A Depiction of an Italian Arming Doublet, c1435-45

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In the Istituto al Gabinetto dei disegni e stampe della Villa Farnesina in Rome there are a series of sixteen pen on parchment drawings (Inv. FN 2818-2833), dating from between 1435 and 1445. The identity of the artist is not known, although he may have been a Paduan. The 220x295 mm drawings depict many famous figures from classical and early medieval history; thus the drawings are often referred to as the Uomini illustri series. Included are emperors, kings, war leaders, philosophers, and biblical and classical heroes.

This is not the only such manuscript to survive. Related examples may be found in the collections of the Biblioteca Reale, Turin (codex 102), the National Gallery of Art in Washington (single page from the ‘Cockerell Chronicle’), the British Library (the ‘Florentine Picture Chronicle’) and the Crespit Collection in Milan.¹

However, the creator of the Uomini illustri series devotes an especially large proportion of his work to the study of military heroes. Therefore, these drawings are of
some importance to the study of fifteenth-century arms and armour. Indeed, both Mann\(^2\) and Boccia\(^3\) have included them in their works on Italian armour. The artist was clearly interested in the subject of arms and armour; this interest is articulated both in the attention to detail and in the actual use of armour as a chronological device.

Military figures of the ancient world, such as Alexander (fol 2825v) and Julius Caesar (fol 2826v) are portrayed in a form of armour *all’ antica*, a blend of the fantastical and the ancient. It is not clear from where a fifteenth-century artist’s impression of ancient equipment would have been derived, although extant Roman material and the artistic record undoubtedly was of some inspiration.\(^4\) In contrast to these pseudo-classical armours, found on twenty-nine of the seventy-eight primary figures (fifty-six of which are of a military nature), there are fourteen figures depicted as being equipped with full Italian armour of c1435-45, contemporary with the creation of the series. A further twelve military characters display various overt combinations of antique and fifteenth-century armour, a good example being the depiction of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (fol

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2824v), in which an Italian cuirass (familiarly comprised of an upper breastplate, placard, and fauld) is combined with fantastical shoulder defenses of the type (a round plate edged with a piccadill-like fringe, from which are suspended a number of ‘pteruges’, a feature often associated with classical armour) found on most of the classical figures.

The one remaining military figure (fol 2825v) is striking and unique. He wears a fifteenth-century arming doublet⁵, complete with arming points and what appear to be lines of quilt-like stitching. His legs are manacled and he wears a crown on his head. Above this he is named (as are all of the primary figures in the series) ‘SIFAX REX’, and below is a biographical statement:

FU TEPORE ANIBALIS

This is an abbreviated version of ‘fui tempore Hannibalis’, literally, ‘I was in the time of Hannibal.’

A brief examination of the identity of this figure makes the artist’s inclusion of an arming doublet in this single case all the more significant. Syphax was the leader of the Masaesylii, a Numidian tribe based in north Africa during the third century BC. He and his followers played an active role in the second Punic War, fighting at various points for both Carthage and Rome. He was

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⁵ Arming doublets were generally referred to as either ‘giubboni’ or ‘guibbonetti’ in Italian. See, for example, the appearances of these terms in the 1492 inventory of the Medici palace (Mediceo Avanti Il Principato, File number 165, State Archives, Florence). Reprinted in Scalini, Mario, ‘The Weapons of Lorenzo de’Medici: An Examination of the Inventory of the Medici Palace in Florence Drawn up upon the Death of Lorenzo the Magnificent in 1492’, in Art, Arms and Armour: An International Anthology Volume I, 1979-1980, ed. by Robert Held (Chiasso: Acquafresca Editrice, 1979), p.12-29.
finally defeated at the Battle of the Great Plains (204 BC), after which he was pursued and captured. He died in imprisonment in Italy in 201 BC.\(^6\)

Many of the depictions in the series include a symbolic context for the figures, as an aid to their identification. For example Samson (fol 2826v) is portrayed with his trademark long hair and jaw-bone club, standing atop a mound of dead Philistines. Theseus (fol 2827v) bears a miniature labyrinth, and Saladin (fol 2827v) wears a turban and carries a curved scimitar. It would seem that the arming doublet found in the depiction of Syphax, being such a specific feature, unique in the series, is meant to function as a signature of identity. It makes it immediately clear to the fifteenth-century viewer that this is a warrior-king who has been captured and stripped of his weapons and armour; his imprisonment, the last major event of his life, is emphasised by his shackled legs. Thus the basic historical significance of Syphax is clearly and efficiently expressed in a primarily visual way.

