More on the Van Eyck Question: Philip the Good of Burgundy, Isabelle of Portugal, and the Ghent Altarpiece

Carel van Mander's incorrect assertion in his *Het schilderboek* of 1604 that Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy commissioned the Ghent Altarpiece from Jan van Eyck,¹ Philip's court artist for sixteen years, has been taken as yet another instance of that author's unreliability as an historian. However, this apparently erroneous statement may reflect a different role that Philip and the ducal family played with regard to the altarpiece. While Philip certainly was not the donor, it does appear that he, his third wife Isabelle of Portugal, and their potential for producing heirs who would perpetuate the House of Valois were significant elements within the elaborate schema of the altarpiece. I believe that Jan van Eyck, in the Ghent Altarpiece, has included a portrait of Isabelle disguised as the figure of the Erythrean Sibyl, has alluded to Philip's rule over Ghent as the Count of Flanders, and has referred to the birth and baptism of Philip's hoped-for legal heir, Josse. Through analysis of the historical situation in which the altarpiece was produced, we can discover how contemporary events affected its iconographical program. Further, and probably more importantly, the association of certain panels with specific historical events of the early 1430's will enable us to date them after the death of Hubert van Eyck, and thus shed some light on the age-old problem of 'hands' in the Ghent Altarpiece.

The Ghent Altarpiece (Figs. 1 and 2) was completed for, and probably commissioned by, Joos (or Josse or Jodocus) Vijd and his wife Elizabeth Borluut for their chapel in the Church dedicated to St. John the Baptist (now the Cathedral of St. Bavo) in Ghent. Recent archival work has produced significant information regarding the donors and the original commission which needs only to be summarized briefly here.² Documents relate that the Vijd's, remaining childless, determined to establish and endow a chapel on the south side of the Church of St. John where mass would regularly be celebrated for them at their altar. To this end, their foundation act made provision for funds to pay salaries to two priests and a sacristan who would care for the chapel and provide for the saying of mass in perpetuity. The Ghent Altarpiece still stands in that original chapel, and the likelihood that it was a part of the original Vijd foundation is confirmed by the famous quatrain on its frame, which names the two Van Eyck brothers, Hubert and Jan, as its creators, Joos Vijd as the donor, and gives the date May 6, 1432 in a chronogram.

Knowing that the primary goal of the foundation concerned the religious well-being of the souls of the donors, it is intriguing that apparently Joos Vijd saw fit
to make references to the ducal family and the city of Ghent in his altarpiece, particularly because he did so at a time when relations between the city and Philip the Good were strained. The first intimation that these references to the Vijds' contemporaries exist arises from the unusual choice of prophets and sibyls for the niches above the Annunciation: from left to right they are Zacharias, the Cumaean and Erythrean Sibyls, and Micah.  

Beginning with the Old Testament personnages (Figs. 3 and 4), we see that two minor prophets are substituted for those more commonly associated with the Annunciation, e.g., Isaiah, Ezekiel or Jeremiah. When we turn to examples of typological literature of the late Middle Ages, such as the Biblia Pauperum and the Speculum Humanae Salvationis, we confirm the fact that Zacharias' and Micah's primary associations are not with the Annunciation. While the specific texts displayed by Zacharias and Micah do appear in the Biblia Pauperum, they are juxtaposed with later events in Christ’s life, his Entry into Jerusalem and his Nativity, respectively. The reasons for these associations are clear when we examine the prophecies. Zacharias' scroll reads, ‘Exulta satis filia syo[n] Jubila Ecce rex tuus ve[n]it g’, while Micah's is inscribed, ‘Ex te egredietur qui sit dominator in israël’  

Both are only slightly altered versions of their Biblical prophecies and can be translated, ‘Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, behold, your King shall come unto you’ (from Zach. 9:9) and ‘From you shall come forth He who shall be ruler in Israël’ (from Micah 5:2). Zacharias' text concerns the city of Jerusalem, first assuring its people that their King is coming, and then proceeding (5:10) to prophesize the peace which that ruler