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Imagining Christian kingship in Sigismund II Augustus's "Genesis" tapestries at Wawel Castle (1553)

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Imagining Christian Kingship in Sigismund II Augustus's *Genesis* Tapestries at Wawel Castle (1553)

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Introduction

In January 1547, Poland-Lithuania was one of the largest polities in Europe, both in population and territory, and one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse. For seventeen years, it had been ruled by two kings who ushered in the kingdom's so-called "Golden Age." The first, Sigismund the Old (1467-1548), was eighty years old and in poor health. His son, Sigismund Augustus, who had been crowned as co-regent in 1530, was about to commission one of the largest and most expensive tapestry series in Europe.



Fig. 1 Anonymous painter, *Portrait of Sigismund Augustus in Armour*, c. 1550, oil on canvas.
Neuberg an der Donau, Alte Pinakothek.

When the old king died on 1 April 1548, Sigismund Augustus (1520-1572) was twenty-seven, and the last son of the Jagiellonian dynasty. He had no heirs, and was a controversial figure among the Polish nobility and clergy for his reforming sympathies,

lavish lifestyle, and romance with the Lithuanian noblewoman Barbara Radziwiłł. Now, as sole ruler of a decentralised monarchy, Sigismund had to establish himself as a worthy and capable successor to the Polish and Lithuanian thrones. His guiding principle, fairly consistent from the start of his reign until his death, was a general policy of conciliation, religious toleration, and strategic relations with various factions at court, in parliament, and in the Catholic and Protestant Churches. As a result, Poland-Lithuania remained an example of relative peace during the age of religious wars.

In the first decades of his reign, Sigismund's bountiful patronage of the arts reflected the flourishing of his kingdom. The tapestries commissioned around 1547, known today as the *Genesis* series, were the first twenty entries in a collection that would eventually surpass three hundred works by Sigismund's death in 1572. They also form the first part of a cohesive series of biblical tapestries, verdure, grotesques, and heraldry, one hundred and thirty-eight of which are extant. Together, they constitute the largest known tapestry series in Renaissance Europe, with *Genesis* being the most-copied series after Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* cartoons.¹ The twenty works considered in this dissertation depict the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses in a monumental mannerist style inspired by Raphael's *Acts*. The cartoons were designed by Michiel Coxcie, the "Flemish Raphael," with borders designed by artists from the school of Cornelis Floris and Cornelis Bos. They were woven in workshops in Brussels using silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. Each tapestry is a landscape-oriented rectangle between 4.5 and 4.8 metres tall and between 5.3 and 8.9 metres wide, with the exception of one (*Fratricide Conceived*, a portrait-oriented rectangle, 4.7 metres tall and 2.5 metres wide). The twenty tapestries were first unveiled in 1553 in Wawel Castle, Kraków at Sigismund's wedding to Catherine

¹ Magdalena Piwocka, "Arrasy Zygmunta Augusta: 'The art of majesty' ostatniego Jagiellona," in *Patronat Artystyczny Jagiellonów*, ed. by Marek Walczak and Piotr Węcowski, 397-408 (Kraków: Societas Vistulana, 2015), 405-406.

of Habsburg, the daughter of the future Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I. The event was documented by the orator and rhetorician Stanisław Orzechowski in an *ekphrasis* of the tapestries, included in his panegyric of the wedding.²

