

## Polymyalgia rheumatica with temporal arteritis, as painted by Jan Van Eyck in 1436

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One of the paintings most discussed medically is Jan Van Eyck's work in the municipal museum of Bruges depicting the Holy Virgin with Canon Van der Paele (1436); the canon provides the medical interest (Fig. 1).

Ophthalmologists have diagnosed slight divergent strabismus and lagophthalmos in addition to myopia. That the canon was myopic and not presbyopic, as one might expect at his age, can be deduced from the distortion produced by the lens in the script of the breviary he is holding. This demonstrates the extreme accuracy of Jan Van Eyck's painting. The canon probably did not really need these spectacles, but at that time it was an honour and a sign of wealth to wear them since they had been invented only a few decades before.

Dermatologists have commented on the skin abnormalities.<sup>1-3</sup> They have noted several cellular moles on the cheek, a sebaceous cyst on the left ear and a lip epithelioma that was obliterated by restoration of the painting in 1934.

As a rheumatologist searching for signs of rheumatism in paintings<sup>4,5</sup> I was struck by the appearance of Canon Van der Paele's left temporal region. Prominent arteries

can be observed, along with scar formation and loss of hair in front of the left ear and from the eyebrows. Even without a biopsy most clinicians would accept this as the characteristic picture of temporal arteritis. The diffuse swelling of the left hand indicates the chronic sclerotic edema observed in patients with long-standing shoulder pain or the shoulder-hand syndrome, a feature of polymyalgia rheumatica. Even nonmedical observers in the past have noted the special appear-

ance of the left hand. Gambetta<sup>6</sup> wrote in a letter in 1865: "D'une main il tient ses besicles, de l'autre il soutient avec *effort* son breviare. Ses mains sont très belles, quoique *ridées et gourdes*, comme il arrive aux goutteux."\* The words I have italicized support my interpretation that the canon had pain and stiffness in the left arm. "Goutteux" in French does not mean gout in the strict sense but more generalized rheumatic pain.

To confirm my diagnosis I consulted historical documents. The canon had a distinguished career as a papal nuncio. He was born in the earldom of Flanders near Bruges about 1370. By the age of 30 he was already an important functionary, namely clerk to the chancellery of Pope Boniface IX in Rome at the time of the schism between Rome and Avignon. For his diplomatic activities he earned a number of benefices.

At the age of 50 he retired from his diplomatic office and returned as a canon to his native city, where he had a stipend from the cathedral of St. Donatian. From 1420 until 1431 he attended the choral service regularly. According to the minutes of the cathedral chapter he started having his first difficulties in attending the morning service in November 1431.



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**FIG. 1—Canon Van der Paele, in Jan Van Eyck's "The Virgin with the canon" (1436), which hangs in the Groeningemuseum, Bruges, Belgium.**

\*[In one hand he has his glasses, and in the other he is holding up his breviary with difficulty. His hands are very fine looking, though wrinkled and stiff, as occurs in rheumatism.]—Ed.

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13-11-1431

. . . domini mei decanus et capitulum precoperpunt Sigerus Toor, tabulario distributionum chori, quod ad lucrum matutinarum magistrum G. de Pala, canonicum, inscribat quotienscumquo idem magister G. ad matutinas venerit, licet usque ad finem non perseveret† (*Acta capituli*, register D, folio 194 verso).

In September 1434 the canon obtained permission to draw his income even though he was not attending the service. Now the minutes clearly indicate that he was infirm and old: "attenta infirmitate et senectute suis".

9-9-1434

Gratia magistro Georgio de Pala. Die Jovis IX septembris, domini mei decanus et capitulum indulserunt magistro Georgio de Pala quod, attenta infirmitate et senectute suis, inscribatur ad omnia lucra, sive veniat ad ecclesiam sive non‡ (*Acta capituli*, register D, folio 218 verso).

At this time he asked Jan Van Eyck to make a special painting to decorate a wall of the church in his memory. He must have felt so sick that he thought his end was approaching. The painting was finished in 1436. In July 1437 he got permission not to attend the yearly obligatory meeting at the octave of St. Peter and St. Paul.

4-7-1437

Gratia de Pala. Eadem die, idem domini mei, attendentes continuam egretudinem magistri Georgio de Pala, ad eius supplicationes indulserunt sibi quod non foret de necessitate astrictus comparere in octavis apostolorum et die proxima capitulare sequente, gratia tamen alias sibi facta in suo robore permanente§ (*Acta capituli*, register D, folio 244 verso).

†[. . . My lords the dean and chapter instructed Sigerus Toor, accountant of the apportionments of the choir, that he should put down for payment the master of the matins, canon G. de Pala, however often the same master G. will have come, granted that he may not always continue to the end.]—Ed.

‡[A dispensation to George de Pala. On Thursday 9 September, my lords the dean and chapter granted to master George de Pala that, in view of his feebleness and old age, he should be put down for all payments, whether he comes to church or not.]—Ed.

From February 1437 until 1443 Canon Van der Paele is mentioned in the half-yearly register of the cathedral chapter as "infirmus". He died Aug. 25, 1443.

All the recorded health data support my clinical diagnosis of polymyalgia rheumatica. The rheumatic pain with morning stiffness, together with general weakness and ill health, forced the ageing canon to stay home first in the morning, so he could not attend the matins, and later for the whole day. This illness, however, is not fatal and he survived the first symptoms for 12 years, a history compatible with the natural course of polymyalgia rheumatica.

One wonders why Jan Van Eyck painted all the details in the canon's face. Without these details the resemblance would have been just as good. Maybe this is Van Eyck's version of a "medical certificate" to excuse the canon's absence from church. It is still valid more than 500 years later, for it accurately depicts the signs of his illness and enables us to make the diagnosis.

Although temporal arteritis as a specific disease was first described in 1932, by Horton and colleagues,<sup>7</sup> and its association with polymyalgia rheumatica was not recorded until 1964, by Hamrin and associates,<sup>8</sup> the disease seems to have existed for many years. The canon was probably not the only sufferer from this disease in the middle ages. Signs of temporal arteritis can be seen in Pieri di Cosimo's 1505 portrait of Francesco Gamberti, now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. I noted this during a visit to the museum in 1974, and I recently discovered that a German dermatologist, Roth<sup>9</sup> had made the same diagnosis in 1969.

The evidence from these two paintings supports my view that this type of inflammatory rheumatic

§[Dispensation to de Pala. The same day, my same masters, taking into account the continuing sickness of master George de Pala, granted his request that he be not of necessity obligated to appear at the octave of the apostles and the next chapter day following, with however the dispensation previously given to him remaining in force.]—Ed.

disease is not limited to modern times.<sup>4,5</sup> The main reason why it is not noted historically is that the mean life span was too short at the time for a sufficient number of cases to develop and be recognized as examples of a specific disease. Ankylosing spondylitis, in contrast, is historically well documented<sup>10</sup> because this inflammatory rheumatic disease preferentially affects younger people.

I am grateful to Dr. Rafael De Keyser, Faculteit Wijsbegeerten en Letteren, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, for his skilled historical assistance.

[The assistance of Professor Susan Treggiari, of the department of classical studies, University of Ottawa, in polishing my rusty Latin is gratefully acknowledged.—Ed.]

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