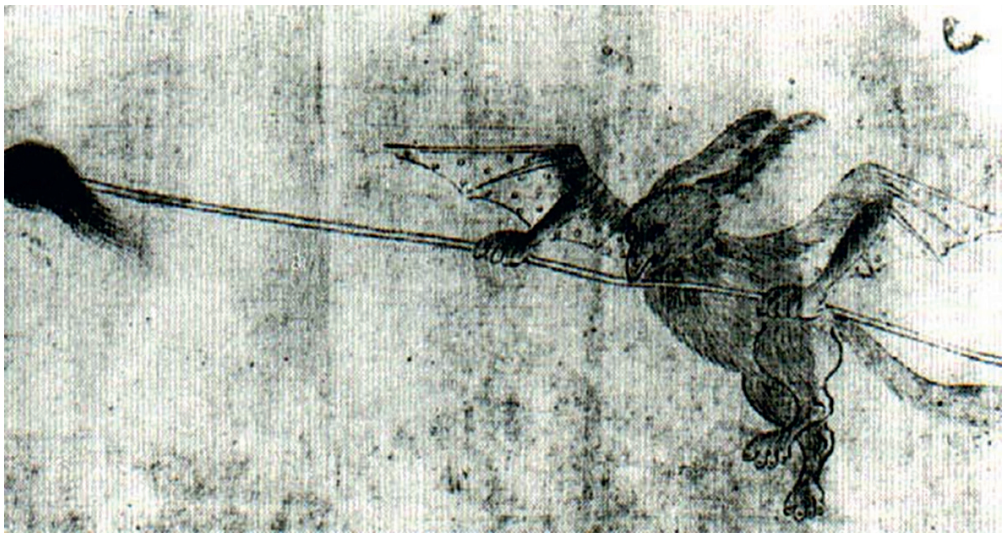

Fig. 2. Demon with hare ears, Li Lung-Mien (ca. 1100 AD).

Between the end of the 13th century and the middle of the 14th, the representation of demons with bat wings spread in art. As Baltrušaitis (1973) and Bussagli (1986) underline, the Chinese origin of this iconography is more than probable (Honour 1973). In China it was already present with a significant expansion especially among the major painters of Buddhist and Taoist inspiration, such as Li Lung Mien (Baltrušaitis 1973).

Link (1995) disagrees with the Chinese origin of the devil's demonic wings but it is difficult to support his motivations: this author says he follows "Ockham's razor" and argues that Giotto simply followed his imagination in painting the fresco *Cacciata dei diavoli da Arezzo* (*Expulsion of the devils from Arezzo*, 1295–1299).

Giotto, however, may have indeed derived inspiration from the Eastern art. Expecially if, as Hidemichi Tanaka (highest Japanese authority in the study of the relations between Asia and Europe) thinks, he had seen examples of the writing *p'agspa* (invented to make Mongolian easier to read) and he used it as an ornament in the "ruffles" that border the robes of Roman soldiers in the "Resurrection" of the *Cappella degli Scrovegni* (Tanaka 1984, Bussagli 1986, Nagel 2011).

Nestorian christianity in Asia

Link (1995) ignores his own claims when he recalls that the Nestorian missions had several contacts with the West. As a matter of fact, the Church of the East (Nestorian Church) historically had a presence in China during two periods: first from the 7th to 10th centuries, and later during the Mongol Yuan dynasty in the 13th and 14th centuries. The first recorded Christian mission in China was led by the Syriac monk known in Chinese as Alopen. Alopen's mission arrived in the Chinese capital Chang'an (traditional name for Xi'an) in 635, during the reign of

Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty who extended official tolerance to the mission allowing the Church of the East to flourish in China for over 200 years.

The Nestorian stele is an epigraphic stele erected in China in 781. It consists of a block of limestone three meters high and one wide, bearing a text in the Chinese and Syriac languages and testifies to the existence of Christian communities in various cities of northern China. The presence of the Nestorians is also mentioned by Marco Polo in the *Milione* (Polo 1974, Cardini & Montesano 2019).

Fig. 3. Psalter of Blanche of Castile (about 1223), showing "The Baptism of Christ; The Temptations in the Wilderness".

