

*Part I - THE WARSAW ILLUMINATION and THE HIDDEN MIND
THE HISTORY OF A DYNASTY AND THE SHADOW OF LEONARDO*

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*The analysis of the "imprese" of Birago's illumination
winds along a hermetic multidimensional path
The "imprese" of his artwork take on symbolic value
and are contaminated with fantastic forms
and traditional grafts of heraldic figures
A secret story unfolds along its perimeter
Enclosed in the design of an invisible mind*

This study dated 2023-2024 is the new interpretation of the illumination of the *Sforziade* of Warsaw by Giovan Pietro Birago, making some additions and changes compared to my previous publication "*The illumination by Birago in the Sforziad incunabulum in Warsaw: in defence of Horodyski's thesis and a new hypothesis*" (2014)

In fully confirming the thesis formulated by the illustrious scholar Bogdan Horodyski, who attributes the possession of the illumination to the family of the deceased Duke Gian Galeazzo Sforza, I have come to conclude through a self-critical review that my hypothesis, which suggested its possession by Gian Galeazzo's half-sister Caterina Sforza, was not founded.

A more rigorous examination of the "imprese" of the Visconti-Sforza family has in fact convinced me that Horodyski's thesis - which interprets the illumination as a sort of post-mortem celebration of the young duke poisoned by his uncle Ludovico il Moro and identifies the patronage in his family - is by far the most well-founded.

The patronage (even if it had been made by a single member) can be traced back to the entire family nucleus of Gian Galeazzo, ideally compact and united in expressing hatred and demanding justice against the usurper Ludovico il Moro and his followers. This conclusion is based not only on the analysis of the "imprese", carried out in the first part

of this study, but also on my decryption in 2023 of perfect anagrams with an unequivocal meaning from the inscriptions on the illumination.

On the other hand, it is an incontrovertible fact that the *Sforziade* of Warsaw together with the illumination included in it was in the possession of Bona Sforza, daughter of Gian Galeazzo Sforza and Isabella of Aragon. There is no historical-biographical trace or act or archive document that links the copy of the National Library of Poland to other members of the family or even to relatives by marriage or otherwise acquired.

I have therefore undertaken a new fascinating journey into the Visconti-Sforza imagination through the fantastic artistic creations of Birago, confirming what has already been published, but at the same time enriching it with new keys to interpretation. In the light of the more in-depth analyses carried out by me, the Warsaw illumination - in addition to being an enigmatic work of art - confirms itself as the bearer of a dynastic history that coincides with the testimonies of historians and chroniclers of the time, and at the same time reveals a dramatic and insoluble plot of irreconcilable hatred and revenge between Ludovico il Moro and the descendants of Galeazzo Maria Sforza in their struggle for ducal power.

However, the historical-biographical narrative that has finally emerged to light - even if it offers a logical interpretative key supported by real data - is not able to erase the hermetic aura that surrounds the illumination, which remains impenetrable despite the solution of some unsuspected perfect anagrams hidden in its inscriptions. In fact - starting from the global analysis of the Warsaw illumination carried out (since 2011) in the first part through the "impresa" - in 2023 I then deciphered from its Latin inscriptions two perfect Latin anagrams, which consist of two sentences placed as a seal of the meaning of the illumination, which irrefutably recall the never-ending feud between the two branches of the Sforza family.

Precisely those anagrammed and deciphered inscriptions (as I demonstrate in the second part of this study) lead us to hypothesize that the illumination - quite original and atypical compared to Birago's work - foreshadows the "presence" of Leonardo.

On the other hand, perfect anagrams are recurrent in my research on Leonardo (see in particular the decipherments made on the inscriptions written on the cartouches of the portraits of *Ginevra Benci* and in the *Double portrait of Luca Pacioli*), and this discovery supports the hypothesis that Birago was inspired by Leonardo's work. Both the artists

worked in the service of Ludovico il Moro and it should be emphasized that Birago at the time collaborated with Cristoforo de Predis who - together with his brother Ambrogio - a few years earlier had collaborated with Leonardo (see the commission of the *Virgin of the Rocks*). There is significant evidence of collaborative relationship between the miniaturist Birago and artists who worked at the Sforza court and who had contact with Leonardo (think of the miniaturist Cristoforo de' Predis and the engraver and miniaturist Andrea Zoan). And it is significant that Birago himself has produced works of art unmistakably inspired by Leonardo (for example "The *Last Supper*, with a Spaniel", engraving, ca.1500, Met's collection of drawings and prints, accession number: 1998.195)

Birago collaborated assiduously with Andrea Zoan, who left Mantua around 1490 to move to Milan, where he worked at the Sforza court with Leonardo da Vinci and reproduced some of his drawings in engraving. Both in Zoan's engravings and in Birago's miniatures and engravings, one can detect influences attributable to Leonardo's works and subjects. These collaborative artistic interrelationships justify the hypothesis that Birago was inspired by Leonardo.

The atypicality and originality of the Warsaw illumination, which differs both from Birago's other works and from the miniaturist and pictorial tradition of the time, is well suited to Leonardo's creative audacity (see the satirical "vignette" of the naked Moor among his adoring followers which implies a specific ability in the field of the grotesque and caricature and which finds no precedent in Birago's production).

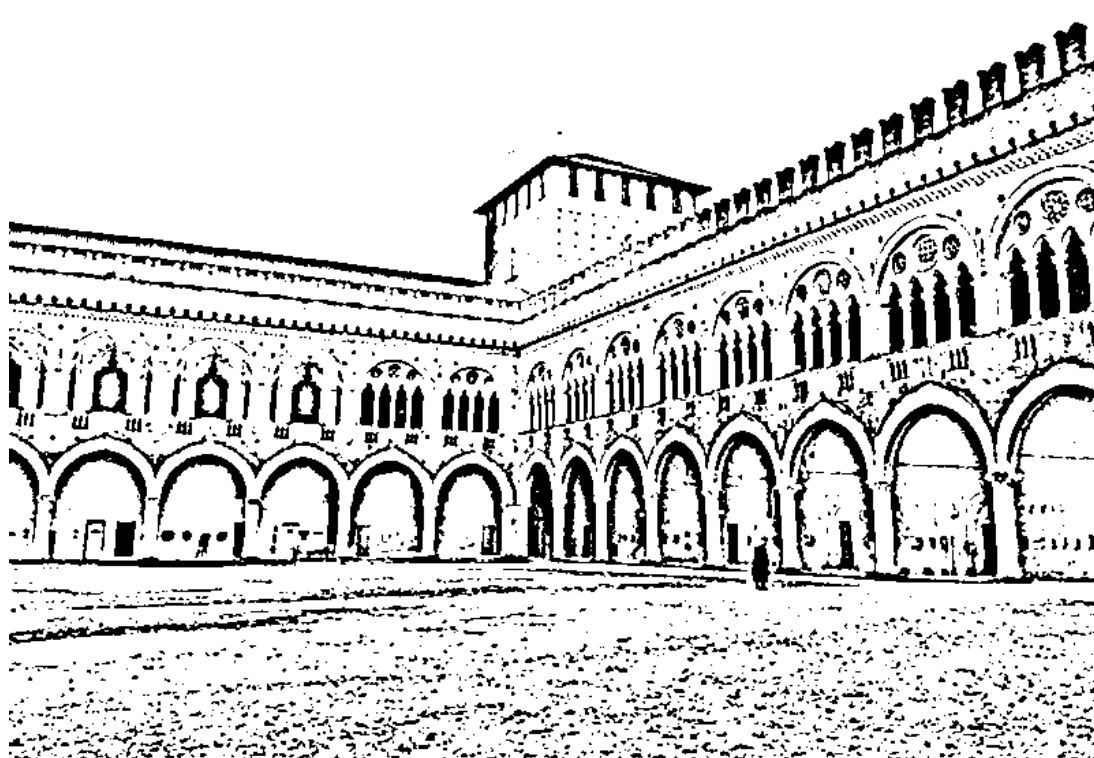
Leonardo was a master in the representation of the grotesque and caricature. (see the satirical "sketch" of the naked Moor among his adoring followers, which implies a specific competence and ability in the field of the "grotesque" and "caricature" in all its nuances, possessed by Leonardo and which finds no precedent in Birago's production).