This example is significant simply because of the fact that evidence regarding fifteenth-century arming doublets, of any sort, is rare in the extreme. There are few extant examples; the arming doublet in the Kienbusch collection at the Philadelphia

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Museum of Art, once thought to be of fifteenth-century origin, probably dates from the late 1500s or early 1600s. Indeed, this garment most closely compares to the arming doublet of Prince Eugen of Austria, which dates from the second half of the seventeenth century. There are also three garments - two in the Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte der Hansestadt, Lubeck, and another in the Altmarkisches Museum, Stendal - which are probably German arming garments dating from around 1430-50. However, these long, thickly padded coats are sleeveless and are not fitted with arming points; therefore it is difficult to determine their exact function.

In the absence of definitive material evidence, representational clues remain the only source of information available; a basic understanding of these garments must then be extrapolated.

The most famous depiction of an arming doublet dates from around 1460, and is found in MS 55 (the ‘Hastings’ manuscript).

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7 LaRocca, Donald, Personal Communications, September 1998 and September 2001. The author would like to thank Mr. LaRocca for making his correspondence regarding this doublet (with the fashion historian Janet Arnold) available. Thread and stuffing analysis (both flax), based on the available comparative evidence, suggests that the doublet was constructed in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth-century.

8 Gutkas, Karl, and others, *Prinz Eugen und das Barocke Österreich* (Vienna: Niederösterreichischen Landesmuseums, 1986, p.181, pl. 48. The author would like to thank Donald LaRocca for this reference.

9 Published in Binder, M. J., ‘Zwei angebliche rocke Gustav I von Schweden im Lubecker Museum’, *Waffen- und Kostumbünde*, 1, 6/7 (April 1925), 191-192, and in Schroder, Almuth, ‘Gestept un wattiert-Zur Geschichte und Bifunktionalitat der Stepparbeit’, *Waffen- und Kostumbünde*, 33, 1/2 (1991), 59. These garments have previously been dated to the sixteenth century; the author, however, believes this dating to be too late. The design of these coats, with their long skirts, dependant dags and centrally-radiating breast
folio 122b-123b, in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. The text relating to this depiction (‘How a man schall be armyd at his ese when he schal fighte on foote’) provides some of the best information in regard to arming doublets, albeit within the specific context of formalised foot combats in England. However, the illustration indicates very little about the doublet itself, other than the presence of a short standing collar. It is important in that it details the presence of mail voiders that cover the underarms (areas not protected by plate) and a mail skirt that protects the groin, hips, and lower abdomen.

Despite the value of the Hastings MS illustration, scenes depicting the arming of knights and men-at-arms are generally not very helpful. They are few in number, and those that do exist usually present the arming process as nearly complete; the cuirass is shown in place, while the squires make final adjustments. Thus the arming doublet is obscured. In a miniature illustrating Hector arming and back stitching, seem to closely conform to the German fashionable taste of c1430-50, and would almost certainly be entirely out of place in the 1500s.

10 For example, see Viscount Dillon, ‘On a MS Collection of Ordinances of Chivalry of the fifteenth century, belonging to Lord Hastings’, Archaeologia, 57 (1901), p. 43-46.
for his final battle with Achilles, from Christine de Pisan’s *Epitre d’Orthea* (MS 8 folio 48, James A. De Rothschild Collection, Waddesdon Manor, c1485), the arming process is almost finished, with only the sallet and gauntlets remaining.

The situation is very similar in a miniature depicting the arming of King Nynus from the French *Romance of Troy* in the Bodleian Library, Oxford (c1470). Again the arming is almost complete, with only the pauldrons, gauntlets, and sallet left to don. Mail is in evidence at the shoulders, and what appears to be some form of arming cap is also discernible. The arming scene most contemporary with the Paduan drawings is found in the *Bedford Hours*, c1430. Again the warrior, in this case Clovis, is for the most part fully armed; his great basinet and sword lie close by on a bench, as do the remaining pieces in two of the previous examples (King Nynus seems content to allow his squires to throw his armour on the floor). One squire is shown securing the right pauldron, while another fits the right spur over the king’s sabaton. Interestingly, the armour in this illustration is very similar to that
found in the Paduan drawings, having such Italianate features as the mail sleeves worn over the vambraces, the centrally strapped placard, and the large circular reinforce fitted to the left pauldron.

Outside of an arming context, it becomes very difficult to be certain that artists were in fact illustrating arming doublets at all. It was not uncommon, for example, for ceremonial or dress doublets to be worn with partial armour in an official or ritualistic context. These could be mistaken for arming doublets.