Fig. 4. Battistero di San Giovanni [Baptisery of St. John], Firenze – Coppo di Marcovaldo (1260–1270).

Bat-winged devils

When, with the passage of time, friars, travellers and merchants came into closer contact with the Mongols and with the Chinese civilization, the initial terror prompted them to know in detail the world of eastern demons, some of which were at times depicted with wings similar to those of bats.

Among travellers on the famous Silk Road, we have to remember the artists, who left a clearly recognizable sign of their passage. The face of the Buddha is certainly the first testimony of the stylistic exchange that took place on the way between the West and the East (Gandhara art). The Silk Road which was always mainly used for trade, also became the way to communicate between the two extremes of the world. In fact, it was possible to mix different roots, traditions, ways of thinking, ways of living such as the Iranian and Hellenic, Chinese and Indian ones.

In the 13th century, the entire Gothic West adopts the fashion of the nocturnal wings; devils are now conceived as beings who inhabit steep cliffs and hover in caves. The same transformation takes place in Italy. In Giotto's frescoes, in the upper church of Assisi, the demons driven out of the city of Arezzo by the work of St. Francis rise, like darkness, above the city. Giotto, in the famous *Cacciata dei diavoli da Arezzo*, the tenth of the twenty-eight scenes of the fresco cycle of the *Stories of St. Francis* in the upper Basilica of San Francesco d'Assisi, shows a very odd image of a devil, possibly derived from that of Li Lung-Mien (ca. 1100 AD), the demon with hare ears (Baltrušaitis 1973; Figs. 1, 2).

The negative view of the rabbit/hare as impure and unclean animals, which derived from the Old Testament (Leviticus and Deuteronomy), always remained present for medieval artists and their patrons. In the concept of medieval people they have a strong reproductive ability, just as evil spreads rapidly and harms the world. Therefore, in the Middle Ages people used these animals as a symbol of evil (Cooper 1995, Windling 2005).

Another famous image of a bat-winged devil appears on one of the pages of the psalter of Blanche of Castile (about 1223), showing *The Baptism of Christ* and *The Temptations in the Wilderness*. The Latin Psalter of Blanche of Castile was produced in Paris in the first third of the 13th century by an anonymous master using tempera, ink, and gold leaf on parchment. The work was most likely commissioned by or for Blanche of Castile (1188–1252), the mother of Louis IX (Fig. 3).

We find precise images of the difference between the wings of angels and those of devils in the mosaics of the dome of the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence. The three segments above

Fig. 5. *Trionfo della Morte* [*Triumph of Death*] in the Camposanto in Pisa, executed in 1336–1341 by Buonamico Buffalmacco.

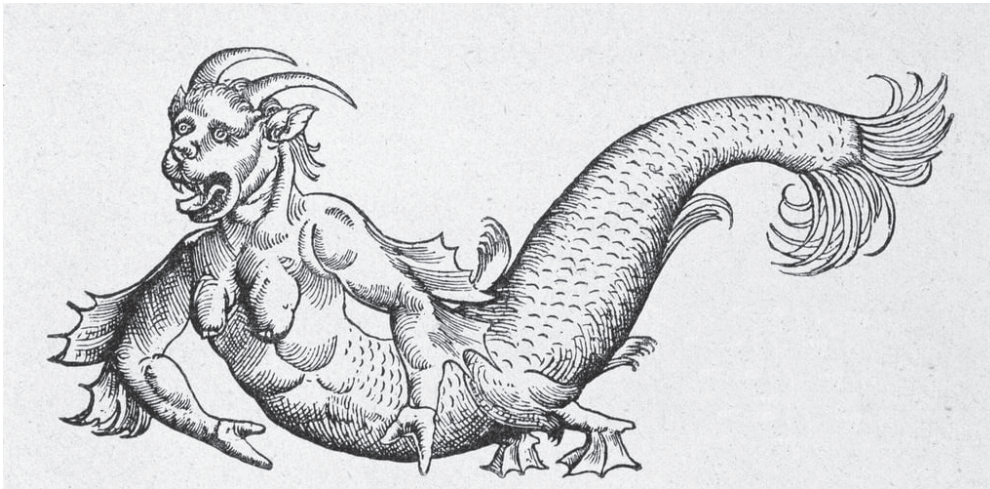

Fig. 6. *Sea devils*: Illustration from Ambroise Paré, *Des monstres et prodiges* [*On monsters and prodigies*], 1585 (Wikimedia Commons).