The grotesque heads by Leonardo - traced in autonomous drawings or as quick notes in the margin of a sheet of paper - are present throughout his artistic work, but are concentrated above all in the last Milanese period, finding well-founded connections with the physiognomic research for the faces of the Apostles, in the *Last Supper*. The dating of the Birago's illumination, after the death of Gian Galeazzo (21 October 1494) is compatible with the preparatory studies for the *Last Supper*, whose commission was initially intended to celebrate the figure of the deceased Gian Galeazzo. And on the other hand, the corrosive and sarcastic vis, bearer of eccentric and nonconformist traits, can be found in

works whose attribution oscillates between Vinci's autography and the autography of his disciple and model Salai, a true enfant terrible of the history of art .

The Warsaw illumination is signed in the first person and in full by Giovan Pietro Birago: an anomalous fact for him that, as such, could go beyond the autograph attestation. The fact is even more anomalous since it was a subversive work with respect to the established power represented by the usurper duke il Moro and his followers. We know of Birago's closeness to Bona di Savoia and the friendship of Leonardo with Isabella of Aragon is well known. Strangely, despite the mortal risk of being discovered and punished by the tyrannical Moro, Birago for the first time personally signed that dangerous illumination. It is legitimate to ask whether in this exceptional case such a signature is valid not only as an attestation of authorship, but (above all) as an exclusive assumption of personal authorial responsibility. Was that signature a free choice of Birago? Or was it a sort of exemption from all responsibility requested by the artist who had secretly provided him with the original drawing to be reproduced in the miniature? ... In the background of the singular Warsaw illumination and among the conspiracies and plots of power at the court of Ludovico il Moro, the shadow of Leonardo then secretly looms.

(La versione italiana è posta in calce alla PARTE I)



The castle of Pavia where the ghost of Gian Galeazzo Sforza wanders

This schematic presentation is the result of the "decipherment" of the illumination, which is hermetic, since the "imprese" - unlike the illuminations by Birago of Paris, London and Florence - in this artwork cannot be interpreted in a descriptive key, but are bearers of cryptic information .



THE PURE AND HYBRID VISCONTI-SFORZA HERALDIC IMPRESE

“LEVRIERO/ALBERO/MANO ARCANA” - Motto: Quietum nemo impune lacesset

“ONDE MONTANTI” or “ONDE CRESCENTI” or “CIELO NUVOLOSO: Muzio Attendolo Sforza , progenitor of the Sforzas

“Il BURATTO” - Motto: TAL A TI QUAL A MI”- Galeazzo Maria Sforza, (impresa) and Bona di Savoia (motto)

“THE PHOENIX” - Motto : SOLA FACTA SOLVM DEVM SEQVOR, Bona di Savoia

“THE DOVE” - Motto: A BON DROIT - Giangaleazzo Visconti, 1° Duke of Milan

“THE THREE CROSSED RINGS WITH DIAMOND” (without motto) - Muzio Attendolo

**“LEVRIERO/ALBERO/MANO ARCANA”, Francesco Sforza
Motto: Quietum nemo impune lacesset**

The “impresa” “Levriero” is placed at the top, in the center of the illumination: it is the only impresa shared with the illumination of Paris, where, however, it appears in the left column

THIS IMPRESA CELEBRATES FRANCESCO SFORZA (4TH DUKE OF MILAN, 1452-1476) AS IT WAS CREATED BY HIM



This medallion - like the other similar medallions with the Visconti Sforza imprese reproduced in this study - comes from the church of S. Sigismondo in Cremona, where Francesco and Bianca Maria were married in 1441

**“ONDE MONTANTI” or “ONDE CRESCENTI” or “CIELO NUVOLOSO:
Muzio Attendolo Sforza , progenitor of the Sforzas**



“ONDE MONTANTI”: this impresa was created by the Sforza progenitor Muzio Attendolo and it was favorite by his son Francesco Sforza - the impresa was also known as “ONDE CRESCENTI” or “CIELO NUVOLOSO” The image is an association of this traditional Sforza impresa (which is similar to an abstract representation) with the boat at whose helm is the dark figure of Ludovico il Moro. The boat in the Paris illumination depicted il Moro and Gian Galeazzo together. Here il Moro has the same location, but now he is alone at the helm because the young duke is dead (this image certifies the date of the illumination: after October 1494)



Onde montanti on Francesco Sforza’s dress §§§ Part. of the illumination of Paris

**THE BURATTO, Galeazzo Maria Sforza (V Duke of Milano) -
Motto: Tal a ti qual a mi (created by Bona di Savoia)**

THE BURATTO represents a sieve held by two hands. Personal impresa of Gian Galeazzo Sforza (as we can see on the "Cassone dei tre duchi", Castello Sforzesco). THIS IS A FUNDAMENTAL IMPRESA FOR THE IDENTIFICATION OF BOTH THE CUSTOMER AND THE PERSON TO WHOM THE ILLUMINATION WAS DEDICATED SINCE IT COMES IN TWICE AND IS SYMMETRICAL IN A CENTRAL POSITION.



The MOTTO of the BURATTO created by Bona di Savoia is written on the shield

This impresa unequivocally leads back to the figure of Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza, who created it, (+ assassinated in 1476), It was the personal impresa of his son Gian Galeazzo, (+ died poisoned in 1494), who exhibits it on the chest of the *Cassone dei tre duchi*, on the horse's gualdrappe.



The BURATTO with the motto TAL A TI QUAL A MI on the gualdrappe of Gian Galeazzo's horse (*Cassone dei tre duchi*, Casello Sforzesco)

THE PHOENIX was the impresa of Bona di Savoia - Motto: Sola facta solvm devm seqvor (Being alone, only God I follow)."



Bona had commissioned many works of art from Birago including the Book of Hours (where the miniature of the Phoenix reproduced above on the left appears). By virtue of this friendly relationship, it was easy for Bona to obtain the illumination by Birago confidentially (Note: the Warsaw illumination was in the possession of her niece Bona Sforza, daughter of Gian Galeazzo and Isabella). BONA WAS IN ABSOLUTE THE MOST PROBABLE CLIENT OF THE WARSAW ILLUMINATION

**THE DOVE (la Colombina), Giangaleazzo Visconti (1° Duke of Milan),
Motto: A bon droit**



Capital, Rocchetta courtyard, Castello Sforzesco

The Colombina is one of the most prestigious “imprese” in which the Visconti dynasty identifies itself. This heraldic emblem was created by Francesco Petrarca during his stay as a guest of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, then seventeen years old. A trace of this gift is found in a letter from Pier Candido Decembrio to Filippo Maria Visconti of whom he was personal secretary. (Bologna, Universitaria, 2387, f. 103). Petrarca was a guest of the Visconti court and of the University of Pavia and - hoping that the young Visconti was the bearer of a policy for peace - had given him the auspicious emblem of the Dove, which through the motto sanctioned the legality of future actions of the Duke. The dove was particularly loved by Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Bona di Savoia, who dedicated the Sala delle Colombine of the Castello Sforzesco to it; furthermore, the duke had it reproduced on a silver coin called “colombina”.