Furthermore, by 1450 it had become fashionable in Italy to wear non-functional arming points on civilian doublets. This trend seems to have lasted until at least 1490, and can confuse the issue further, in the sense that decorative arming points were mounted on garments designed not as foundation garments for armour, but rather as stylish personal statements. Decorative points of this type are perhaps found at their most prominent in the ‘meeting scenes’, depicting the Gonzaga court, painted by Andrea
Mantegna on the walls of the Camera Picta in the Castello San Giorgio, Mantua. In these works decorative arming points are found on the rich courtly doublets worn by most of the figures. The same feature also appears elsewhere in Mantegna’s work, for example in his ‘Martyrdom of St Christopher’ (Eremitani Church, Padua). Garments bearing decorative arming points were depicted by many other Italian artists in the second half of the fifteenth-century; they appear frequently in the work of Piero della Francesca, Cosme Tura, and others.

Otherwise, depictions of what are clearly functional, military arming doublets are rare in the extreme. One of the clearest, other than the Syphax example, may be found in a donor portrait, c1450, of Don Inigo de Mendoza by Jorge Ingles, now in the Duque de Infantado Collection, Madrid. In this important comparison, the main body of the doublet is obscured by an over-garment, just as is the case in the Syphax example. The doublet is of a different, predominantly Western-European type, having five pairs of points to support the three-part vambrace (made up of an upper cannon, couter, and lower cannon, all separate and not attached to each other) that had become common in Western Europe.
by 1450. Another clear illustration of an arming doublet of this type can be found in a British Library manuscript (*Chronicle of England* by Jean de Waurin, Royal MS 14 EIV folio 14v, Flemish c1470), where it appears on an archer who has either discarded his arm defenses, or has yet to acquire them.

Nevertheless, the difficulties of determining exactly what is being represented, in a great deal of the pictorial record, serves to emphasise the singular usefulness of interpretation of the Syphax depiction.

Unlike the points described in the Hastings manuscript, which are required to be ‘made of fyne twyne suche as men make stryngis for crossbowes’¹² and waxed (probably with beeswax mixed with a resin or linseed oil), Italian points seem usually to have been more ribbon-like, being strips of a textile, probably linen or silk. Attached to the ends of these strips were metal aiglets; even tiny details such was gathered into minute folds at the throat of the aiglets was often depicted. Points of this type, while being clearly the norm on fashionable doublets, also appear

¹² New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS55, fol 122b.
in portraits of Italian men in armour; Bonsignori’s portraits of Francesco

Sforza (National Gallery of Art, Washington) and of an unknown man-at-arms (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore) are excellent examples. This type of arming point seems usually to have been coloured; blue or black points did exist, though seem to have been rare, while red or white points, as colourfully painted by Domenico Ghirlandaio in his ‘Legend of Saints Justus and Clement of Volterra (c1479, National Gallery, London, Inv. NG 2902), were apparently more common. The two pairs of points mounted just below the point of the shoulder are prominently featured, and the artist has been careful to exactly articulate the way in which they are fixed to the doublet.
The function of these points, as hinted above, was to secure the vambraces; the upper cannons would normally have been fitted with leather tabs around their top edges, which would in turn be punched with holes matching the position of the points on the doublet. Each pair of points correspond to a set of four holes in the sleeve; the ends of the points are first passed through the top two holes, and then brought out through the bottom two. This creates a strong anchor point onto which the vambraces may be fastened.

Three pairs of points are present at the hips, although in this case each pair of points are threaded into a single pair of holes; they are not then brought out again through additional holes. However, despite the fact that these hip points are largely obscured, the artist has been careful, again, to provide enough detail for there to be no mistake as to the function of the garment. These three pairs of lower points are placed precisely where they are required to support the cuisses, which would be pointed on in a similar manner to the vambraces, by means of a leather tab that extended above the top edges. The

Figure 24: Italian vambrace of an Italian armour, c1440-45. Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove, Glasgow, Inv. 1939-65e.

Note the leather band, punched with holes, through which the arming points were passed and then securely tied.
points are positioned directly over the hip since it is from this point that the thigh articulates; the cuisse can thus mimic the natural mechanics of the wearer’s body. The points are not brought back outside the doublet because the cuisse must extend under the padded skirts of the doublet (which is split to facilitate movement). This method then, by keeping the hip points inside, also provides them with additional protection from damage.

