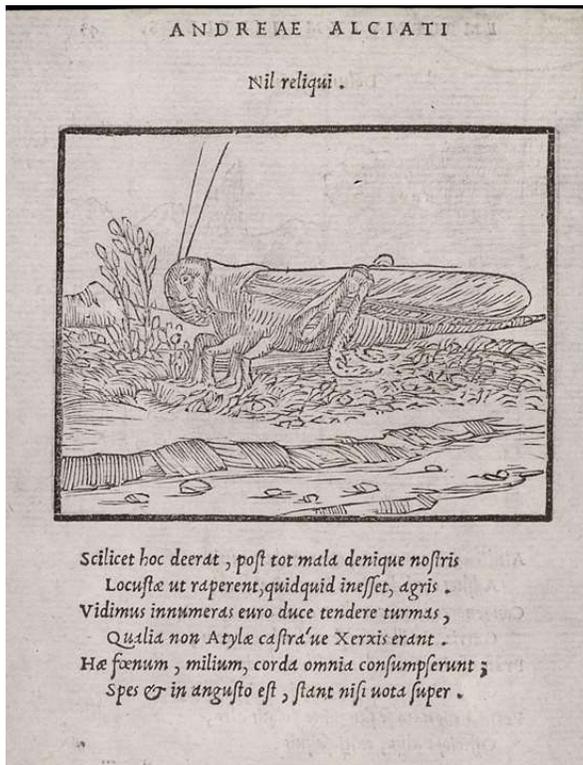


HEADING REPORT(H)A: The theatre of nature and the world

“Illustrated news” of a locust plague in the 16th century – emblem books as a source for environmental history

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Nothing left

This was all it needed - that after so many misfortunes, finally locusts should seize whatever was in our fields. We have seen countless squadrons encamped, led by Eurus, hosts such as Attila and Xerxes never had. These creatures have eaten up all hay, millet and barley. There is little scope for hope unless our prayers prevail.

Alciato, A. (1546). *Emblematum libellus*. University of Glasgow Library, Special Collections (Sp Coll SM29). Source: https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/facsimile.php?id=sm29_F3v2

This testimony referring to a devastating locusts plague comes from the 16th century, written in Latin verse and accompanied by an expressive engraving. It was included in a collection that achieved extraordinary editorial success, at an early period in the development of engraving printing techniques. The author was the Milanese jurist Andrea Alciato (1492-1550), who became known for having inaugurated a new literary

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² Translation by Knott (Alciato, 1996: 139).

typology: the emblem. This format was generally made up of three elements: a motto, a picture and a poetic text.

The first edition of the work was printed in Augsburg by Steyner in 1531, with 104 emblems. As its popularity was increasing among readers, the author introduced new compositions (up to a total of 212) and the book attracted the interest of other renowned publishers in Paris, Venice, Lyon and Antwerp. This work became, therefore, one of the most widespread in all of Early Modern Europe, with a great impact on Letters and Arts also in Portugal (Araújo, 2014).

Alciato composed his emblems taking inspiration from ancient sources, medieval bestiaries, herbaria, fable books and hieroglyphic collections. The compositions offered thus a symbolic reading of the universe, in order to convey a certain moral lesson through “mute signs”.

The emblem under analysis was introduced in the Venetian edition of 1546. This fact reinforces the hypothesis that the author, in this specific case, resorts to the first person of the plural to express the collective voice, showing that he was influenced by the tremendous impact of the calamity that had just devastated his native region. The commentator Laurentius Pignorius indicates the date of August 28, 1542 as the height of the catastrophe (Alciato, 1621: 550). Based on unidentified accounts, the interpreters of the emblem confirm the historical record of a locust invasion that seemed a cloud of animals (Alciato, 1621, p. 549), but also point out the textual connections to the traditional description of the eighth plague of Egypt (Ex. 10:1-20).

Although the use of conventional forms must be taken into consideration in dealing with this long-standing theme, this composition invites us to investigate whether the information is valid. In this perspective, it is important to resort to historiography, and particularly to environmental studies, to validate this news about the existence of a locust plague in northern Italy, its consequences and its origins. Contemporary records confirm that there was an invasion of *locustae* from the last days of August 1542, identify eastern Europe as the origin and mention the influence of wind in the propagation of the threat (Camuffo & Enzi, 1991). This example therefore suggests that a systematic study of emblem books could effectively contribute to the environmental history of the 16th century, namely through the reconstitution of the occurrence of locust pests, their factors and impacts.

In addition, it seems also relevant to highlight the information on crops devastated by the pest. The *miliun* mentioned in the text corresponds to a typical European grass plant, commonly known as millet (*panicum italicum* or *setaria italica* in Linnaeus' classification). It is one of the grain varieties described by Pliny (*HN* 18.10) as a summer crop in Italy, very vulnerable to be attacked by birds. The same Roman source lists the cereals to be planted in winter, namely wheat (*triticum*) and barley (*hordeum*). Could these be the “late cereals” referred to in the emblem?

Finally, it is important to focus on the picture of this emblem, which has undergone significant changes in different editions³. How anatomically accurate is this engraving? Is it possible to identify the species? Allegedly based on contemporary sources, the commentators describe the pest as a cloud of insects, which were the length of a human finger, distended belly, and antennae (Alciato, 1621, p. 549). They also cite classical authors, in a commentary that brings together authorities from various fields, namely naturalists, historians and poets.

In this way, it becomes evident that Alciato resorted to a diverse source to compose his emblems, bequeathing an eloquent testimony of his humanist vision of the universe. The deep comprehension of the *Emblemata* and its cultural legacy requires, therefore, a methodology that demands the intervention of different scientific areas, based on a truly interdisciplinary dialogue.

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³ In the 1550 Lyons edition, a panoramic view is preferred with insects blown by the winds, and in the 1621 print, the picture represents a cloud of locusts invading the cereal field.

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