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Medieval Prophecy and Politics

by Robert E. Lerner

«Subiciet ergo vespertilio inclitus rex Arragonensis regnum
Granate»

JOHN OF RUPESSISA, *Liber de oneribus orbis*, Tours, Bibliothèque municipale, ms 520, f. 29r

During the early 1980s many peace-loving American citizens were worried. Our President, Ronald Reagan, had not only called the Soviet Union an «evil empire», but was known to be an admirer of Hal Lindsey's best-selling *Late Great Planet Earth* which described the gathering of Anti-christ's forces as a 200-million-man army coming from the East and soon to do battle at Armageddon¹. The President's «star wars» program and massive military build-up, it seemed, was calculated on the certainty of apocalyptic engagement with the «evil empire» derived from the reading of supercharged premillennialist Christian prophecy. Indeed, during the 1984 elections journalists wondered whether Reagan's belief in the imminence of Armageddon would prompt him to launch a surprise nuclear attack against the Soviet Gog on his own terms. Who knows even today what exactly was on the President's mind, but fortunately one thing is certain: toward the end of his second term, when Gorbachev waved the olive branch, Reagan was willing to go to Moscow and engage in amiable personal talks about weapons reductions with the leader of the government scripted by biblical prophecy to be the embodiment of the Beast.

I take this episode from the recent past to be emblematic of the perennially ambiguous relationship between prophecy and politics². Statesmen

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¹ On Reagan and prophecy, P. BOYER, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1992, p. 142.

² The present essay excludes consideration of the relationship between astrology and politics, a related but sufficiently different issue.

may pay attention to prophecy, but it is uncertain what difference it makes. My concern here is with the medieval period, and I will propose first that in terms of his interest in eschatological prophecy Reagan would have fitted right in. Plentiful evidence exists that prophecies of various kinds were deemed noteworthy in the highest governmental circles. Impressive examples come from the Capetian royal registers. In 1220 Etienne de Galardon, a clerk of Philip Augustus's chief administrator, Bishop Guérin of Senlis, copied at the end of a register the prophecy of the Tiburtine Sibyl and an abbreviation of the *Valerian prophecy*³. Other prophecies appeared in Capetian registers a century later. One was a prophecy of a certain «Brother Columbinus» foretelling a sequence of events to culminate in 1320; another was a set of recently invented pope prophecies that must have just reached Paris⁴.

The presence of prophecies in the documentary repositories of the kings of France is matched by their presence in the libraries of cardinals. An oft-quoted remark by Cola di Rienzo bears repeating. In 1350 the erst-while «Roman tribune» complained that «if the prophecies of Merlin, Methodius, Polycarp, Joachim, and Cyril come from an unclean spirit or are fables, why do the pastors and prelates of the Church keep them in their libraries in beautifully adorned books?»⁵. Rienzo surely knew whereof he spoke, for surviving books and inventories show that cardinals often commissioned and owned copies of prophetic texts. Pope prophecies were owned by Cardinals Martin of Zalva, Pietro Corsini, Francesco Zabarella, and Francesco Gonzaga⁶; other copies were in the collections

³ J.W. BALDWIN, *The Government of Philip Augustus*, Berkeley 1986, pp. 370, 384, 412-413.

⁴ Both registers were copied under the supervision of Pierre d'Étampes, keeper of the French royal archives from 1307 to 1324. For the «Brother Columbinus» prophecy in Register XXIX, today BNF ms lat. 10919, E.A.R. BROWN - R.E. LERNER, *On the Origins and Import of the Columbinus Prophecy*, in «Traditio», 45, 1989-90, pp. 219-256. For the pope prophecies in Register XXIX, today AN JJ 28, R.E. LERNER, *On the Origins of the Earliest Latin Pope Prophecies*, in *Fälschungen im Mittelalter. Fingierte Briefe* (MGH, Schriften 33, V), Hannover 1988, pp. 611-635, here p. 634.

⁵ K. BURDACH - P. PIUR, *Briefwechsel des Cola di Rienzo* (= *Vom Mittelalter zur Reformation*, II/3), Berlin 1912, p. 295; the passage may be found more easily in R. RUSCONI, *L'attesa della fine*, Roma 1979, p. 21.

⁶ H. MILLET, *Le Cardinal Martin de Zalva († 1403) face aux prophéties du grand schisme d'occident*, in «Mélanges de l'Ecole Française de Rome, Moyen âge, temps modernes», 98, 1986, pp. 265-293, here p. 275; R. RUSCONI, *L'attesa della fine*, p. 56; D.S. CHAMBERS, *A Renaissance Cardinal and his Worldly Goods: The Will and Inventory of Francesco Gonzaga (1444-1483)*, London 1992, p. 171. Chambers mistakenly calls the *Papalista* «a list of popes».

of the popes of Avignon⁷. Often these were «beautifully adorned» with fascinating emblematic illuminations. Owing to the patronage of *quattrocento* prelates pope prophecies provided material for luxury manuscripts executed by prominent artists, possibly including Pisanello and Benozzo Gozzoli⁸. Aside from the appearance of prophecies in collections of documents and libraries there is also ample evidence of direct inquiry. Two of the twelfth century's most famous rulers summoned to their presence two of the twelfth century's most famous seers. In 1152, *en route* from his election in Frankfurt to his coronation in Aachen, Frederick Barbarossa summoned the Abbess Hildegard of Bingen from her nunnery on the Rupertsberg to pronounce about the future of his reign⁹. Also taking advantage of the presence of a noted prophet in his vicinity was Richard the Lionhearted who in the winter of 1191 summoned the Abbot Joachim of Fiore from across the straits when he waited in Messina *en route* to a crusade in the Holy Land¹⁰. Since both Hildegard and Joachim also prognosticated before travelling papal curias they seem to have been three-star attractions for the most prominent twelfth-century tourists¹¹.