THE THREE CROSSED RINGS WITH DIAMOND (without motto)

The three crossed rings with diamond is the *impresa* granted in 1409 by the Marquis of Ferrara Niccolò III d'Este to the Sforza progenitor Muzio Attendolo after the conquest of Reggio Emilia. Its provenance is therefore Sforza. This *impresa* beloved by Bianca Maria Visconti, was then granted to various noble families by the Sforzas . The “three crossed rings” also recur among the Medici. We can see that on the left column there is the shape of the Medici lily in the upper ring, probably in memory of the strong friendship of Galeazzo Maria with the Medici family. But the French lily also reminds Isabella di Valois, daughter of the king of France and lady of the county of Vertus that was the wife of Gian Galeazzo Visconti and the same Bona di Savoia, wife of the duke Galeazzo Maria and mother of Gian Galeazzo



NOTICE: It is noteworthy that among the families who were granted the concession of this *impresa* (Borromeo, Cavazzi della Somaglia and Birago), there were also the Sanseverino family, who however personalized it inserting the A of the Aragona in the center, as the Sanseverinos were one of the seven great families of the Kingdom of Naples. The recall to the Aragona is due to the progenitor of the dynasty Roberto Sanseverino d'Aragona (1418-1487), son of Leonetto and Elisa Sforza, sister of Francesco Duke of Milan. Therefore their *impresa* differs from the Sforza one illustrated here. I discovered the personalized *impresa* of the three rings with the A of Aragon in the incunabulum "La Comedia" by Dante (Casa di Dante, Roma), with commentary by Cristoforo Landino (Cremonese, in Venice, 1491). This incunabulum was dedicated to Gaspare Sanseverino known as Fracasso. The Sanseverino's coat of arms and the heraldic insignia and motto of the Sanseverino family, were depicted in this incunabulum between 1491-99 by Antonio Grifo, who was well-informed on the emblems, devices and coats of arms of the Milanese court. Grifo was a close friend of Roberto and his sons. Since 1480 Antonio Grifo in Venice was an intimate friend of Roberto Sanseverino, and since 1490 in Milan he was in close friendship with the Sanseverino brothers Antonio Maria, Gaspare and Galeazzo. Moreover we can be sure that also Giovan Pietro Birago was well-informed about the Sanseverino family device, and it is not plausible that he, omitting the Aragonese "A", could make a mistake in the Warsaw illumination.



*THE HYBRID FIGURES THAT PROVIDE INFORMATION
IF THEY ARE ANALYZED WITH REFERENCE
TO THE STORY OF GIAN GALEAZZO AND FAMILY
AND TO THE VISCONTI-SFORZA HERALDIC TRADITION*

ON THE RIGHT COLUMN OF THE ILLUMINATION



- THE TWO SHIELDS WITH THE DOUBLE "GZ" INITIALS AND THE DUCAL ARMS THAT APPEAR ON THE "CASSONE DEI TRE DUCHI"
- THE STRANGE ANOMALOUS BLACK&RED COMPOSITION WITH FIVE BLACKBERRIES SIMILAR TO FIVE PETALS OF A FLOWER
- THE ANCIENT "ITALIAN SHIELD" WITH THE UNION OF THE ARAGONA STRIPES AND THE MILANESE CROSS

ON THE LEFT COLUMN OF THE ILLUMINATION



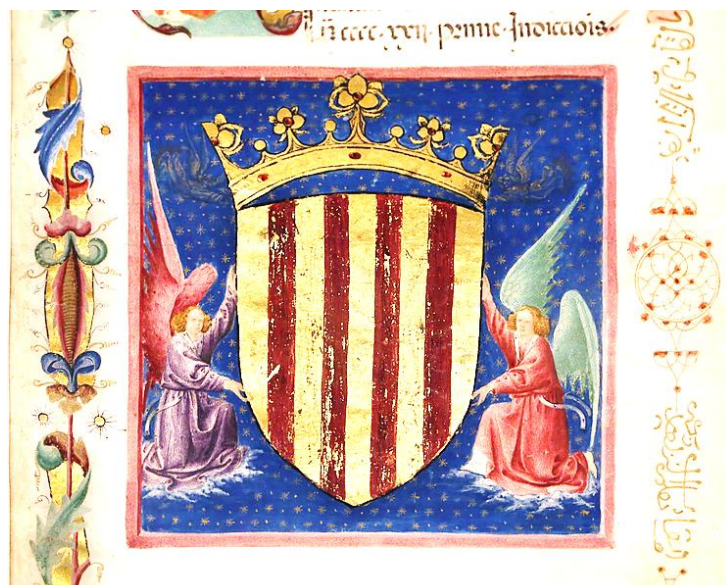
- THE BROKEN SHIELD WITH THE TWO INITIALS "GZ" RECURRING ALSO IN THE UPPER COLUMN AND THE SHAPE OF A HELMET
-
- THE DARK KNOT CLOSED LIKE A NOOSE WHICH RECALLS THE SHAPE OF THE VISCONTEAN EMBLEM OF THE CAPITERGIO AND ALSO OF THE VISCONTI SERPENT
-
- THE DISQUIETING HEAD THAT LOOKS LIKE A FUNERARY MASK
-
- THE EMPTY ARMOR

THE ANCIENT "ITALIAN SHIELD" WITH THE UNION OF THE ARAGONA STRIPES AND THE MILANESE CROSS



Whatever hypothesis is made about this hybrid figure, it is heraldically inadmissible for all the noble members of the court of Milan. For this reason I will leave aside two alternative hypotheses previously formulated by some scholars. In fact, there are two heraldic interpretations of this ambiguous chimerical creation enclosed in the horse-shaped shield (the oldest type of shield in use in Italy). Both of these interpretations are refutable:

(A) The yellow and red stripes of the Aragonese coat of arms are joined to the central red cross on the uniform yellow background: the cross does not exist in the Aragonese heraldic tradition.



Coat of arms of King Alfonso I of Aragon, from the codex of the Confraternity of Santa Marta, ca. 1445-50.

(B) The yellow (gold) field in the shield is heraldically incompatible with the white (argent) field of the Sanseverinos' coat of arms. From the beginning, the traditional coat of arms of the Sanseverino of Aragon (Roberto Sanseverino: 1418 Regno di Napoli - + 1487, Calliano) had white field (Fig.IA). Even the coat of arms of the Sanseverino family by Grifo in the incunabulum *Comedia*, (Cremonese, Venice, 1491), shows the white field. (Fig.IIA). Roberto Sanseverino (* 1418-- killed in an ambush, Calliano in 1487), also added the surname of Aragon to his own by concession of the King of Naples and obtained the right to unite the Aragonese arms to his original coat of arms; but he always maintained the traditional white (argent) shield and also his descendants did'nt change it.

FIG I

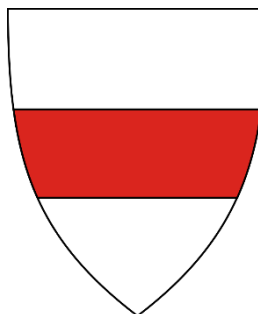


FIG II



Sanseverino's coats of arms - Motto: *Nostro è il mestiere*

The yellow (gol) field of the shield on Birago's illumination is heraldically incompatible with the white (argent) field of the Sanseverino coat of arms.

FROM THE ANALYSIS CONDUCTED SO FAR, SOME PRELIMINARY
CONSIDERATIONS EMERGE ABOUT THE POLITICAL MOTIVATION
OF THE ILLUMINATION AND THE COMMISSION

The illumination presents a significant prevalence of "imprese" of Visconti origin and in any case referable to the Visconti roots of the branch headed by Duke Galeazzo Maria, father of Gian Galeazzo. Among these, there are "imprese" exclusively attributable to the deceased Gian Galeazzo and to his father Galeazzo Maria.

The included "imprese" of Sforza origin refer to the tradition preceding the ducal investiture of Moro and are not attributable to his person. The citation of the Sforza "imprese" is to celebrate the pater patriae Francesco Sforza and in this context they should be understood as an ideal heritage shared by the two deceased dukes.