Since the efficacy of his visual statement depends on Syphax’s garment being immediately recognised as a functional military garment, the artist has been especially careful to show it in some detail. What remains unclear, however, is why he unfortunately elected to cover much of it with a short cloak. This may be an additional layer of the representation of Syphax as a warrior. The over-garment may in fact be a form of giornea, a short cape or cloak that Italian knights and men-at-arms often wore with their armour. Garments of this type are common in the art of the Quattrocento. Regardless, it obscures much of the doublet. There is, however, enough of it visible to both allow it to be clearly recognisable and to give a number of clues as to its exact function.
The basic cut of the doublet is not unprecedented within the context of Italian fashion of the time. While the torso does not appear to be quilted, the hip-length skirt and lower arm certainly are, and possible lines of stitching are discernible on the main upper portion of the one visible sleeve. The skirt also appears to be engrailed along its hem, although since only one side is visible, it is possible that slits are only meant to be present at either hip, possibly to facilitate riding. Both ideas are equally feasible, as other depictions of similar garments show both designs. A study of hanged men by Pisanello, made in preparation for his Saint George frescos (at the church of Sant’Anastasia, Verona), shows a number of doublets very like that found in the Syphax depiction.\textsuperscript{13}

In the case of these examples, the skirts seem to be slit lengthwise at regular intervals along the hems. In one example, quilted padding appears to be in evidence, being

\textsuperscript{13} For this reference the author would like to thank Karen Watts, Senior Curator of Armour, Royal Armouries, Leeds.
comprised of a series of longitudinal lines on the skirts, while on the main body of the jacket is cross-hatched with a diamond pattern.

In another Italian drawing of the same period, an unarmed knight converses with a group of partially armed soldiers. He wears a doublet again very similar to the Syphax depiction, although in this case the skirt only displays a small cut-out around the hip. As in the Syphax depiction, the quilted skirt also displays horizontal lines of stitching, and the same sleeve-mounted arming points are also present.

One must also note that unlike the Hastings illustration, there are no mail voiders attached to this arming doublet. This should not be at all surprising, in fact, it would be quite unusual if mail were in evidence. It seems clear that, until at least 1470, Italian men-at-arms continued to wear a full mail shirt, reaching just below the hips, under their armour. This was often combined with an additional
mail skirt, that extended in some cases almost to the knees. This formed the characteristic ‘double hem’ of mail that can be so frequently found in fifteenth-century Italian depictions of fully-armed warriors.

A drawing by Giovanni Battini (c1460) in the Bodleian Library includes several details of knights arming, one of which clearly illustrates the donning of a mail coat in addition to a longer mail skirt, while the squire stands by with the upper breastplate, which will then be placed over the mail. The reason for this configuration (as opposed to simply a longer mail shirt) is unclear, although from a practical point of view it would certainly optimise the weight distribution (the weight of the mail being split between the shoulders and the waist); efficiency in the bearing of this mail weight would become very important when one takes into account the additional load of the full plate harness. Interestingly, in

Figures 34, 35: Details from ‘An Army Breaking Camp’ by Giovanni Battini, c1460. Bodleian Library, Oxford. MS Canon Class Lat. 81, fol. 49v.

Note, in the right detail, how the squire must push back the mail sleeve to tie the points at the top of the arm. Once this is done, neither the arm or leg points (detailed in the Syphax depiction) are left exposed.

Note also the partially armed squire wearing a mail shirt and carrying a saddle, while another fully dressed and mounted squire, holding his comrade’s horse, wears what may be an arming cap.
the *Uomini illustri* series itself, eleven of the twelve primary figures in full Italian plate
armour display the double hem of mail.

The final detail (briefly touched upon above) in the Syphax depiction that is of immediate import is the inclusion of lines of stitching, prominent on the doublet’s
forearms and skirt. Longitudinal stitching may also be in evidence along the length of the arm. This implies that the doublet has had a layer of padding incorporated into its
construction. This would be essential, for while the arming doublet functions as a
foundation garment, it also must provide some shock-absorbing potential. Without some form of padding, no metal armour, plate or mail, can provide effective protection. This would be especially
important to the Italian man-at-arms, since parts of the plate armour, particularly the large pauldrons, would at times be discarded, whether for combat on foot or as a matter of expediency in the hot Italian climate. In these cases the protection of the uncovered areas was left to the arming doublet and the mail alone (as indeed they had been for hundreds of years previously); stout padding would thus be even more important.
The *Uomini illustri* series, beyond the mentions by Mann and Boccia already cited, have otherwise yet to be studied in any detail.⁴ They undoubtedly contain many more details that should be of interest to scholars and art historians. Yet to those involved in the study of arms and armour, the Syphax depiction is of particular relevance, since it displays, with clarity and style, one of the least understood aspects of the subject.

⁴ Papaldo, Serenità, Director of the Istituto al Gabinetto dei disegni e stampe della Villa Farnesina, Rome (personal communication, November 2000).