⁷ Rome, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ms Vat. lat. 3819 is listed in Pope Urban V's library catalogue of 1369, R.E. LERNER, *On the Origins*, p. 635, citing further literature. A different ms containing «prophetia Joachim de papis» appears in the catalogue of Benedict XIII's library of 1410, M. FAUCON, *La librairie des papes d'Avignon*, Paris 1886-1887, repr. Amsterdam 1969, II, p. 134.

⁸ Rome, Bibl. Apost. Vaticana, ms Rossiano 374, is a luxury manuscript commissioned for a cardinal, as can be seen from the incomplete coat of arms on the first page (facsimile edition: Belser Verlag, Zürich, 1985). Modena, Biblioteca Estense, ms M. 5, 27 is a luxury manuscript done for Leonello d'Este, plausibly by Pisanello; see H. GRUNDMANN, *Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, 2: *Joachim von Fiore*, Stuttgart 1977, p. 50, and A. VENTURI, *Il Pisanello a Ferrara*, in «Archivio Veneto», 30, 1885, pp. 410-420. For yet another fifteenth-century luxury manuscript «not unworthy of Benozzo Gozzoli», B. BERENSON, *Miniatures Probably by the Master of the San Miniato Altarpiece*, in *Essays in Honor of George Swarzenski*, Chicago 1951, pp. 96-102.

⁹ B. NEWMAN, *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and her World*, Berkeley 1998, p. 19, and p. 203 n. 95. Barbarossa's itinerary makes it clear that Hildegard's presence at Ingelheim (near Mainz) must have transpired before his arrival at Aachen rather than after. See also B. NEWMAN, *Sister of Wisdom: Hildegard of Bingen's Theology of the Feminine*, Berkeley 1987, p. 11.

¹⁰ Best on this incident is M. REEVES, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism*, Oxford 1969, pp. 6-10.

¹¹ On Hildegard's meeting with a curial delegation when Eugenius III was visiting Trier, B. NEWMAN, *Voice*, p. 11. On Joachim's encounter with the curia of Lucius III at Veroli, M. KAUP, *De prophetia ignota: Eine frühe Schrift Joachims von Fiore*, Hannover 1998, pp. 1-13.

The thirteenth century was bereft of prophets of Hildegard's and Joachim's stature but when another appeared in the fourteenth century, he might easily have opened a consultancy. I refer to John of Rupescissa, the French Franciscan who emitted tomes of prophecy during the decade of the 1350s while being held prisoner in papal Avignon¹². Judged innocent of heresy charges, Rupescissa apparently was held captive because the members of the curia did not wish to have him excoriating them in public. But they trusted his pronouncements so much that they allowed him the use of writing materials in his dungeon and solicited him for written statements of things to come. In 1356 the pope himself approached Rupescissa via an intermediary with a request to learn about the duration of the wars in France¹³. Similarly an Avignon prelate submitted a list of questions about the future to the immured celebrity. Examples were: «Who, and of what status, and of what nation will be the antipope? Who will adhere to him?»¹⁴. Rupescissa also wrote a long treatise for the Cardinal Protector of the Franciscan Order, Talleyrand of Périgord, which, he explained, would be useful to the latter in his capacity as papal legate to the kings of France and England¹⁵.

¹² The basic work on Rupescissa remains J. BIGNAMI-ODIER, *Études sur Jean de Roquetaillade (Johannes de Rupescissa)*, Paris 1952. A second, lightly revised version is J. BIGNAMI-ODIER, *Jean de Roquetaillade (de Rupescissa)*, in «Histoire littéraire de France», 41, 1981, pp. 75-240. Hereafter I will cite the pages from the book of 1952 and place those from the later version in parentheses. See also R.E. LERNER, *Historical Introduction*, in R.E. LERNER - C. MOREROD-FATTEBERT (eds), *Johannes de Rupescissa, Liber secretorum eventuum*, Fribourg 1994, pp. 13-85.

¹³ Rupescissa's letter of 1356, *Vos misistis*, still lacking a useable modern edition, was written in response to an inquiry about the length of the wars in France. The continuator of the chronicle of Nangis states that the question was posed by the archbishop of Toulouse; see J. BIGNAMI-ODIER, *Jean de Roquetaillade*, p. 174 (171). But a preface in a version of the letter copied by the librarian of Bury St. Edmunds, Henry of Kirkestede, is more explicit in stating that the archbishop posed his questions at the command of the pope; see Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, ms 404, f. 103r.