The initials GZ (referring to the name "Galeazzo" of the two dukes) appear twice in pairs on the illumination. Furthermore, the Phoenix impresa identifying Bona di Savoia appears, and this insertion is completely anomalous and unusual, considering the marginality of the exiled Bona, banned because she was an irreducible enemy of Ludovico il Moro.

Based on the "imprese" focused and the historical biographical reconstruction carried out, Bona's identity is confirmed by the presence of the "Phoenix" (her personal impresa) and the "Colombina" (Visconti's impresa favored by her), that are placed above the sides of the horse's head shield.

In conclusion, from the analysis conducted so far, Bona of Savoy appears to be the most likely patron of the illumination, whose political value had already been highlighted and supported by Bogdan Horodyski. This political value is strengthened by the study of the "imprese" and their transposition in an artistic-symbolic key carried out by Birago.

The hypothesis that leads to unveil the secret identity of "the client Bona of Savoy", will lead to a surprising "revelation", allowing us to also give a name to the face transfigured in a tragic mask that stands out in the centre of the left column. This stunning identification is closely linked to the attribution of patronage to Bona.

I deepen the analysis on the hybrid coat of arms, agreeing with Horodyski. So I recognize the red cross as the emblem of Milan (originally in a white background) merged with the Aragonese coat of arms. I add some considerations on the political relevance of this interpretation, which favored the symbol of the city of Milan over the Visconti-Sforza "Biscione".

If we agree with a political reading of the illumination, we can reasonably hypothesize that the heraldically unacceptable transformation into yellow of the white field into which the Milanese red cross stands, was intentionally done to unify the two heraldic coats of arms with the dominant Aragonese color (having the underlying idea of a partisan choice). It is founded to believe that the Aragonese dominant color underlies the claim of power over the duchy of Milan by the Aragonese descendants (Isabella and Duchetto), having been interrupted the legitimate genealogical branch headed by Gian Galeazzo.

The first evidence of the Milanese heraldic symbol that we have memory, dates back to the 14th century and it was found on the ark of Azzone Visconti present in the church of San Gottardo in Corte (now lost), where Saint Ambrose was depicted carrying the white banner with the red cross. After his death, Azzone (1302-1339) was celebrated by Visconti propaganda as the builder of the supra-city domain of the Visconti.

The red cross is an ancient emblem that dates back to the Middle Ages, when the Milanese hoisted it on the Carroccio during the battles of the Italian municipalities against the Empire in opposition to the white cross on a red background of the Germanic emperor and the municipalities that supported him.

Later, under the rule of the Visconti, the white coat of arms with a red cross was often replaced by the Biscione, emblem of the Visconti family and of the Duchy of Milan, returning to being used (certainly as a banner and probably also as a coat of arms) by Aurea Ambrosian Republic (1447-1450). Ambrosian Republic, is the name given to the Municipality of Milan, a republican government created in Milan in 1447 by a group of nobles and jurists from the University of Pavia following the power vacuum created with

the death of Filippo Maria Visconti. The Milanese Republic was abolished in 1450 with the seizure of power by Francesco Sforza, who restored the Duchy of Milan with the connected heraldic emblem of the Biscione

The decision to associate half of the Aragona coat of arms with half of the red cross of the municipality of Milan confirms the political reading that emerges from the analysis of every particular and detail of the illumination. Even if the client can be identified with the highest probability as Bona di Savoia (or less likely as Isabella d'Aragona), the mind that conceived the overall project then realized by Birago had a lucid and aware political motivation and preparation. I would even say a refined political vision. I believe this subject will remain an unidentifiable "shadow figure".

We know that many members of the Milanese court (nobles, intellectuals, scientists or collaborators in the duke's service) had reasons to oppose the Moro's power and to try to eliminate him. The central vignette at the base of the illumination depicts the "usurping duke" in a grotesque and satirical way and demonstrates the contempt that some courtiers felt for him. As far as the illumination is concerned, we can identify some subjects who were enemies of Moro and who were in relationship with Birago or who in any case could have participated in the planning of this work of art.

Inter alia, the Moro's enemies who were closest to Birago were:

- I) the author of the Sforziade Giovanni Simonetta who had been involved in the tragic story of the beheading of his brother Cicco, as he himself had taken great risks
- II) Bona di Savoia (or less likely Isabella d'Aragona), that certainly had a personal and political hate towards the Moro
- III) in particular Bona was the most probable client of the illumination because she had close relationships of trust with Birago: among other works, Birago also created the masterpiece "The Book of Hours" for Bona (around 1490).

But I believe that whoever conceived the basic project of this artwork, then entrusted to the artist Birago, is an unidentified subject who worked on behalf of one of the two women.

The cross of Milan on the right is located in: "Castello Sforzesco"



**THE TWO SHIELDS WITH THE DOUBLE “GZ” INITIALS
AND THE DUCAL ARMS THAT APPEAR ON THE “CASSONE DEI 3 DUCHI”**



The initials GZ are two and they are surrounded above by the same ducal symbol that appears on the initials of Galeazzo Maria on the Cassone dei tre duchi. At that time Galeazzo Maria was still alive and Gian Galeazzo was not yet duke. It is clear that the double initials refer to the two dukes with the name Galeazzo. Also the weapons are the same that appear in the possession of the two dukes of Milan; the sword and the quiver with arrows; there is also the same circular shield carried by the servants. The reference to the Cassone dei tre duchi is certain. On the right there are also two crossed sceptres. The scepter is traditionally a symbol of power and sovereign authority, therefore it concerns the ducal power.



ON THE “CASSONE” (AROUND 1488), ON THE LEFT, WE CAN READ “IO GZ M” (IO GZ HERE IS WITHOUT THE DUCAL SYMBOL ABOVE THE INITIALS, BECAUSE HIS FATHER GALEAZZO MARIA – ALSO GZ – WAS STILL ALIVE AND GIAN GALEAZZO WAS NOT YET DUKE. ON THE BIRAGO’S ILLUMINATION THE DUCAL SYMBOL APPEARS ON BOTH THE INITIALS “GZ” BECAUSE AT THAT TIME GIAN GALEAZZO WAS THE DECEASED DUKE.

IL MORO ON THE CASSONE IS THE THIRD DUKE (AT THAT TIME HE WAS DUKE OF BARI)

**THE STRANGE BLACK COMPOSITION
WITH FIVE BLACKBERRIES SIMILAR TO FIVE PETALS OF A FLOWER
"Mela cotogna" with the motto "Fragrantia durat" was the founding impresa
of Muzio Attendolo, the progenitor of the Sforza dynasty
*The explanation about the black flower made of blackberries***

These five blackberries (referring to the Moro) symbolize the five petals of the quince flower.



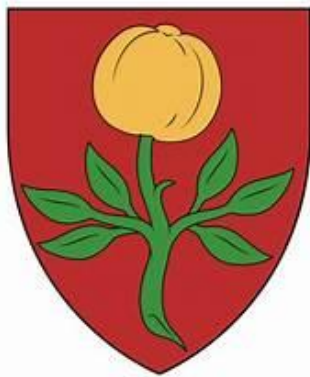
The dark shape - (which I had confused at the time as an indirect reference to the rose of the Riarios, assigning the illumination to Caterina Sforza) - here stands out at the top of the right column and it is composed of five blackberries (macroscopic allusion to the Moro) on a blood red field, flanked by two palm branches. . The "corolla" composition formed with the five blackberries as a kind of black petals, gives off something dark and baleful, constituting a lugubrious reminder of the figure of il Moro. Palm branches, as well as oak and olive branches, are associated in various tombstones with the figures of Galeazzo Maria Sforza and Bianca Maria Visconti.