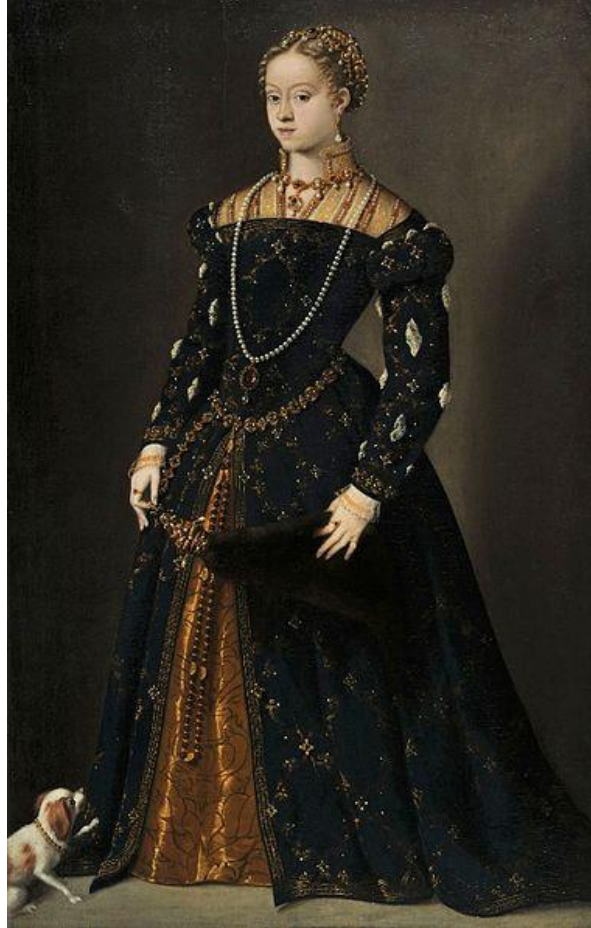


Fig. 2 Titian, *Portrait of Archduchess Catherine of Austria*, 1548-1549, oil on panel. Ölsnitz, Schloss Voigtsberg.

From 1553 to the present, the Jagiellonian tapestries have been spaces of meaning-making for their owners and viewers. In his will, Sigismund Augustus bequeathed his collection to “the people of Poland,” so that they would be treasured by the kingdom for ages to come. Used for over a century in royal ceremonies and celebrations, they were intrinsically linked to the Polish crown, even as it passed from the heads of the Jagiellons to other dynasties. The tapestries’ plunder in 1795 by the Russian army during the Third

² Stanisław Orzechowski, “Panegyricus Nuptiarum Sigismundi Augusti regis Poloniae,” reprinted in Jerzy Szablowski, ed., *Arrasy królewskie w Zamku Królewskim na Wawelu* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1975), 51-55.

Partition of Poland made them a symbol of lost sovereignty and national resistance. Following their reclamation after the Polish-Soviet war in 1922, they became symbols of restored sovereignty and a hopeful future for the Republic of Poland. Today, they are the highlight of the royal art collection at Wawel Castle. Although it is important to understand how the tapestries have become increasingly loaded signifiers for Poland over the centuries, it is just as important to try and recreate their intended functions and meanings in 1553. There remains a common thread throughout the nearly five hundred years of the tapestries' existence, a thread that would have been visible to their earliest viewers at Sigismund's wedding: they tell a story of princely power, and of religion woven through it.

As art historians have shown, tapestry is an ideal medium to question and recontextualise notions of early modern kingship. Indeed, there is quite possibly no other artistic medium from the Renaissance that is so closely linked to kingship. Sixteenth-century European rulers frequently used tapestry as tools for conveying personal images and political/religious agendas. Tapestries were synonymous with wealth, power, and trans-European regnal legitimacy. As court art, they were intended to be showpieces for elite audiences, and were therefore in a prime position to be message-boards to courtiers and visitors. Made with international legibility in mind, they used a common iconographic lexicon that could be read by foreigners as well as locals. In other words, a tapestry was the most magnificent, prominent, and comprehensible artistic medium for broadcasting princely power to other elites.³ Through their medium, materiality, narratives, style, and symbolism, a monarch's tapestry collection is fruitful ground for studying their visions of rule. Frances Yates's and Thomas Campbell's groundbreaking research into Renaissance tapestries has demonstrated that it was common for Sigismund's contemporaries in the

³ See especially Thomas Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002) and *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

Holy Roman Empire, France, and England to use the medium as their primary visual conveyors of personal image and ideology.⁴ This is due in part to the connotations of tapestry with magnificence, as well as the medium's practical benefits, including its imposing size, materials, portability, and potential for narrative and iconographic detail.⁵ The collections of Henry VIII, the Habsburgs, and the Valois have already been considered through the lens of "the politics of tapestry."⁶ Sigismund's renowned collection has not, and is worth being brought into this discourse alongside these other collections.

Genesis is also worth studying because of its potential role as a new primary source to continue ongoing historical work on the religiosity of Renaissance Poland. Traditionally, Sigismund, whose religious convictions and policies seemingly defied confessional categorisation, has been treated as an anomaly to be reconciled within the Catholic metanarrative. In recent decades, historians have worked to deconstruct national myths of the innate Catholicism of the Polish people and monarchy in the early modern period.⁷ In light of these studies that have illuminated the Polish Reformation and religious culture in all its nuance and complexity, it is worth taking another look at the tapestries as signifiers of Polish "Golden Age" kingship and its relationship to religion.

For both of these reasons, it is time for a re-examination of *Genesis* through new methodology, in order to reach a better understanding of Sigimund's kingship and its

⁴ Frances Yates, *The Valois Tapestries* (London: Warburg Institute, 1959); Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 103.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 336.