¹⁴ For the still unedited letter, *Flori rosarum*, responding to a schedule of twelve specific queries, which I would place between 1356 (capture of John the Good) and 1360 (Peace of Brétigny), J. BIGNAMI-ODIER, *Jean de Roquetaillade*, pp. 177-179 (pp. 173-175). See the list of questions edited at pp. 178-179, n. 5 (p. 175, n. 409). I agree with Bignami-Odier that the prelate who posed the questions was probably Cardinal Talleyrand of Périgord. Yet another letter, *Reverendissime pater*, probably written in 1350 or shortly thereafter, on which see *ibidem*, pp. 175-177 (pp. 172-173), was also written on demand, and probably for Talleyrand.

¹⁵ This is the *Liber ostensor* of 1356, on which see J. BIGNAMI-ODIER, *Jean de Roquetaillade*, pp. 140-156 (pp. 142-156). In the prologue Rupescissa lists as his third reason for address-

Did authors of prophecy, knowing that kings, popes, and cardinals might turn to them for prophetic insight, respond with recommendations of specific plans of action? Even had they wished to, three circumstances impeded this possibility. First, the assumption prevailed among theological authorities that if God ever revealed knowledge about the future He did so only in exceptional circumstances and only to the holiest of recipients¹⁶. This made it impossible to hang out a shingle reading «prophecies proffered» and hope that kings and cardinals would stand on line for guidance. Instead one had to have a well-established reputation for sanctity, which in turn meant that one could not give the appearance of being a consultant. Accordingly the ascetic prophet or prophetess often disavowed the role and when obliged to assume it was most comfortable with generic prophecies of chastisement. Granted that one might express prophecy pseudonymously as if it had been written by an acknowledged saintly person or mythical seer. But in that case the individual surely could not offer himself or herself for consultation.

Secondly, the familiar trait of prophetic composition, calculated obscurity, was particularly pronounced in the Middle Ages. Inasmuch as the prophets Daniel and John were obscure, it behooved anyone after them to be equally obscure; since sibyls portrayed coming events by means of initials and emblems, it behooved their imitators to do the same. So firm was the medieval conviction that prophecy had to be difficult that the obscurity of a text could be offered as proof of its genuine inspiration¹⁷. One might avoid this constraint by volunteering to interpret a preexistent prophecy, but since commentators themselves were expected to be reputable ascetics they could not volunteer too freely. Furthermore, commenting on someone else's prophecy evidently did not offer unlimited freedom to predict on one's own even granting that one might often try to force meanings¹⁸.

ing the treatise to Talleyrand: «quia ex hiis que dicentur poterit evidenter perpendi quid in Franciam facturus sitis de pace inter reges Francorum et Anglorum, ad quam tractandam estis institutus legatus sedis apostolice, et ad quem finem poteritis venire et si pacem faceretis volente Deo an duraret vel cito rumperetur». I quote from a transcription made from the unique manuscript by Mme Bignami-Odier, generously made available to me by Professor André Vauchez.

¹⁶ See my *Ecstatic Dissent*, in «Speculum», 67, 1992, pp. 33-57, esp. p. 47, with nn. 49, 50.

¹⁷ See the example of Gebeno of Eberbach in R.E. LERNER, *Powers of Prophecy*, p. 187, n. 4.

¹⁸ On forced meanings, see the wry observation of N. VALOIS, *Conseils et prédictions adressés à Charles VII, en 1445, par un certain Jean du Bois*, in «Annuaire-Bulletin de la

A third constraint on using prophecy as a mode of influencing action was the obvious inherent contradiction: «if these events are certain to take place, how can they possibly be altered or influenced by foreknowledge?». A prophet who confronted this objection was John of Bassigny, a fourteenth-century French seer. After prophesying a succession of frightful woes he stated that they would not necessarily come to pass, for God, who cancelled his decision to overthrow Nineveh, is freely able to relent¹⁹. John then assumed the role of Jonah and ended his prophecy with a call to repentance and prayer. In the lack of equivalent statements it is hard to know whether other prophets conceived of their function to be that of frightening their audiences into mending their ways by predictions that really were threats. The silence, however, suggests that few did, for if prophets meant to adjure by threatening they were free to be clear about that. Instead, the venomous zest with which most prophets usually depicted coming punishments suggests that they were really promising such things without an escape clause and thereby expressing their own deep-seated resentments. Voicing prophecies of doom not only may have helped relieve pent-up hostilities but sometimes the imprecations may have served to offer solidarity to communities of the aggrieved.

We are left with the conclusion that the main potential influence of prophecy on behavior would have been to encourage people to do things because they knew they were fated to do them. Almost all medieval religious prophecies foretold coming trials and woes juxtaposed with the coming of Antichrist. But almost all such prophecies also foretold the coming of joyful events, whether before or after Antichrist, conceived as triumphs and rewards for the warriors of God. The point of heeding such prophecies, then, would not have been to alter the unalterable but to act in ways that proved to one's self and others that one belonged to the ranks of the chosen.

If we return now to the authors of prophecy, it is clear that despite constraints it remained possible to cast predictions that implicitly recommended courses of action other than contrition. But these courses of action were seldom specific. Although the details of Hildegard's exchange with Barbarossa are not recorded, she almost certainly did not tell him

Société de l'Histoire de France, 46, 1909, pp. 201-238, here p. 207: «à un jargon dépourvu de clarté il sera toujours aisé de donner tel sens que l'on voudra».

