

GIRALDUS CAMBRENSIS

A NOTE ON HIS ACCOUNT OF A PAINTING IN THE KING'S CHAMBER AT WINCHESTER

By GEORGE HENDERSON

In Chapter XXVI of Book 3 of the *De Principis Instructione* Giraldus Cambrensis gives an account of a wall-painting in the King's Chamber in the Castle at Winchester. Giraldus writes: 'It once happened that in the chamber at Winchester which had been decorated with various paintings and colours, a place was left blank by command of the king, where afterwards he ordered an eagle to be painted, and four eaglets perching on it, two on the two wings and the third on the breast, piercing their parent with their claws and beaks; and the fourth eaglet, of equal size, poised on its parent's neck, watching intently for a chance to peck out its eyes. Being asked by his attendants what this picture might portend he said, "The four eaglets are my four sons, who will not hesitate to harry me even unto death. The youngest of them, whom now I embrace with so much love, will in the end attack me more grievously and more dangerously than all the others." Thus first of all, his mind foreboding evil, he inwardly depicted to himself coming afflictions, caused by his children, and then bringing his mental picture out into the light, he had it painted by an artist.'¹

Assuming the truth of this story, at what period in Henry II's career is he likely to have ordered such a painting and spoken such words in explanation of it? The painting and the recorded words cannot reflect the king's mind at the time of the first rebellion of his sons, Henry the young king, Richard, and Geoffrey, in 1173-4. The king dealt with that rebellion with great efficiency and, after settling his sons' affairs wisely and liberally, was more powerful than ever.² In 1173 his youngest son John was only six years old, too young to be the subject of bitter comment. The despondency of the king in Giraldus' account can only relate to the period leading up to the second rebellion of his sons in 1183. Early in that year, in spite of Henry's strenuous efforts to preserve peace among his sons, the young king and Geoffrey broke from his control and formed a league against their brother Richard, thereby gravely threatening the stability of the Angevin 'Empire'. In June 1183 the young king died, and Henry no longer had four sons.³ Therefore 1182 seems a reasonable date for

¹ Giraldus Cambrensis, *De Principis Instructione*, ed. G. F. Warner, *Opera*, VIII, 295-296. 'Contigerat aliquando cameram Wintoniensem variis picturarum figuris et coloribus venustatam, locum quendam in ea vacuum regio mandato relictum, ubi postmodum aquilam depingi jussit et quatuor aquilae pullos ei insidentes, duos alis duabus et tertium renibus, parentem unguibus et rostris perfodientes, quartum nec minorem aliis in collo residentem et paternis acrius oculis offodiendis insidiantem. Requisitus autem a familiaribus suis quidnam haec pictura portenderet, Quatuor, inquit, aquilae pulli quatuor

fili mei sunt, qui me usque ad mortem persequi non cessabunt. Quorum minor natu, quem tanta dilectione nunc amplector, mihi denique longe gravius aliis omnibus et periculosius nonnunquam insultabit. Sic igitur primo interius futuras per prolem aerumnas mente praesaga malorum sibi depinxit, deinde exterius mentis conceptum protrahens artificio depingi fecit.'

² See A. L. Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta* (Oxford, 1951), 332-339.

³ *Ibid.*, 341.

the events narrated by Giraldus. John was then fifteen, and his father's favourite.

It so happens that the earliest reference to painting being carried out in the King's Chamber at Winchester occurs in the Pipe Roll for the twenty-eighth year of Henry II's reign, that is 1182, and there is a second reference in 1183.¹ After that nothing more is heard of the 'painted chamber' at Winchester until the fourth year of Henry III's reign, 1219.² The evidence of the Pipe Rolls seems to confirm 1182-3 as the probable date of Giraldus' story.

In the *De Principis Instructione*, however, the story is told immediately before the account of Henry's last meeting with Richard and of his death, in July 1189. Thus Giraldus' use of the story is distinctly literary, not historical. It adds impressive inevitability to the sad ending of the old king's life. Furthermore, if Giraldus had himself been a witness at the scene which he describes, he would undoubtedly have said so, as he does when he records words spoken by King Henry at Clarendon in March 1185, and in his account of Richard de Redvers' prophecy of the king's death in April 1189.³ The story is not, therefore, a first-hand report, and it has rather the appearance of a literary device.