the altar are occupied by the scene of the Last Judgment. The lower section shows representations of Heaven, to the right, and Hell, to the left. Resurrected souls are immediately seized by angels or devils: angels and demons are shown as having different kinds of wings, the angels' being like those of feathered birds, the demons' like bat wings (Russell 1981; Fig. 4). Horrible devils with black bat wings push the damned to the right (left of Christ). The representation of Hell is dominated by the great horned Satan, who devours a man while two snakes come out of his ears and bite as many damned people.

The infernal scene is unanimously attributed to Coppo di Marcovaldo and can be dated between 1260 and 1270. Dante Alighieri was probably inspired by this vision for the description of some scenes of Inferno, written around 1307–1309. Dante in the Divine Comedy (Inferno – Hell – XXXIV, vv. 46–49) describes Lucifer with his great wings which "had no feathers, but of vispistrello [bat] // it was their way; and those he fluttered about." The original title, with which the author himself designates his poem, was *Comedia*. The adjective *Divine* was added by Boccaccio.

Another testimony of the diversity between devils (with bat wings) and angels (with feathered wings) is in the fresco *Il Trionfo della Morte* [*Triumph of Death*] in the Camposanto in Pisa, executed in 1336–1341 by Buonamico Buffalmacco. The conflict between demons and angels to conquer the souls of the deceased is represented here. The devils have faces very similar to those of a real bat, with large ears (Fig. 5). Devils with bat wings would also be widespread in the following centuries and even attributed to "sea devils" (Fig. 6).

Before the end of the 13th century, Chinese dragons with bat wings transformed into devils began to appear in illuminated manuscripts and in sculpture, but these were simple symbols of the kingdom of darkness (which was then commonly identified with Tartary) conceived in a typically European way (Honour 1973)

Western iconography continued to use bat wings for demons, in contrast with the bird wings for angels. This may have something to do with the prejudice against bats. On a June afternoon of the year 1770 (in the far north of what is now Queensland) when a sailor from Captain Cook's Endeavour saw an Australian flying fox for the first time (*Pteropus alecto*?) he ran back to the camp terrified, claiming to have met a real live devil: "*It was*," says he, "*as black as the devil, and had wings*; *indeed I took it for the devil* …". (Ratcliffe 1953).

Fig. 7. The Fall of Simon Magus, Cappella Palatina [Palatine Chapel], Palermo (1135–1143).

First image of a bat-winged devil in European art (1135–1143)

We have illustrated the Eastern origins of the figure of the devil with bat wings and its development in Western art. The earliest clear example is in the mosaic in the north aisle of the Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel) in Palermo which represents the fall of Simon Magus (Fig. 7).

This mosaic shows the challenge between Simon Magus and the apostles Peter and Paul: the magician claimed he could fly and he initially succeeded because he was supported by devils. Peter's prayers (on his knees) managed to overcome the demonic help and Simon Magus fell crashing to the ground (Viscontini 2001). Previously Simon Magus tried to buy Peter and John from the apostles, by offering them money, the power to confer the gifts of the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. The term *simony* derives precisely from the episode. Because of this sin Dante puts Simon Magus in Hell (XIX, 1–30)

The Cappella Palatina, built by King Roger II of Sicily, is located within the architectural complex of Palazzo dei Normanni in Palermo. Roger II had Greek and Arabic tutors and learned Greek, Latin, and Arabic. The Cappella Palatina shows new creations of court art, executed by builders, sculptors and artists who were not only locals but came from all over the Mediterranean. There is no general agreement among scholars about the provenance of the artists who executed the Cappella Palatina ceilings. The main regions that have been suggested are: Egypt, North Syria, North Africa, Iraq, Iran, and Sicily itself.

According to Beat Brenk, the most authoritative expert on this subject, the mosaics of the Cappella Palatina were created between about 1135 and 1143, including those of the lateral naves with the representation of the fall of Simon Magus (B. Brenk, pers. comm., 26 December 2022). Details on the dating of the masterpiece are specified in Brenk (2022).

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