¹⁹ Staatsbibliothek Bamberg, ms Misc. Astr. 4, f. 156r: «Nec eciam dicat me ... quod ita necessario evenient, quia dico quod potens est Deus, qui iudicium subvercionis a Ninive removit, ista in mundo per suam omnipotenciam [ms: potentiam] totaliter removeres».

just what he would do in the next few years, and this is verifiably the case with Joachim's prophecies to Richard I and Rupescissa's to his pope and cardinals. If rulers in such cases hoped for specific guidance or encouragement they would have been disappointed. So what was the relationship between prophecy and politics in the Middle Ages? I would say that for ecclesiastical politics it was in fact slight: prelates were warned of chastisement. It is true that angel popes might be foretold, but they were not to come from the obvious pool of the *papabile*. The expectation of an angel pope may perhaps have contributed to the election of Celestine V in 1294, but this is speculation and if true would be an exception that proves the rule since no saintly hermits were elected pope before or after. But in the realm of secular politics I do think that consideration of religious prophecy takes some proper place.

I refer to the realm of dynastic ambitions. On the model of late-Roman and Byzantine emperor prophecies a large number of pseudonymous «Sibylline» texts were minted in the high- and late- medieval West that foretold the advent of conquering heroes²⁰. Details inevitably differed, but the main plot-line was that a mighty warrior would soon rise up to defeat neighboring enemies, overpower the heathen, unite Christendom, and journey to the Holy Land to install a wondrous regime before the coming of Antichrist. The hero was identified allusively, either by initial or emblem, but usually the allusiveness was transparent: an «L» from the line of France was an easy puzzle to solve, and so was an «eagle rising up from the north». Sometimes it was less clear whether the «L» or «eagle» was meant to be a reigning ruler or one soon to come; an «L» might follow a row of «L's» and «C's» in a succession that might make his identity obscure; an «eagle» might fly according to a timetable written in crypt. Additional confusion could occur because a given author might choose to alter an old prophecy rather than write an entirely new one and leave old parts untouched in ways that were inconsistent or incoherent. And scribal confusion could always wreak further havoc. Yet for all these qualifications the dynastic or national implications of such pseudonymous prophecies could seldom be missed.

Because authors hid under the mantle of Sibyls and Merlins we can never know exactly how close they were to the rulers or dynasties they were promoting. But while it seems dubious that any given «L» actually com-

²⁰ For an expert recent overview of Sibylline prophecies through the eleventh century, citing further literature, see B. MCGINN, *Oracular Transformations: The 'Sibylla Tiburtina' in the Middle Ages*, in I.C. COLOMBO - T. SEPPILLI (edd), *Sibille e linguaggi oracolari*: Mito, Storia, Tradizione, Pisa 1998, pp. 603-644.

missioned a functionary to write a Sibylline prophecy in his behalf it seems plausible that a functionary might have written such a prophecy (or remodelled an old one) out of spontaneous enthusiasm for his sovereign's cause. While this can never be proven, many examples exist of monarchical attendants adducing prophecies to support their rulers' ambitions. Bishop Benzo of Alba wrote a panegyric for the Emperor Henry IV in which he cited an otherwise unknown Sibylline text that told how Henry would add southern Italy to his realms of Germany and Lombardy, be crowned in Constantinople, and then rescue the Holy Land²¹. Similarly Nicholas of Bari, a clerical adherent of the Emperor Frederick II, preached a sermon before him in which he interpreted biblical verses as well as the Emperor's birth on the day after Christmas as applicable to Frederick's foreordained messianic rule²². The most picturesque example is that of an otherwise obscure fifteenth-century Frenchman, Jean du Bois, who addressed a prophetic treatise promising world rule to his monarch, Charles VII. Although Jean was not Charles's employee, and even protested that he was unworthy of being such, he clearly would have been glad to have been placed on the royal rolls since he concluded his treatise with an obsequious petition requesting that he and his children be absolved of paying all imposts due in the realm of France²³.

Of course neither Henry, Frederick, or Charles accomplished what was foretold of them, but I wish to conclude with a case in which a prophecy in royal service became self-fulfilling. I refer to a text beginning with the words «Ve mundo in centum annis» («Woe to the world in one hundred years»), first recorded in a treatise of 1301 by the Catalan physician Arnold of Villanova, where it is cited verbatim²⁴. The authorship is uncertain.

²¹ The prophecy is edited by C. ERDMANN, *Endkaiserglaube und Kreuzzugsgedanken*, in «Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte», 51, 1932, pp. 384-414, here pp. 405-406; an English translation is given by B. MCGINN, *Visions of the End*, New York 1979, pp. 90-91. B.A. PAVLAC, reviewing BENZO VON ALBA, *Sieben Bücher an Kaiser Heinrich IV.*, ed. and trans. H. Syffert, Hannover 1996, in «Speculum», 74, 1999, pp. 389-390, observes (drawing on Syffert) that Benzo was an «outsider», who «called himself Henry's 'most faithful servant in heart, mouth and deed'», and whose «servitude resembles that of a dog, happy to eat the scraps from his master's table».