The tone and substance of the story are entirely characteristic of the *De Principis Instructione* and other writings by Giraldus. Giraldus is much inclined to bird-lore in connection with the Angevins, to vivid visual imagery, and to prognostications of the miserable death of the king. After telling the story of the demon countess, ancestress of the Angevins, who flew out of the high window of a church when her exit was barred, Giraldus records comments on the subject attributed to Richard and Geoffrey: 'King Richard often used to repeat this story, saying that, coming from such a stock, it was not surprising that sons should not hesitate to attack their parents and brothers to attack one another.'⁴ Geoffrey is represented as replying to a messenger from his father: 'Do you not know that it is natural to us and implanted in us as it were by direct inheritance from our ancestors, that none of us should love the other, but that brother should always strive furiously against brother and son against father?'⁵ Giraldus then remarks with evident satisfaction: 'Just so the sons of King Henry II, rising with one mind against their father, as has been said, harried him even unto death . . .'⁶

Giraldus records a dream of 'a certain monk' in which four ducks swimming on a stream are terrified by a falcon hovering overhead. A voice asks the monk: 'Do you see these birds? They are the sons of King Henry . . .' And again: 'Do you desire to know who that bird is flying overhead? It is Philip, the son

¹ Pipe Rolls, 28, 29 Henry II, *Publications of the Pipe Roll Society*, XXXI (1910), 146: XXXII (1911), 112.

² *Rotuli litterarum clausurarum in turri Londiniensi asservati*, ed. T. D. Hardy, I (London, 1833), 409.

³ *De Principis Instructione*, 207, 261-262.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 301. 'Istud autem rex Ricardus saepe referre solebat, dicens non esse mirandum, si de genere tali et filii parentes et sese ad invicem fratres infestare non cessent.'

⁵ *Ibid.*, 302. 'Numquid ignoras hoc nobis naturaliter proprium et quasi jure haereditario ab avis et atavis insitum et insertum, ut nullus ex nobis alterum diligit, sed ut semper frater fratrem, filius patrem, et e diverso, totis nisibus infestare contendat?'

⁶ *Ibid.*, 303. 'Qualiter etiam regis Henrici secundi filii, in patrem unanimiter insurgentes ipsumque, sicut jam dictum est, usque ad mortem persequentes . . .'

of the King of France.¹ If 'a certain monk' had not dreamed this dream, Giraldus himself could have done so, since it accurately reflects his animosity towards the House of Anjou and his admiration for Philip Augustus. Birds play an important rôle in his own prognostication of King Henry's death, which he represents as a dream in which he saw the king's body deposited in a church and the lights then extinguished by the sudden flight of a flock of birds.²

In his *Expugnatio Hibernica*, after he has described a magnificent apocalyptic vision of Christ dragged from His throne in heaven, Giraldus writes: 'Now what this vision was, and what it portended, I will explain without bias in a few words.'³ And he evidently refers to himself when he comments on Richard de Redvers' prophecy: '... but some, silently pondering over the matter and noting carefully what happened afterwards, saw all things truly accomplished one by one, just as they had been foretold.'⁴ In the story of the Winchester painting Giraldus speaks of the painting exactly as he speaks of his own and other people's dreams and visions. The king first depicts the scene in his mind, and the form of the visual image portends something and requires interpretation. It is not merely allegory, but also prophecy. Henry's words 'The four eaglets are my four sons . . .' follow the pattern of 'The seven fat kine and the seven full ears are seven years of plenty.'⁵ Giraldus represents King Henry both as the dream-troubled Pharaoh and the interpreting Joseph.

Since Giraldus' mind is full of bird-imagery and omens of evil it is of course perfectly possible that his contemporary King Henry II had similar thoughts, and that the whole story of the Winchester painting is true. But it is perhaps useful to point out that the story is not the only one of its kind to be found in the writings of Giraldus. It differs from the other visions, dreams, and fatalistic comments, in only one respect, namely that the story centres upon a painting, definitely located in a particular place.

Giraldus gives a full description of the content of this painting. Leaving aside the emotive and interpretative phrases in his description, it appears that the painting showed a parent bird surrounded by four young birds. Two of the young birds pecked the wings of their parent, the third pecked its breast, and the fourth was perched on the parent's neck, looking towards its eyes. Two well known subjects from the insular *Bestiary* agree perfectly with this description. The first subject is the piety of the offspring of *Epopus*, and the second is the impiety of the offspring of *Pelicanus*. I illustrate (Pl. XIII) the versions of these subjects on f.38 of the late twelfth-century *Bestiary* in Cambridge University Library.⁶

About *Epopus* the *Physiologus* has this to say: 'When the bird which is called *Epopus* sees its parents grown old and their eyes dimmed, it plucks out

¹ *Ibid.*, 308. 'Videsne volucres istas? Filii sunt regis Henrici . . . Vis scire quae sit avis illa supervolans? Filius utique est regis Franciae Philippus.'