What is important to underline here is having associated the five blackberries with the quince flower. In fact this association was made possible on the basis of a more in-depth

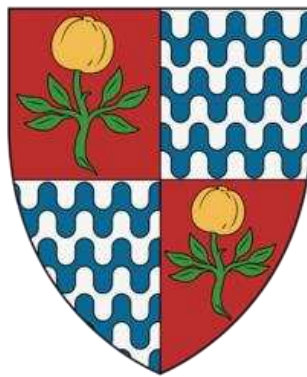
historical interpretation of the illumination, arriving at the unequivocal confirmation of its belonging to the family context of Gian Galeazzo, already supported by Horodyski. In particular, the strong political component underlying the illumination which emerges from the overall re-interpretation of this artwork justifies the association of the "black flower with five blackberries" to the "quince" flower. The quince was placed at the center of the genesis and legend of the Sforza dynasty and appears raised high by the lion's paw on the Attendolo's coat of arms. The lion augmentation was granted by Rupert, King of Germany in 1401. After Muzio Attendolo Sforza's death in 1424, Joanna II of Naples awarded his descendants to replace the surname of Attendolo with that of Sforza.

House of Attendolo-Sforza - Counts of Cotignola

In the temporal sequence of the coats of arms, starting from the initial one with the quince, we arrive at the coat of arms in which the quince is supported by the paw of the lion.



The basic coat of arms



The insertion of the Muzio Attendolo's impresa of the "Crescent waves"



The coat of arms with the lion augmentation

Muzio (from Jacomo/Jacomuzzo) Attendolo (1369-1424) was a valiant "condottiero" and captain of fortune, and was the progenitor of the Sforza dynasty; He had the nickname "Sforza" by Alberico da Barbiano for his refusal to be discouraged and the ability to reverse situations in his favor, or simply in reference to his physical vigor.

The Attendolos belonged to a branch of secondary nobility from Cotignola (a town in Emilia Romagna) dedicated to the cultivation of the fields and to the "profession of arms". Muzio began his career at the age of 13 as a soldier in Boldrino da Panicale's mercenary company and soon made an amazing career. During his stay in Umbria he met Lucia Terziani da Marsciano, daughter of Orso, a local saddler. He never married her but she would become her lover for the rest of her life and would give him eight children including her beloved Francesco, future Duke of Milan.

The origin from a family of secondary and country nobility - despite the prestige and feudal possessions acquired and Francesco's conquest of the ducal title - was always experienced by il Moro as a mark of inferiority compared to the other more powerful and aristocratic families of the peninsula..

The Sforziade had a propaganda intent, aimed at strengthening the political prestige of the Sforza dynasty among the courts of the peninsula, which did not boast an ancient lineage. The project was to ennoble the figure of the "pater patriae" Francesco with a sort of legendary aura and to accredit the magnificence of the Sforza family to the other courts and potentates of the time.

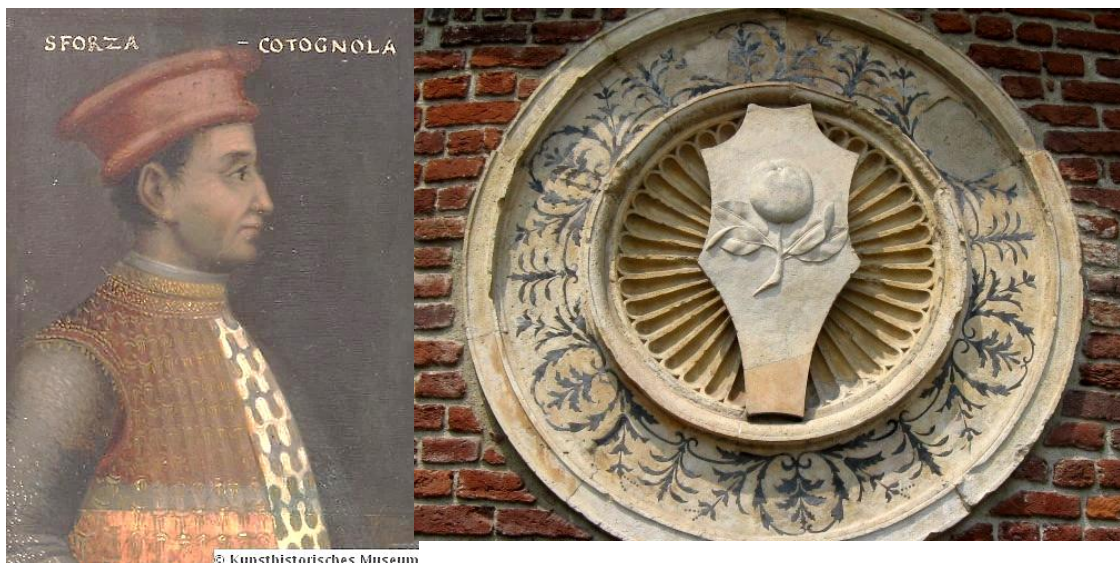
This consideration helps to explain the link I established between the "black flower with five blackberries" and the quince flower.

MY INTERPRETATION OF THE DARK COMPOSITION WITH THE BLACKBERRIES

I established a link between the "black flower with five blackberries" and the quince flower. The allusion made is to the impresa APPLE QUINCE with motto "FRAGRANTIA DURAT", created by Muzio Attendolo. The black flower in my interpretation is Ludovico il Moro, descendant of the Sforza family tree, who, through an act of usurpation, "has planted his roots in the ducal coat of arms", which, after the death of Gian Galeazzo, was instead to be assigned legitimately to the Aragonese genealogy represented by the widow Isabella and her eldest son Francesco II. The Moor is therefore the "black malignant plant" that stands out on the ducal coat of arms.

In this sense, the charge made to Moro by the Visconti side of the family, of having ruined the original nobility of the Visconti and the respectability of the Sforza house itself with his politics and his atrocities, is here reaffirmed.

In the following portrait Muzio Attendolo displays "the rising waves" on his dress and this impresa appears on the sail of the ship on which il Moro sits alone at the helm (at the base of the right column). The "rising waves" - an exclusive impresa of the Sforzas - symbolize the passage of the government of the Duchy to the usurper, who positioned himself as heir to the Sforza part of the family, and the cancellation of the privileged and cultivated Visconti tradition by the Sforza branch of his brother Galeazzo Maria.



On the right: "mela cotogna" in clipeo of S.Maria delle Grazie

THE BROKEN SHIELD WITH THE RECURRING TWO INITIALS "GZ"
AND THE SHAPE OF A HELMET



A bare, winged helmet with the initials GZ
.....



Traditional Visconti coat of arms with crest
with snake, ropes, buckets and burning embers



Leone galeato, Cast. Sforzesco, cortile della Rocchetta.

Horodyski underlines the disturbing and vaguely funereal sign of the initials "GZ" placed at the top left inside the broken shield "on a black background like an abyss"

"...dans le coin superieur gauche de l'enluminure, on voit un bouclier brisé avec le monogramme de Gian.Galeazzo au-dessus le même monogramme disparaissant dans un fond noir comme dans un abime.."

The meaning of the two similar but intact shields, with the identical initials GZ surmounted by the ducal symbol that are found on the right column is entirely plausible: both Galeazzo father and son on the right are remembered alive and with the weapons and sceptre of ducal command. On the left column we see their initial GZ appearing on a broken shield and on a black background because they are deceased.

Regarding the "bastoni incrociati" (the crossed sticks), it is interesting to quote Clark (Clark 1968-1969, I, p. 9) according to whom it would be the "impresa" designed by Leonardo for Gian Galeazzo Sforza: although this impresa does not fall within the Sforza-Visconti dynastic tradition, the reference to Leonardo in relation to the conception of it is significant in relation to some developments of this study which are explained in depth in the second part.