²² R.M. KLOOS, *Nikolaus von Bari, eine neue Quelle zur Entwicklung der Kaiseridee unter Friedrich II.*, in «Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters», 11, 1954-1955, pp. 166-190; see English translation in B. MCGINN, *Visions of the End*, pp. 172-173.

²³ N. VALOIS, *Conseils et prédictions*, pp. 237-238.

²⁴ The treatise is ARNOLD OF VILLANOVA, *De cymbalis ecclesie*: see J. PERARNAU I ESPELT, *El text primitiu del De mysterio cymbalorum ecclesiae d'Arnau de Vilanova*, in «Arxiu de textos Catalans antics», 7-8, 1989-1990, pp. 7-169, here pp. 102-103.

Arnold reported that he had gained knowledge of the prophecy from an «almost illiterate man» of his acquaintance to whom it had been communicated miraculously. Some scholars have taken this formula to be a camouflage for Arnold himself but I am inclined to believe that Arnold did learn of the prophecy from another, even if this was not an «almost illiterate» other who learned of it miraculously. Here the question need not worry us, for whoever the author, his national sympathies were surely Catalan.

Ve mundo opens with the Lord speaking: «Woe to the world in one hundred years because it is estranged from my favor!». The portentous introduction leads to an enumeration of chastisements to strike Christians in a geographical tour running counter-clockwise around the Mediterranean from a point of departure in the Holy Land. The inhabitants of Syria will be driven from the coast and the land will remain desolate until the coming of a «new David», who will restore the «ark of Zion». Greece will be plundered, «headstrong Sicily» will be threshed, Italy will be bitten by lions and wolves. And so forth. As the tour heads toward Gibraltar it foretells that Spain, «nurse of Muslim depravity», will suffer war between her kingdoms until the «bat» devours the «Spanish gnats». Then the bat will subjugate Africa, trample the «head of the beast», accept «the monarchy», and «humiliate the inhabitants of the Nile»²⁵. Now full circle, the prophecy ends with the triumph of Antichrist, the sorting of the «sons of Jerusalem» from the «sons of Babylon», and the defeat of Satan (the «dragon») for eternity.

Although several passages of *Ve mundo* elude decipherment (contemporaries had difficulties with them too²⁶), the bat in the Spanish section was surely meant to be a king of Aragon. He is a ruler from Aragon *prima facie* because the prophecy foretells messianic victories for the bat in

²⁵ *Ve mundo*, ed. Perarnau, p. 103: «Hispania, nutrix mahometice pravtatis, reciproca furia laniabitur, nam in invicem ipsius regna consurgent. Et cum pullus iumentalis tria septem compleverit, multiplicabitur ignis vorans, donec vespertilio scinifes Hispanie devoret, subiciensque Africam et caput bestie conterens, accipiat monarchiam et in posteris humiliet Nili habitatores».

²⁶ Three fourteenth-century students of prophecy, Brother Gentilis, John of Rupescissa, and the Infante Peter of Aragon, glossed all or parts of *Ve mundo* and reached very different conclusions about various points of interpretation. Parts of the commentary of Brother Gentilis are edited by H. FINKE, *Aus den Tagen Bonifaz VIII.*, Münster, 1902, pp. 217-22; I am planning a study of this work in collaboration with Matthias Kaup. For Rupescissa's commentary on *Ve mundo*, n. 29 below; for Peter of Aragon's treatment of the passage on Spain, see R.E. LERNER, *Powers of Prophecy*, pp. 145, 148-149.

Spain and Africa, and Arnold of Villanova was a familiar of the king of Aragon. (Indeed Arnold sent James II of Aragon a copy of his treatise soon after he completed it²⁷). Surely Arnold would not have disseminated a prophecy that foretold the eschatological triumph of a king of Castile. But the identification is clinched on the grounds of heraldry, for the armorial bearings of the kings of Aragon included a strange creature for the crest that looked like a winged dragon or a bat²⁸.



Fig. 1. Ornament from title page of ANTONI BEUTER, *Primera part de la historia de València*, Valencia 1538.

²⁷ J. CARRERAS ARTAU (ed), *Del epistolario espiritual de Arnaldo de Vilanova*, in «Estudios Franciscanos», 49, 1948, pp. 79-94, 391-406, here p. 406.

²⁸ The earliest known appearance of the winged dragon as crest is on an Aragonese seal dated 1343 or 1344: M. AURELL, *Messianisme royal de la Couronne d'Aragon (14e-15e*

It may be added that implicit resonances are contained in the word «bat». The Latin for bat, *vespertilio*, connotes a creature of the evening, *vesper*, and Spain from the medieval point of view was located in the far west, the ambit of the setting sun. Moreover, the creature of the evening from the temporal point of view is of course a creature who arises at the evening of the world, the end of time. Finally, the bat's devouring of gnats (bats really do feed on insects) would have had a special meaning in an Iberian context. Namely, the vernacular for gnat (Catalan: *mosca* or *mosquit*) resonates with mosque (Catalan: *mesquita*). Thus the bat that devours the gnats is implicitly a hero who defeats the moors.