² *Ibid.*, 312.

³ Chapter XXX of Book 2 of *Expugnatio Hibernica*, ed. J. F. Dimock, *Opera*, V, 371. 'Quid autem haec sibi visio velit, et quid portendere valeat, absque praedjudicio paucis absolvam.'

⁴ 'Nonnulli vero, rem tacite considerantes et subsequencia cum suis eventibus tempora circumspicte notantes, singula postmodum, sicut praedicta fuerant, veritate sequaci completa viderunt.'

⁵ *Genesis*, xli, 26. 'Septem boves pulchrae et septem spicae plenae septem ubertatis anni sunt.'

⁶ Cambridge University Library MS. II.4.26, for which see M. R. James, *The Bestiary* (Roxburgh Club, 1928).

their feathers and licks their eyes and warms them, and its parents are rejuvenated.¹ The illustration in the Cambridge *Bestiary* shows the young birds apparently tormenting their parent, but actually assisting it to regain its sight and warmth and youth. About *Pelicanus* the *Physiologus* says: 'It is exceedingly fond of its children. When it has given birth to its young and they begin to grow, they strike their parents even in the face. But the parents, striking back, kill them. On the third day their mother, piercing her side opens her flank, and leaning over her chicks sheds her blood on the dead bodies and so revives them.'² The illustration in the Cambridge *Bestiary* shows only one young bird attacking its parent's breast, but the text allows for more than one assailant. In view of the similarity between these illustrations and the painting described by Giraldus it seems not impossible that what was actually represented in the King's Chamber was a normal *Bestiary* subject, either *Epopus* or *Pelicanus*, and that the story of the symbolic eagle harassed by its children, and of the king's responsibility for the design, was a characteristic invention of Giraldus himself. The form of the birds would have been no obstacle to Giraldus' fanciful interpretation of the Winchester painting. In the Cambridge *Bestiary* the only difference between *Aquila* on f. 31 and *Epopus* is the curved beak of the former, and two of the pelicans in the *Bestiary* have curved beaks.

Giraldus was familiar with the text of the *Physiologus*, as is proved, for example, by his account of the nature of the eagle in his *Topographia Hibernica*.³ Curiously enough, Giraldus leans heavily on the vocabulary of the moral commentary in the *Physiologus* on the nature of *Pelicanus* in two dreams or visions symbolising the insult offered to Christ by Henry II in declining to help Heraclius, Patriarch of Jerusalem. The pelican's offspring behave towards their parent as unnaturally as men behave towards Christ. 'We have struck Him', says the *Physiologus*, 'even in the face when we have served His creatures rather than the Creator. For this reason He ascended the cross, and His side being pierced, blood and water issued forth for our salvation and eternal life.'⁴ In a vision of a monk recorded by Giraldus, King Henry and Christ appear as armed opponents in a duel. 'When they were fiercely engaged, the king, making at last a grievous attack, was seen to strike the Lord on the brow, so that blood was seen to flow down from His face.'⁵ Like the parent pelican Christ does not hesitate to turn on His assailant, and strikes Henry to the ground. In a vision of Giraldus' own, Christ is torn from His throne in heaven

¹ 'Avis quae dicitur Epopus quando viderit parentes eius senuisse et caligasse oculos eorum evellit plumas eorum et oculos eorum lingit et calefacit eos et renovantur parentes ipsius.'

² See C.U.L. MS. li.4.26, f. 38b. 'Amator est nimis filiorum. Qui cum genuerit natos et coeperint crescere, percutiunt parentes suos in faciem. Sed parentes repercutientes eos occidunt. Tertio vero die mater eorum percutiens costam suam aperit latus suum et incumbit super pullos suos et effundit sanguinem super corpora mortuorum et sic suscitavit eos a mortuis.' The *Bestiary* tradition of the impiety of the children of *Pelicanus* was familiar to Shakespeare. See *King Lear*, Act III, scene iv, 'Judicious

punishment! 'twas this flesh begot those pelican daughters.' Also scene vii, Gloucester's speech.