⁶ See Campbell, *Henry VIII*; Iain Buchanan, *Habsburg Tapestries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015); Frances Yates, *The Valois Tapestries* (London: Warburg Institute, 1959).

⁷ See e.g. Kazimierz Bem, *Calvinism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth 1548-1648* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Howard Louthan, "A Model for Christendom? Erasmus, Poland and the Reformation," *Church History* 83 (2014): 18-37; Natalia Nowakowska, "Forgetting Lutheranism: Historians and the Early Reformation in Poland (1517-1548)," *Church History and Religious Culture* 92, no. 2-3 (2012): 281-303; Maciej Ptaszyński, "Between Marginalization and Orthodoxy: The Unitas Fratrum in Poland in the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of Moravian History* 14, no. 1 (2014): 1-29.

religious dimensions. A combination of historical and art historical approaches is an ideal way to fully comprehend both the context and the content of the artworks.

This thesis studies the *Genesis* series in terms of how the medium, style, narrative, and iconography may have supported Sigismund's nascent kingship in a time of flux and instability. It considers the biblical content of the tapestries, the rise of the Polish Reformation at the time of their commission, the cultural significance of tapestry as the supreme medium of court art, and the grandeur of the series in materials, scale, style, and narrative. From this, the two major themes that emerge are religious leadership and magnificence. Therefore, this dissertation seeks to answer the question: what can the Jagiellonian *Genesis* tapestries reveal about the relationship between religion and power in Sigismund Augustus's kingship?

The *Genesis* tapestries

The following is a complete list of the twenty *Genesis* tapestries unveiled in July 1553. Apart from the lost Moses set and *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* (Royal Castle in Warsaw), all of the tapestries are in the possession of the National Art Collection at Wawel Castle in Kraków. All cartoons are by Michiel Coxcie, and all borders are from the circle of Cornelis Floris and Cornelis Bos. Each of the tapestries includes a short Latin inscription in the top border based on a Bible verse (see Appendix 1).

- *Paradise Bliss*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Jan de Kempeneer. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 480 x 854 cm.
- *Adam Cultivating the Earth*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Willem de Kempeneer. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 470 x 540 cm.
- *Abel's Sacrifice*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop unknown (stamp lost). Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 467 x 582 cm.
- *Fratricide Conceived*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Jan van Tieghem. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 470 x 246 cm.
- *Cain Kills Abel*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Jan van Tieghem. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 466 x 539 cm.

- *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Pieter van Aelst. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 467 x 526 cm.
- *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop unknown (stamp lost). Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 452 x 612 cm.
- *God Converses with Noah*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Pieter van Aelst. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 467 x 525 cm.
- *The Building of the Ark*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshops of Pieter van Aelst and Willem de Kempeneer. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 484 x 790 cm.
- *The Animals Enter the Ark*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Pieter van Aelst. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 475 x 792 cm.
- *The Flood*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop unknown (stamp lost). Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 482 x 842 cm.
- *The Animals Exit the Ark*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Jan van Tieghem. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 477 x 885 cm.
- *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop of Pieter van Aelst. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 481 x 713 cm.
- *God Blesses Noah's Family*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshops of Jan van Tieghem and Jan de Kempeneer. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 479 x 612 cm.
- *Noah's Drunkenness*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshops of Pieter van Aelst and Willem de Kempeneer. Silk, wool, and silver and gold thread. 481 x 610 cm.
- *Moses Sent to Egypt*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop, materials, dimensions unknown.
- *Moses Speaks with Pharaoh*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop, materials, dimensions unknown.
- *The Crossing of the Red Sea*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop, materials, dimensions unknown.
- *The Ten Commandments*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop, materials, dimensions unknown.
- *The War with the Amalekites*. Brussels, c. 1550. Workshop, materials, dimensions unknown.⁸

One question which must be answered at the onset of this study is: why analyse the *Genesis* series among all of Sigismund's other tapestries for this thesis? Firstly, the

⁸ It is worth mentioning that the title given to the series by modern tapestry scholars at Wawel Castle, "the *Genesis* series," is a misnomer if one includes the lost Moses pieces in discussions of the set as a whole, as this dissertation does, because the story of Moses is not found in the Book of Genesis. It is therefore unlikely that the series was referred to as *Genesis* while in the possession of Sigismund Augustus. However, it is an accurate title for the extant pieces at the castle, which include only the Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah stories, all of which are found in the Book of Genesis.