The identification of the bat as an Aragonese ruler was easily made by John of Rupescissa in 1354 when he undertook a commentary on *Ve mundo*. There he identified the prophecy's bat as a king of Aragon because: «the king of Aragon carries the emblem of a bat over his helmet»²⁹. Because Rupescissa was loyal to the Valois kings of France he resisted interpreting the Aragonese bat positively, viewing the creature instead as a scourge of God; even though the bat would destroy the Saracens, he would still be serving as a minion of Antichrist. But a positive messianic interpretation was given by two different Catalan authors in the second half of the fourteenth century. One was an unidentifiable prophet of about 1365, who foretold that a king of Aragon would «obtain the monarchy and destroy the African beast, namely the Mohammedan»³⁰. The other

siècles), in «Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales», 52, 1997, pp. 119-155, here p. 135. Both Aurell and Milhou (*La chauve-souris, le nouveau David et le roi caché*, in «Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez», 18, 1982, pp. 61-78, here p. 64) assume dubiously that the earliest known appearance is the first appearance.

²⁹ Rupescissa's commentary on *Ve mundo*, remains unedited. I quote from Tours, Bibliothèque municipale, ms 520, f. 28v: «Rex Arragonensis portat insigne vespertilionis super galeam suam». (See also the epigraph to this article.) Rupescissa repeated the identification in his *Liber ostensor* of 1356 in reference to the reigning king of Aragon's half brother; see the passage cited by M. AURELL, *Messianisme*, p. 140, n. 60: «Fernandus super galeam vespertilionem gerit insigne armorum».

³⁰ The prophecy is reported in an anonymous letter to an anonymous ecclesiastical recipient edited by J. PERARNAU I ESPELT, *La traducció Catalana medieval del Liber secretorum eventuum de Joan de Rocatalbada*, in «Arxiu de textos Catalans antics», 17, 1998, pp. 7-219, here pp. 207-208. The passage in question is: «Potentia enim minuetur Ffranchorum, et, pro dolor, domini Regis nostri, sed tamen postea reformabit in melius, optinebit enim monarchum et bestiam destruet Africanam, scilicet, macometicum». (Cfr. *Ve mundo*: «donec vespertilio scinifes Hyspanie devoret, subiciensque African et caput bestie conterens accipiat monarchiam»). Perarnau infers persuasively that the report was written by an Aragonese courtier and assumes that the information came from Avignon. He also identifies an earlier

was the Catalan Franciscan Francis Eiximenis, who drew on *Ve mundo* to conclude that a king of Aragon would conquer north Africa and destroy the Saracens³¹.

The last two writers followed the original chronology of *Ve mundo* to assume that the dramatic victory of the bat would occur before the end of the fourteenth century («woe to the world within a hundred years»). But the same chronology meant that when the fourteenth century expired and no king of Aragon had emerged as a messiah the prophecy lost its immediacy and fell into neglect³². Nevertheless, the bat started fluttering again toward the end of the fifteenth century, a revivification that concerns us here. The new life must have been inspired by the applicability of the text to a real Aragonese ruler with considerable heroic potential: Ferdinand of Aragon. Given a desire to apply the prophecy to Ferdinand, the supposed date of its issuance was altered to make it more suitable. One anonymous falsifier of the later fifteenth century brought forth the prophecy on the pretense that it had been revealed in 1388 and another on the pretense that it had been revealed in 1405. In both cases one hundred years from the new starting point meant that the heroic bat of *Ve mundo* could now be understood as the heroic Ferdinand of Aragon³³.

part of the prophecy as having a source in Rupescissa, but misses the echo of *Ve mundo* in the final part and hence the likelihood that Rupescissa's commentary on *Ve mundo* was the source for the ultimate triumph of the Aragonese king.

³¹ F. EIXIMENIS, *Primer del Crestià*, cited by P. BOHIGAS, *Aportació a l'estudi de la literatura Catalana*, Badalona 1982 (from an article originally published in 1928), pp. 101-103. The passage is also cited by J. PERARNAU I ESPELT, *La traducció Catalana*, 43, n. 58. Direct verbal borrowings show that Eiximenis was drawing on Rupescissa's commentary on *Ve mundo*; hence Rupescissa is Eiximenis's «gran doctor»: «diu ací hun gran doctor que aquesta rata penada significa lo Rey d'Aragó». See also a second passage from the *Primer del Crestià* containing an echo from *Ve mundo*, cited by J. PERARNAU I ESPELT, *La traducció Catalana*, p. 44, n. 61: «segons que alguns dien, que en breu pas en Africha príncep d'aquesta casa [Aragon] qui ha a humiliar tota la secta de Mafomet».

³² An anonymous Catalan prophecy of 1449 exalted the reigning king of Aragon, Alfonso the Magnanimous, as the «eleventh bat» (cfr. Dan 7, 24) who would chastise the clergy. Since the text contains no echoes of *Ve mundo* the allusion must have derived independently from the winged creature on the Aragonese royal crest. (The same prophecy also referred to Alfonso as the «eleventh dragon», evidently another way of characterizing the creature on the crest.) See M. AURELL, *La fin du monde, l'enfer et le roi: une prophétie catalane du XVe siècle*, in «Revue Mabillon», NS, 5, 1994, pp. 143-177, here pp. 161, 166.

