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The Manipulation of Images in Ancient Books: The Case of Sacrobosco's *De Sphaera Mundi*

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Abstract. Since the time of the invention of printing, ancient texts were graced by rich iconographic collections. These illustrations have a twofold role, decorative and explicative. However, the symbolic meaning of these images could not escape the watchful eye of the Counter-Reformation. Indeed, all science books that were bringing new truths were often censored. However, it should be noted that not only the texts were censored. Sometimes the images were also subject of such repressive actions and, in some cases, they were modified or disfigured.

In this paper, we present the case of *De sphaera mundi* by Johannes de Sacrobosco, conserved in the library of the Astronomical Observatory of Capodimonte. The xylography that accompanies the text shows the mutilated breasts of Urania.

1. Introduction

Since the invention of printing, books were subjected to close inspections of their content and distribution. Prior to that, as long as a limited number of texts were produced in scriptoria and the manuscripts were mainly circulating among religious orders, the 'problem' was marginal because the system was subjected to a sort of control. In the second half of the fifteenth century, however, the invention of printing and the translation of some works into vernacular, particularly the Bible, boosted the circulation of books greatly.

2. Censored texts

The increased circulation of books helped the fast spread of Protestantism through Europe. Therefore, to stem the spread of heretical theories, the Catholic Church decided, during the Council of Trent, to control the production of books and their contents. The first index of forbidden books, banned for their heretical or ideologically dangerous content, was drew up by order of Pope Paul IV and published in 1559 by the Sacred Congregation of the Roman Inquisition. The text in these books in this list was censored and the pictures were often manipulated.

An example of scientific text's censorship can be found in the volume *Ioannis de Sacro Busto Libellus de sphaera. Accessit eiusdem autoris Computus ecclesiasticus, et alia quaedam in studiosorum gratiam*, published in 1553. The pages of the preface,



Figure 1. Xylographic image of Erasmus transformed into a wolf. From *Cosmographiae universalis lib. VI* by S. Münster, 1552 (courtesy of Biblioteca Panizzi, Reggio Emilia).

written by Philipp Melanchthon, the German theologian and humanist friend of Luther, were eliminated or deleted, because a leading author belonging to the Protestant Reformation wrote the text.

Illustrations were often censored. In the case of ‘licentious’ images, nudity was covered with brown ink, and in some cases deleted. The publisher himself often carried out these actions. Famous examples include the editions of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, published in Venice in 1497 and in Florence in 1516, respectively.

Other famous examples can be found in the editions of *Cosmographiae uniuersalis lib. VI*, written by Sebastian Münster and published in 1550 and 1552 at Basel by the printer H. Petri. The censor erased parts of the text and altered some images. In particular, he altered pictures of Erasmus of Rotterdam (Zappella 2005, p. 195) and Sebastian Münster, humanist, cosmographer, geographer, and theologian, one of the most censored authors of that period (see Figure 1).

3. Sacrobosco’s *De sphaera mundi*



Figure 2. Xylographic image of Urania. From *De sphaera mundi* by Johannes de Sacrobosco, 1488 (courtesy of Biblioteca Panizzi, Reggio Emilia).



Figure 3. Xylographic mutilated image of Urania. From *De sphaera mundi* by Johannes de Sacrobosco, 1488 (Biblioteca Osservatorio Astronomico di Capodimonte).

Sacrobosco’s *De sphaera mundi*, published in Venice in 1488, presents on the back of the first page a xylography, which represents the “allegory of the Astronomy”: a young woman, dressed in the fashion of the Renaissance and seated on a throne, holds

in her left hand an armillary sphere and in her right hand an ancient astrolabe leaning towards Urania (see Figure 2), the Muse of Astronomy and Geometry. On the left of the throne Tolomeo, dressed as an oriental magician, has on his knees a book, perhaps the *Almagest*.

The same picture of the copy conserved in the library of the Astronomical Observatory of Capodimonte shows an interesting difference, the mutilated image of Urania (Zappella 2011, pp. 28–29; Olostro Cirella, Rinaldi and Sorrentino 2011, p. 89). While her head is crowned with laurel, Urania's body, which is only covered by a skimpy cloth, lacks some anatomical details. The erased breasts are a typical example of image manipulation, which is likely due to one of the book's owners (see Figure 3). This censorship has not been found in other existing copies of this book.

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