³ Chapter XIII of Book I of *Topographia Hibernica*, ed. J. F. Dimock, *Opera*, V, 39.

⁴ 'Tunc percussimus eum in faciem cum servivimus creature potius quam creatori. Id circo ascendit ipse in altitudinem crucis percussoque latere eius exivit sanguis et aqua in salutem nostram et vitam aeternam.'

⁵ *De Principis Instructione*, 315. 'Cum congrederentur acrius, rex graves insultus faciendo demum visus est Dominum in fronte percutere, adeo ut sanguis per faciem deorsum manare videretur.'

quint' nox ob tecta densis tenebre sit: ad psidii raris dirigendi
 iuxta m'ia luceant cursumq; me patet iudicio plumarū fulgentū.

Vis q'di Epopus qm

vident parentel ei

lenuisse caligasse oculos

cor: enclit plumar eoz

oculos eorum lingit ycale

facit eos renouant paren

tel ipsi. qm dicens parentib;

suis. sic laborastis nutrent me

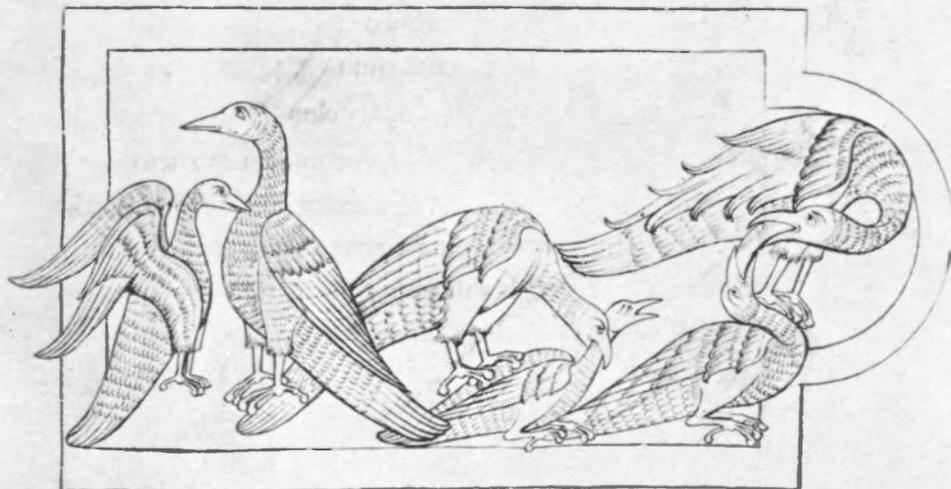
similit ego facio uobis. A ante hoc

faciunt sibi inuicem irrationabiles quanto magis rationa

biles homines parentum suoz nutrita mutua reddere de

bent. quia lex dicit. Q'maledixerit pat' ul' matri morte mori

etur & est quasi patricida & matri da.



Epopus and Pelicanus from a late 12th-century Bestiary

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by armed men, and pierced through the side with a lance. The words *graves insultus* in Giraldus' account of the duel of Henry and Christ are echoed in the words *gravius . . . insultabit* which he attributes to King Henry in the story of the Winchester painting. The Winchester story falls into place as a natural product of Giraldus' mind, suggested initially by the *Physiologus* account of *Pelicanus*. So inevitable does the story appear in Giraldus' elaborate analysis of Henry's crimes and punishment that it seems almost unnecessary to suppose that any painting of a bird and its young existed in the King's Chamber at Winchester.

These, then, are the reasons for supposing that Giraldus' story is wholly or in part apocryphal. There is, however, one important piece of evidence which tends to suggest that the story may be true. D. J. A. Ross has pointed out that a single *Bestiary* subject, the rescue of the King of the Garamantes by his dogs, was painted in Henry III's wardrobe at Westminster.¹ The reference to this painting in the Liberate Roll for 1256 gives an original twist to the familiar *Bestiary* story. Instead of being rescued merely from his enemies, the King is rescued from the sedition plotted against him by his subjects. As Ross says, this original twist 'may have been a topical embroidery added by Henry III himself'. Could not Henry II also have given a similar topical meaning to a familiar *Bestiary* subject, *Epopus* or *Pelicanus*, and having done so, would he not have derived some satisfaction from explaining the meaning to his attendants?

¹ D. J. A. Ross, 'A Lost Painting in Henry III's Palace at Westminster', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, XVI (1953), 160.