scriptural subject matter of *Genesis* makes them the most literal choice for an exploration of religion and kingship. Secondly, they are the only extant narrative tapestries in the Jagiellonian collection, the rest of which comprises verdure, grotesques, and heraldry, all of which should be studied separately due to their different genres. However, they certainly warrant their own examination, especially of their symbolism, and this would certainly be an avenue for future research. The *Genesis* tapestries are also considerably larger and more iconographically rich and complex than the others, providing more material for close readings. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, the *Genesis* series was commissioned and unveiled at a particularly crucial and precarious time in Sigismund Augustus's reign: a time we can also specifically pinpoint based on primary sources. By contrast, we do not have records of the exact dates of the commissioning or unveiling of the verdure, grotesques, and heraldry, making a study of their relationship to their historical context much more difficult. Because of the known timing and primary sources related to the *Genesis* tapestries, they are perhaps the only choices from the Jagiellonian collection for which a study with my chosen methodology would be possible.

The location of the tapestries within Wawel Castle at their unveiling is a matter of some controversy, discussed at length by art historian Marcin Fabiański.⁹ While Fabiański presents two main theories regarding the rooms in which *Genesis* hung, in this thesis, I have adopted one of them as the more likely: namely, that the Adam and Eve/Cain and Abel subsets hung in the Eagle Hall, the Noah subset in the Senators' Hall, and the Moses subset in an antechamber between them. In Appendix 3, I have included maps of these hanging locations, using Fabiański's work on the dimensions of the rooms, as well as the

⁹ See especially Andrzej Fischinger and Marcin Fabiański, *Dzieje budowy renesansowego zamku na Wawelu około 1504-1548* (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2009); Marcin Fabiański, *Wokół wawelskiego dworu Jagiellonów: Cztery studia o sztuce renesansowej* (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2020).

argumentation for my theory. In general, two major takeaways emerge from these visualisations. Firstly, they allow us as modern readers and viewers to more clearly imagine how the original wedding guests would have viewed and received the tapestries, both in terms of their narrative flow and of their visual/material power. This is particularly relevant for the discussions of style, materiality, and affect in Chapter Four. Secondly, these maps reveal the odd chronology of the series, according to Orzechowski's account: the Moses subset was displayed in between the Adam and Eve/Cain and Abel and Noah subsets. In the Bible, the story of Moses occurs some time after Noah and the Flood. The narrative and didactic implications of this achronological presentation of *Genesis* will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Historiography

This dissertation is located at the intersection of several fields of study, the most important of which are studies of the Jagiellonian tapestries, of Renaissance tapestry more broadly, and of Sigismund Augustus's reign and its relationship to sixteenth-century Polish religious culture.

1. Renaissance tapestry and the Jagiellonian collection

The modern historiography of the Jagiellonian tapestries began after their repatriation in the 1920s, spearheaded by the writings of Marian Morelowski, one of the scholars responsible for their recovery, but was then impeded by the outbreak of the Second World War and the evacuation of the tapestries to Canada. During this time, there were a few short articles published in French, most notably by Marthe Crick-Kuntziger, which gave the tapestries some scholarly exposure across the continent.¹⁰

¹⁰ Marian Morelowski, *156 arrasów flamandzkich Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej* (Warsaw: Marian Morelowski, 1922); Ibid., "O arrasach flamandzkich Zygmunta Augusta." *Prace Komisji Historii Sztuki*,

After 1939, there were essentially no studies on the tapestries in Poland or otherwise, with the exception of a few articles published in the 1960s, coinciding with the beginning of the return of the collection from Canada to Poland.¹¹ One of these was a study by Maria Markiewicz (1961) on the symbolism of the *Paradise Bliss* tapestry, perhaps inspired by the work of Yates on the Valois collection.¹² This is one of only two iconographic studies of a Jagiellonian tapestry ever published.¹³ I will build on Markiewicz's proposals in my own reading of *Paradise Bliss*, where I will put a particular focus on the elements pertaining to kingship, and will apply some of her methodology to the iconography of other tapestries in the series.