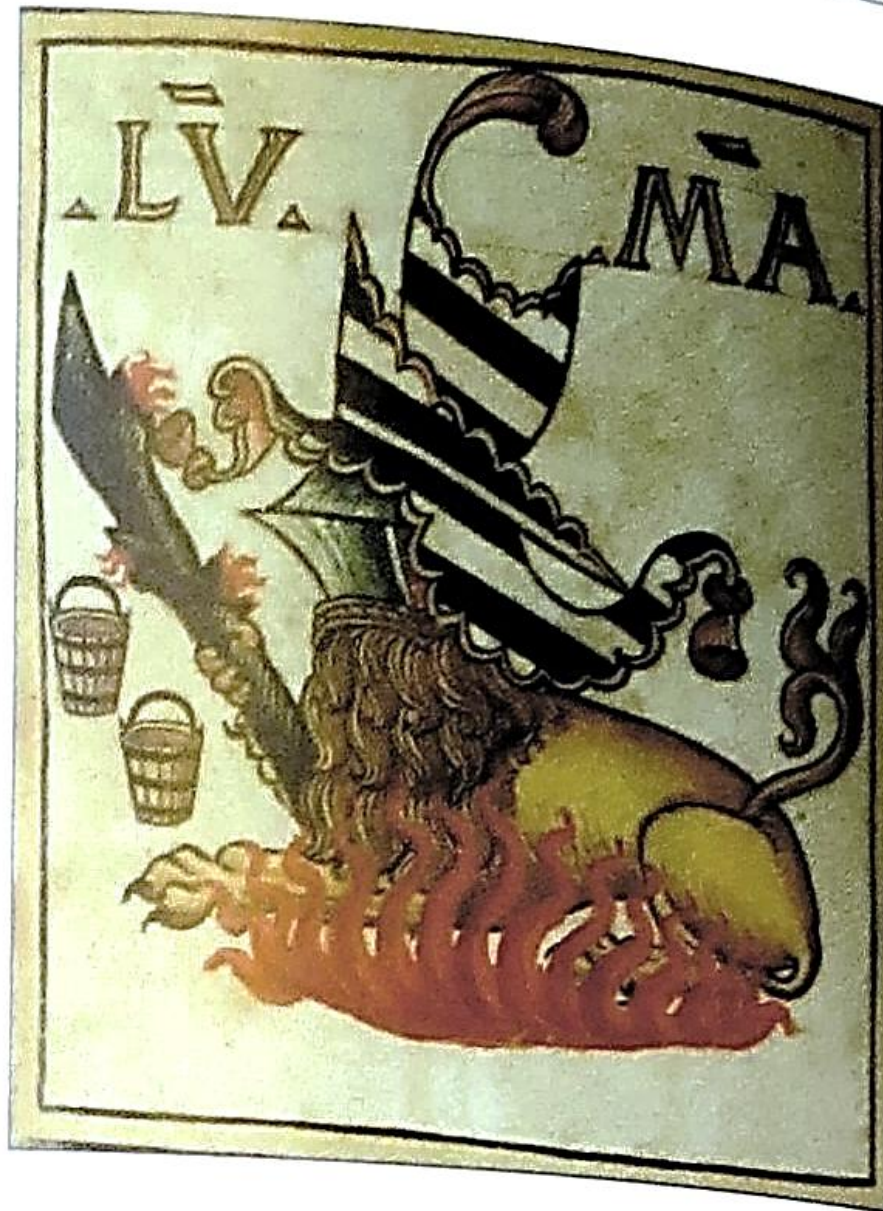
Leonardo da Vinci, Impresa dei biscioni e bastoni intrecciati, Windsor, Royal Collection, foglio n. 12282a r

The overlying initials "GZ" on the black background most likely refer to the duke Galeazzo Maria, assassinated in 1476, as they appear thinned and out of focus, as if to give the idea of a distant past and ; the other initials GZ, referring to Gian Galeazzo, are broken on two parts of a shield split in half (this second broken shield is similar to the two ducal shields placed on the right column, which designated the dukes in life). Both initials lack the ducal symbol that surmounted them (given the now occurred usurpation of the Moro, which interrupted that dynastic line headed by the two "Galeazzo" father and son)

Noteworthy that the shape of a helmet appears. The Visconti tradition exhibited the crest with the dragon's head, which appears at the top right, included in the emblem with the burning embers. Significantly, however, only a bare helmet appears in the illumination,

devoid of the dragon's head, which was a symbol of power (a clear allusion to the loss of ducal power).

The Visconti helmet also appears in the impresa of the "leone galeato", with the motto "ICH OFF", which also includes burning embers with ropes and buckets between the lion's paws. *Gàlea* in Latin means helmet, "galeatus" is the one who wears the helmet. The reference in the illumination to the "leone galeato" is therefore also significant, since it was once associated with the powerful and fearsome lion. Here we find instead the helmet stripped of all the attributes of the power that the Visconti imprese assigned to it. Both imprese with helmet and crest were created by Galeazzo II Visconti (1355-1379).



The "Leone Galeato impresa" in the CODEX TRIVULTIANUS

**THE DARK NOOSE KNOT THAT REMINDS THE FORM
OF THE THE CAPITERGIUM" IMPRESA**
(also called: "velo", "fazolo", "sudariolo", "nodo", "cercine", "tortiglio")

Hybridization with the CAPITERGIUM:



The knot as the artistic fusion with the "impresa" The fusion with the Sforza's nebulous



Medallion with Filippo Maria Visconti and the device of the dove in the veil. Certosa di Pavia,

Here we find a reference to the most solemn and precious "impresa" of the Visconti tradition, which was the "CAPITERGIUM". This "impresa" was without motto, but it recurs sometimes with the title DIVIXIA IMPERATORIS. It was an "impresa" that the Viscontis considered their exclusive property, underlining its belonging to their descendants and its imperial origins. It was gifted by Venceslaus IV of Bohemia to Gian Galeazzo Visconti in 1395, with the Ducal title. It was favored by Emperor Venceslaus IV of Bohemia (1361-1419), and appears as a national symbol, surrounding the Bohemian lion on the coins of the Emperor of 1384.



Anonymous (XVIII sec.), The veil o Nałęcz. Poznan (Poland), Raczyński Palace,



Anonymous (15th century), 4 soldi coin of Galeazzo Maria Sforza with the impresa of the capitergium or veil surmounted by Piumai (after Galeazzo Maria Sforza this !impresa” was no longer used).

THE CAPITERGIUM REFLECTS THE DUCAL PRESTIGE OF VISCONTIS

The capitergium was intended to celebrate the ducal prestige of imperial descent of the Visconti dynasty. The use of this “impresa” by Galeazzo Maria Sforza attests to the predilection he reserved for the Visconti branch, from which he claimed to be a descendant. There is therefore an evident connection between the Warsaw illumination and the branch of Galeazzo Maria and son, which was cut off with the usurpation by Ludovico il Moro of the ducal title, stolen from the legitimate heir “il Duchetto”. The prestige of this “impresa” derives from the fact that it was the veil placed on the head of Gian Galeazzo Visconti on 5 September 1395, before he wore the crown of ducal

investiture that Emperor Wenceslao had granted him on 11 May. He later made a heraldic “impresa” from it, sometimes placing a star at the centre of the knot, and had it illuminated by the de' Grossi in his Book of Hours. The capitergium was displayed during the funeral of the first Duke of Milan.

Beltrami defines the capitergio as “*Emblem of Giov. Galeazzo Visconti: it appeared at his funeral, and can be seen carved on a plaque of his sepulchral monument, at the Certosa di Pavia, with the words Divixia imperatoris: for which it is presented as the emblem of the ducal dignity conferred in 1395 by the Emperor Wenceslao*”. (Beltrami, 1910, p. 56).

At the court of Prague the symbol had a religious and dynastic value: It is a dominant motif in the famous Wenceslas Bible and is linked to the world of astrology and the magic of the time.