³³ Both redatings occur in A. DE JAÉN, *Espejo del mundo*, a work written in 1481: E. DURAN - J. REQUESSENS, *Profecia i poder al Renaixement: Texts profètics catalans favorables a Ferran el Catòlic*, Valencia 1997, pp. 157, 257.

Evidence for the use of *Ve mundo* in panegyrics and prophecies surrounding Ferdinand is copious³⁴. Even before he acceded to the throne he was hailed in a verse panegyric of 1473 as «the bat for whom the kingdoms of Spain are waiting»³⁵. In the same vein Ferdinand's courtier Pere Azamar identified the Infante in 1476 as the bat of *Ve mundo* as well as the hero of other parallel prophecies for whom a glorious future could be expected in feats of arms³⁶. Two works in particular written before 1482 when Ferdinand began his campaign against the Muslim kingdom of Granada (he became king of Aragon in 1479), indicate that his military campaign against Granada was virtually dictated by prophetic-panegyric sentiment. Roughly around 1480 a certain Juan Alemany (otherwise unidentifiable) foretold in language closely paraphrased from *Ve mundo* that a «hidden one» (*encobert*) would appear to destroy all the Moors in Spain and all the Jews and then aid the «new David» (understood to be a great pontiff) in restoring the «ark of Zion»³⁷. Then, in 1481, Alonso de Jaén, apparently a crown official of Moorish origin working in Valencia, specified in

³⁴ Most of this evidence is now analyzed and edited in E. DURAN - J. REQUESSENS, *Profecia i poder*.

³⁵ The poem with the lines «vós soys l'excelso vespertió / qu'estan esperando los reynos d'Espanya» was first noticed and edited by A. MOREL-FATIO, *Souhails de bienvenue, adressés à Ferdinand le Catholique par un poète Barcelonais, en 1473*, in «Romania», 11, 1882, pp. 333-356, here p. 348. Morel-Fatio dated the composition to 1473 and associated it with Ferdinand's ceremonial entrance into Barcelona of that year. Duran and Requesens, who re-edit the poem, follow J. Vicens Vives in dating it to August 1472 in the context of a meeting between Ferdinand and his father. See E. DURAN - J. REQUESSENS, *Profecia i poder*, p. 302, and text at pp. 313-314.

³⁶ A. MOREL-FATIO, *Souhails de bienvenue*, p. 339; E. DURAN - J. REQUESSENS, *Profecia i poder*, p. 339. Azamar's explicit source for *Ve mundo* is «Rocaçisa en el Breviloquio», in other words John of Rupescissa's commentary on *Ve mundo* which often went by the title of *Breviloquium* (E. DURAN - J. REQUESSENS, *Profecia i poder*, p. 330, mistakenly identify the work as the anonymous Pseudo-Joachite, *Summula seu Breviloquium*).

³⁷ Spadework on Alemany was done by A. MILHOU; see *La chauve-souris*, pp. 75-77, and his *Colon y su mentalidad Mesianica en el ambiente franciscanista español*, Valladolid 1983, pp. 238-240. But Milhou is superseded by J. GUADALAJARA MEDINA, *Las profecías del anticristo en la edad media*, Madrid 1996, pp. 375-389, 405-425 and E. DURAN - J. REQUESSENS, *Profecia i poder* (who are unaware of Guadalajara), pp. 73-133, both with editions of Alemany's Catalan *De la venguda de Antichrist*. (David Viera kindly called my attention to the book by Guadalajara.) Regarding the dating, the *terminus post quem* must be 1474 (J. GUADALAJARA MEDINA, *Las profecías*, pp. 378, 387) and the *terminus ante* 1481, when it was cited by Alonso de Jaén (see below). The work was printed at an uncertain date before 1514 (E. DURAN - J. REQUESSENS, *Profecia i poder*, p. 75); it seems most likely that the original appearance around 1480 was that of a printed edition because not only Alonso but Rodrigo Ponce de Leon (see below) knew the work in the 1480s.

a treatise dedicated to Queen Isabella that her husband Ferdinand was the bat of *Ve mundo* called to «destroy the Moors of Spain and to gain Granada»³⁸.

Subsequent examples hailing Ferdinand as bat and foretelling his imminent triumphs can be easily multiplied. In 1486, while the war for Granada was progressing, one of the royal lieutenants, Rodrigo Ponce de Leon, Marquis of Cádiz, disseminated to the nobility of Castille a commentary on various prophecies that he said he had received from a certain wise man. Drawing on Alemany, but with independent knowledge of *Ve mundo*, Ponce de Leon explained that Ferdinand of Aragon was the «bat» and the «hidden one» who «would conquer the kingdom of Granada very soon», then subjugate all of Africa up to the doorway of Egypt, and then take Jerusalem³⁹. With the prophecy of Ferdinand's messianic role reverberating from different directions, it is not surprising that in 1493, a year after Ferdinand's victory at Granada, he was acclaimed by Genoese legates with the observation that «the future [ruler] who will restore the ark of Zion will come from Spain», or that in 1496 he was urged to conquer Jerusalem by the Valencian physician Jerome Torrella on the grounds of prophecies including one that began «rise up, o bat», or that none other than Christopher Columbus drew on the «ark of Zion» passage in the *Ve mundo* prophecy to ingratiate himself with Ferdinand and Isabella in letters of 1501 and 1503⁴⁰.