“I am convinced that the presence of painted emblems in the margins of Wenceslas’ manuscripts was not, however, a nonsense play, or a play just for the sake of fun. I would like to introduce here the concept of a “magic of image”, which was developed a few decades after Wenceslas’s death by the Neo-Platonist philosopher of the Italian High Renaissance Marsilio Ficino” (Bartlová 2005, p. 26).

THE CAPITERGIUM AND THE VISCONTI’S SNAKE KNOTTED IN A SIMILAR WAY

The snake knotted in a similar way appears in the decorations of important architectural works, but in the Warsaw illumination it is plausible that it was chosen by Birago both because it evokes the capitergium and because it evokes the shape of a noose made with a snake .



Rocca di Angera, Biscione visconteo
Castello di Angera (Varese)



Anonimo (III sec. d.C.),
Basilica di Sant’Ambrogio, Milano



A.da Imbonate (fine XIV sec.-inizio XV sec.), Incoronazione di Gian Galeazzo Visconti, particolare (1395). Biblioteca di S.Ambrogio,

In this choice of Birago, which assimilates the capitergium to the shape of the noose, we can therefore grasp both the strongly symbolic representation and bearer of hermetic value, and both the more concrete political value that permeates the entire illumination. The precious imperial frieze would therefore appear to have been transformed into a dark-coloured noose, with all that is ominous for the dynasty as a result. In particular, the dark color of the “impresa” is consistent with the aura marked by sadness and mourning that hovers in the work of art. For these symbolic connotations, I decided to include this figure among the figures that provide information if they are analyzed with reference to the story of Gian Galeazzo and family and to the Visconti-Sforza heraldic tradition

The capitergium impresa, with the two hanging and loose curls, is a legacy of the imperial tradition and linked to the investiture of the progenitor Gian Galeazzo Visconti, appointed duke of Milan by the emperor Venceslao in 1395. It refers to the “serto” or “infula” of the ancient rulers; conferred in royal and episcopal investitures; it is a confirmation of sovereign powers, their priestly value and their universality. On the day of the coronation, the imperial lieutenant placed on the arm of Gian Galeazzo, who had already put on the vajo cloak and ducal cap, a capitergium sprinkled with gems worth 200,000 gold florins.

Since in Birago's artwork the founding impresa of the Visconti dynasty is presented as a snake knotted around itself to form a noose, the imperial emblem is emptied of its ancient royalty, and this transformation can be explained consistently with the reading given of the illumination as a whole, as the noose represents the outrage perpetrated by Ludovico il Moro against the tradition of the dynasty.

In fact, after the death (due to poisoning) of Gian Galeazzo (1494), the Moro deposed the legitimate heir - the “duchetto” Francesco - and the branch descending from his brother Galeazzo Maria. With this act the usurper broke the original Visconti nobility at the basis of dynastic power

THE DISQUIETING HEAD THAT LOOKS LIKE A FUNERARY MASK NOW HAS A NAME (THE ENIGMA REVEALED)



Cicco Simonetta, façade of the cathedral of Como, second half of 1400

The disquieting head with the melancholic and thoughtful expression would have remained an enigma without any reasonable hypothesis of solution without an in-depth historical/heraldic study of the Warsaw illumination, reaching the same conclusions as Horodyski regarding the patronage of the family of the deceased Gian Galeazzo, and further confirming the political interpretation of this work.

The impression of being in front of a detached head can be obtained from the lack of the lower part of the face, which seems to rest on a flat support; but the search for identification of the face would still be destined to remain a subjective impression and devoid of elements without the historical biographical reference to the very strong bond of Cicco Simonetta with the two dukes Galeazzo Maria and his son Gian Galeazzo, to whom the Warsaw illumination is dedicated.

Gian Galeazzo was eleven years old when he lost the one who - by will of Duke Galeazzo Maria, his father - he considered a second father, namely Cicco Simonetta. In 1474, Duke Galeazzo Maria had in fact appointed Simonetta as Gian Galeazzo's guardian, going so far as to cast a curse on anyone who opposed or despised his will. And in fact, until September 11, 1479, Gian Galeazzo was under the tutelage and protection of Cicco.

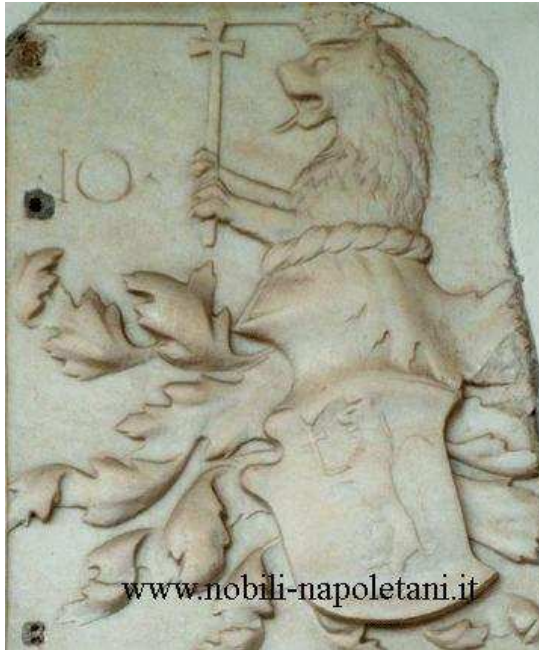
That day, Simonetta was captured and taken to the castle of Pavia, together with her brother Giovanni (the author of the *Sforziade*) while her assets and those of his family were plundered; his property was confiscated and his children were forced to flee. He remained a prisoner in Pavia for about a year - until the end of October 1480 - when some Ghibelline exponents (in particular Antonio Marliani, Pietro Pusterla and Count Giovanni Borromeo) took power in Milan and Ludovico il Moro, de facto regent of the duchy,

initiated the trial and execution of Cicco. The summary judgment was carried out by his opponents, and on 30 October 1480 Simonetta's head rolled onto the ramparts of the castle of Pavia. With the death of Cicco, a tragic event of unheard-of violence was repeated for Gian Galeazzo: after the assassination of his father which had taken place four years earlier, the little duke lost the protector who had defended him in the short space of the last four years (from 1476 to 1480) in the context of the Sforza court, in which – albeit confusedly – he felt in danger. In October 1480 the trauma of the loss of a fundamental point of reference for his balance was repeated. Although not having the same traumatic significance of the assassination of his father Galeazzo Maria, that second loss decided his fate, handing him over to the untrustworthy tutelage of his uncle Ludovico il Moro. Due to the very close ties that Cicco had with the two dukes, in whose memory the illumination was commissioned, the identification of the disturbing head placed in the middle of the left column with the figure of Cicco Simonetta can be considered well founded.

Cicco was a very cultured man, with great administrative ability and political acumen, placed at the head of the Chancery and appointed a member of the Secret Council by Francesco Sforza. After the assassination of Galeazzo Maria, he was at the top of power, having Ludovico and his brothers declared rebels and sending them into internal confinement (1477). Il Moro, having reconquered Genoa and Tortona, through strong pressure obtained a rapprochement with Bona. Historians argued that it was probably Bona di Savoia's passion for the waiter/courtier Tassino, who was detested by Cicco, that induced the duchess to call back il Moro, who returned as master and marked the ruin of Cicco. The rise to power of the Moro passes "over the corpse" of Cicco, who is beheaded on 30 October 1480 while the little Gian Galeazzo is segregated in the Rocchetta. The end of Cicco - imprisoned by Bona herself - was fatal for the fall of the two "Duces Mediolani" mother and son. A few days later – on 3 November – Bona too was segregated and deprived of power, while Ludovico il Moro, the new guardian of Gian Galeazzo, began his twenty years of unchallenged power in Milan.