³⁸ Alonso's Castilian *Espejo del mundo* has been brought to scholarly attention by E. DURAN - J. REQUESENS, *Profecía i poder*: see their commentary and edition, pp. 135-297; for the passage predicting explicitly that Ferdinand was the bat who would conquer Granada, p. 270. Alonso cited Alemany and specified that the latter's «encobert» was identical to the bat of *Ve mundo*, which Alonso himself knew independently: p. 274. See also p. 206, where he equates bat and encobert in the form of anagrams.

³⁹ Anon., *Historia de los hechos de don Rodrigo Ponce de León, marqués de Cádiz*, in *Colección de documentos inéditos para la historia de España*, 106, Madrid 1893, pp. 145-317, here pp. 247-251. Ponce de Leon's reference to the «encobert» indicates that he knew Alemany, but the phrase «sojuzgará toda Africa», which does not appear in Alemany, is evidently taken directly from *Ve mundo* («subiciensque African»). A typographical error in E. DURAN - J. REQUESENS, *Profecía i poder*, p. 79, has 1496 instead of the correct date of 1486.

⁴⁰ A. MILHOU, *Colon*, pp. 378-381, E. DURAN - J. REQUESENS, *Profecía i poder*, pp. 369-384, esp. p. 376. Columbus believed the author of the *Ve mundo* prophecy to have been «the Abbot Joachim», a false attribution that seems to have originated with the late-fourteenth-century Telesphorus of Cosenza; see TELESOPHURUS, *Liber de magnis tribulationibus*, Venetiae 1516, f. 13ra: «Unde Joachim in sua speciali visione et prophetia que sic incipit: Veh mundo in centum annis ...».

The fact that panegyrists and propagandists employed the bat of *Ve mundo* to hail Ferdinand of Aragon after Ferdinand actually conquered Granada in 1492 illustrates most clearly of all the intricate connection between prophecy and events. Although Ferdinand had won all of Spain, he had not yet crossed over into Africa, let alone reached Egypt to «humiliate the inhabitants of the Nile», so there was much left for him to do. Since *Ve mundo* foretold a skein of events some of which had now happened, its entire messianic narrative seemed all the more ineluctable. This in turn explains why some late-fifteenth century Iberian prophecies about the triumphs of the «bat» are impossible to date precisely. Although Torrella cited a prophecy about a triumphant bat in 1496 the text itself could have been written any time previously during Ferdinand's reign because it could have applied to the conquest of Granada prophetically or else could have been encouraged by the conquest of Granada to foretell the conquest of Jerusalem prophetically (and in this case falsely)⁴¹. The same uncertainty surrounds the dating of a Valencian vernacular prophecy in verse that tells of how the bat will «fly high», enter into Granada, and «cross into Barbary» to exalt the cross. Perhaps the author already knew of the conquest of Granada, but perhaps he was prophesying that as much as he was prophesying triumphs in north Africa, or perhaps he even knew that Ferdinand did cross over into Africa early in the sixteenth century (albeit hardly there «flying high»)⁴².

In conclusion we may ask whether Ferdinand was aware of the prophetic role for which he had been appointed. One of his predecessors, John I of Aragon (reigned 1387-1395), cared enough about dynastic prophecies as to chide Francis Eiximenis for recommending an unsatisfactory one⁴³. No

⁴¹ The Latin prophecy cited by Torrella was supposedly written by a hermit of Constantinople in 1455, but that is almost certainly a fiction put forth to make it seem more inspired and awesome.

⁴² The Valencian prophecy is discussed and edited by E. DURAN - J. REQUESENS, *Profecia i poder*, pp. 385-401 (the passages in question are at pp. 395-396), who date the text to around the middle of 1492.

⁴³ In 1391 John complained to his chancellor about Eiximenis's recommendation of a prophecy that favored France instead of Aragon. Shortly thereafter Eiximenis apologized to John and told him of a pro-Aragonese prophecy that Rupescissa had sent to John's father, Peter the Ceremonious. John in turn answered Eiximenis that he already knew this prophecy, which was in the royal archives. The documents (two letters by John; Eiximenis's apology can be inferred from John's answer to it) are edited by A. RUBIÓ Y LLUCH, *Documents per l'història de la cultura catalana mig-aval*, 2 vols., Barcelona 1908-1921), 1, pp. 372-373; but Rubió omits a passage from the first letter wherein John instructs his

such explicit evidence exists for the conqueror of Granada, but it is hard to imagine that he was unaware of predictions of his messianic triumphs addressed to him or swirling around him. Presumably he would have pressed his campaign against the Moors had prophecy not beckoned, but, like Ronald Reagan centuries later, he must still have felt encouraged by prophecy to combat an «evil empire».

chancellor to communicate his anger to Eiximenis: «li digats que daciavant se absenga de aytals paraules sino vol provocar nostra ira». See the complete edition: [J. COROLEU], *Documents històrics catalans del segle XIV*, Barcelona 1889, pp. 134-135. For more evidence of John I's interest in prophecy relating to the house of Aragon, J. PERARNAU I ESPELT, *La traducció Catalana*, p. 19, n. 14.