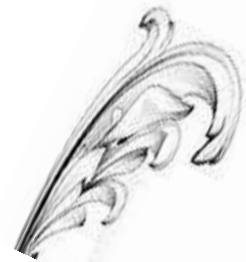
The identification of the funeral mask - which could previously have appeared as an extraneous element inserted in the context of the Visconti Sforza "impresa" - finally constitutes the decisive element which serves to confirm the commissioning of the illumination and the subjects to whom Birago's work was dedicated. The political value of the illumination in its entirety is also confirmed. All the characters here identified (Galeazzo Maria father and Gian Galeazzo son, Bona di Savoia and finally Giovanni Simonetta himself, (brother of Cicco and author of the *Sforziade*) are at the same time the protagonists of the tragic dynastic history of the Sforza family between 1476 (the killing of Galeazzo Maria) and 1494 (the poisoning of Gian Galeazzo): However, an element of a heraldic nature is added to determine the recognition of the mask as Cicco. It is the presence of the acanthus on the coats of arms of his family. The acanthus leaves also appear on Chicco's dress ("Bas-relief, Cicco Simonetta, Como Cathedral)

The acanthus leaves around the lion on the Simonetta family coat of arms and the comparison between the leaves of acanthus and the decorations on the mask



Stemma dei Simonetta

Stemma di Angelo Simonetta, padre di Cicco



THE IDENTIFICATION OF CICCÒ SIMONETTA LEADING BACK TO BONA DI SAVOIA

The patron of the illumination is most likely to be Bona di Savoia, in light of the recognition of Cicco Simonetta behind the tragic and disturbing mask with which Birago transfigured him. No other member of the family that belonged to Galeazzo father and son had reason to celebrate the memory of Cicco except Bona. Cicco was his trusted ally and advisor when he had to take over the ducal government. And he was the “second father” of little Gian Galeazzo. The bond between Bona of Savoy and Cicco Simonetta was deep and certainly marked by Bona’s remorse and feelings of guilt.

The decapitated head of Cicco is depicted in the center of the left column, surmounted by the initials “GZ” of the two dukes in the broken shield, by the capitergio twisted into a noose and by the empty breastplate to symbolize the ruin of the dynastic branch. For well-founded historical and biographical reasons, the decapitated head of Cicco was placed by Birago to seal the enigma enclosed in his work of art..

The ownership of the copy of the Sforziade with the illumination now in the Biblioteca Narodowa in Warsaw passed to Bona Sforza, Bona’s granddaughter.



The Phoenix: Bona's “impresa” in the Book of Hours illuminated by Birago

THE PHOENIX IS THE SIGNATURE OF THE CLIENT BONA DI SAVOIA



It was difficult to recognize the phoenix due to the marginal position and the poor definition of the image, moreover with low contrast colours, but I was able to recognize it when I saw the impresa of Bona di Savoia in the Book of Hours by Birago, where the bird is identified with certainty with the phoenix, In this Birago's masterpiece, it is also identified as Bona's personal impresa through the motto "Sola facta solvm devm seqvor".



The same characteristic of the tuft on the bird's head appears on the Warsaw illumination. Moreover I found the same bird having that identical tuft on the head on the reverse of the coin called "testone" in silver, minted in the name of Bona di Savoia, regent for the Duchy of Milan from 1476 to 1481 (after the assassination of her husband).

The certain presence on the Warsaw illumination of the Phoenix, that was the exclusive impresa of Bona, categorically excludes that the commission made to Birago can be attributed to Ludovico il Moro or one of his followers, given the irremediable hostility existing towards the exiled regent. On the contrary, this "impresa" constitutes proof that the illumination was commissioned by the family of Gian Galeazzo and almost certainly by Bona.

THE EMPTY ARMOR

The empty armor belongs to duke Gian Galeazzo to whom the illumination is dedicated. It is empty because the duke is dead. It is not just any armor, as it is the same one he wore with the Moro in the Paris illumination, but, above all, it is the traditional armor that distinguishes the ducal identity of the wearer. There is no possibility of misunderstanding as it is the identical armor worn by the pater patriae Francesco Sforza among his peers in the Florence illumination.

The latter unique figure confirms that, even if the illumination is dedicated to the memory of the two Galeazzo dukes father and son, the main recipient is the young dead duke.



The Birago's illumination in the Sforziade of Paris – The armors of Gian Galeazzo and il Moro



**THE EMPTY ARMOR OF THE WARSAW ILLUMINATION AS A SYMBOLIC ECLIPSE
OF THE SFORZA'S DUCAL POWER AND AUTHORITY
CELEBRATED IN THE ILLUMINATIONS OF PARIS AND FLORENCE**

In the Paris illumination, the central figure at the bottom places the uncle and nephew equally facing each other, while the boat in the background is governed by il Moro, who holds the guide (the oars), and Gian Galeazzo is next to the mainmast and the sails.

In the background appears the blessing image of Ludovico di Tolosa, protector of the sick and at the same time a clear allusion to Ludovico il Moro himself, also equated in name to the figure of the tutelary saint, as he took care of his sickly nephew (who however until July 1494 showed no signs of the mysterious illness that would kill him after three months). The goddess Fortuna - depicted according to tradition on the back of a dolphin - is symbolically auspicious.

In the idyllic painting the roles assigned to the two Sforzas in the government of the State are defined, while in reality the Moor had taken all power for himself. It must be said that the historians and chroniclers of the time attributed the poisoning of Gian Galeazzo to il Moro through the magician and court doctor Ambrogio da Rosate.

As can be seen here, a clear interplay of references is established between the ship placed centrally at the base of the Paris illumination and the black vessel within the hybrid coat of arms - featuring the Sforza emblem of the "rising waves" - placed at the base of the right illuminated band of the illumination.



While in the Paris illumination the presence of Gian Galeazzo is everywhere pervasive, in the Warsaw one it is his memory and that of his father that lives on: through the symbols and the “deeds” that dot the illuminated lateral bands and the upper central one, a subtle funereal aura emanates. The heavier tone of the colors, that hovers over the lateral bands and the upper one of the illumination, contrasts with the grotesque mood of the lively central scene at the bottom, in which, in a scurrilous pose, the naked Moro stands out, surrounded by a group of armed putti prostrate before him. Il Moro is “naked”, just as his followers are naked. They are clearly all unworthy of wearing the traditional and prestigious armor that the "pater patriae" Francesco Sforza displayed in the Birago illumination in Florence, where he is portrayed in a central position with respect to the group of wise men and brave generals of all ages.



The Illumination of Florence: Francesco Sforza in the center with the armor among the great wise men and brave generals of all times.



***About the grotesque scene with the putti placed
at the base of the illumination in a central position***

This grotesque scene inscribed in the Warsaw illumination distinguishes it as “atypical” compared to other illuminations of the time, both in terms of iconography and for its unusual “atmosphere”. which is such as to arouse amusement and bewilderment in the observer.

Bogdan Horodyski was the first to date it after the death of Gian Galeazzo: “après la mort de Gian Galeazzo Sforza (c’est-à-dire après le 21 octobre 1494)”. He also underlines its political character not free from caricatural traits, placing it in the entourage of the widow Isabella, who was opposed to Ludovico il Moro. For the Polish scholar, it is undoubtedly an illumination different from the others that Birago had created for the three copies of the Sforziade deluxe, given its “caractère absolument exceptionnel: sa miniature figurative, en bas de la bordure, est une caricature politique”.

The in-depth study of this singular “scene” of the Warsaw illumination will be developed in the second part of this study, with particular attention to the inscriptions that appear there (from which stunning and revealing decryptations of perfect anagrams have been drawn). In the second part to follow, aspects of this work by Birago that are still unpublished and that lead back to the figure of Leonardo will also be discussed.

P.S. Part II also includes the perfect anagrams decrypted by the motto of the “impresa” that appears on the shield supported by the two “putti” and related research.

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