In 1972, scholarship on the Jagiellonian tapestries reemerged with the publication of *Les tapisseries flamandes au château du Wawel à Cracovie* in Antwerp, translated into English, Polish, Dutch, and German.¹⁴ This volume, edited by this period's foremost scholar of the Wawel tapestries, Jerzy Szablowski, included an article on *Genesis* by Anna Misiąg-Bocheńska. This text offers significant insight into the stylistic genealogy of *Genesis* (e.g. Greco-Roman models and *cinquecento* sacral art), but avoids discussion of the tapestries in relation to Sigismund's persona and motivations in his patronage, as well as any didactic or symbolic readings. Unfortunately, Szablowski's volume did not ignite a

no. 3 (1923): iii-xiv; Ibid., "Arrasy wawelskie Zygmunta Augusta, ich wartość i znaczenie w dziejach sztuki." *Sztuki Piękne*, no. 1 (1924/1925): 293-338; Ibid., *Arrasy wawelskie Zygmunta Augusta* (Kraków: Drukarnia Narodowa, 1929). Marthe Crick-Kuntziger, "Les 156 tapisseries bruxelloises du Château royal de Cracovie et leur importance dans l'art flamand du XVI^e siècle," *Revue de l'Art*, no. 27 (1926): 1-7; Ibid., "Tapisseries de la Genèse d'après Michiel Coxcie," *Bulletin de la Société Royale d'Archéologie de Bruxelles*, no. 1 (1938): 5-17; Ibid., "Une tapisserie bruxelloise de l'Histoire de Noé." *Bulletin des Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire*, no. 1-3 (1947): 20-25.

¹¹ See e.g. Janina Ruszczyk, "Au sujet de l'iconographie des tapisseries aux éléments grotesques," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 2, no. 4 (1961): 103-114.

¹² Maria Markiewicz, "Iconography of the Paradise Tapestry in the Old Polish Royal Collections," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 3, no. 1 (1962): 9-18.

¹³ The other is Janina Ruszczyk's study of a grotesque (1961), cited above.

¹⁴ Jerzy Szablowski et al, eds., *Arrasy flamandzkie w Zamku Królewskim na Wawelu* (Antwerp: Fonds Mercator, 1972).

new wave of studies on the Jagiellonian tapestries, save a couple of articles by art historians who had previously written on the topic in the 1960s.¹⁵

With the end of the Cold War, Polish researchers were able to reexamine the Wawel collection in light of scholarship from Western Europe and North America. At the time, perhaps the most influential work remained Frances Yates's *The Valois Tapestries* (1959), which revolutionised the study of the medium by providing a political reading of a tapestry set. In addition to her detective work in establishing the identities of the artist, weavers, and figures depicted in the textiles, Yates presented the Valois tapestries (c. 1580) as a deftly-crafted piece of propaganda for the House of Orange. Moreover, she used the tapestries to analyse the politics and image-creation of the two major figures involved with the provenance of the set: William of Orange and Catherine de Medici. In her readings of the eight tapestries, Yates drew on a wide body of sources related to art history, politics, religion, court culture, literature, and more.¹⁶ Although her conclusions have been questioned and rebutted by subsequent scholars, Yates's work established a methodology for studying the "politics of tapestry" that has been adopted and modified by subsequent scholars.¹⁷ For this thesis, I have been particularly influenced by Yates's use of a variety of interdisciplinary sources, and her use of tapestries in decoding both the image and politics of specific figures (here, Sigismund Augustus).

Following in Yates's footsteps, around the turn of the millennium, a new wave of art historians (most notably Thomas Campbell, Guy Delmarcel, Iain Buchanan, and Elizabeth Cleland) surveyed the commissions of the major princely and aristocratic houses

¹⁵ See, for example, Maria Markiewicz, *Landscape in the 16th-17th Century Flemish Tapestries*, trans. Jerzy Dunker (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 1979).

¹⁶ Yates, *The Valois Tapestries*.

¹⁷ Most notably, Pascal-Francois Bertrand, "A New Method of Interpreting the Valois Tapestries, through a History of Catherine de Médicis," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 14, no. 1 (2006): 27-52; Ewa Kociszewska, "Woven Bloodlines: 'The Valois Tapestries' in the Trousseau of Christine de Lorraine, Grand Duchess of Tuscany," *Artibus et Historiae* 37, no. 73 (2016): 335-363.

of Renaissance Europe, and mapped the development of the medium across the continent and the period. They highlighted the importance and ubiquity of tapestry as a trans-European luxury commodity, a universal signifier of wealth, power, magnificence, and legacy. They also outlined the process of commissioning and patronage. Delmarcel in particular has explored the religious, emblematic, astrological, and mythological iconography of the Habsburg sets. Most importantly for this study, like Yates before them, they used the collections of Henry VIII and the Holy Roman Emperors to argue that tapestry was a core tool for princely image-creation and political messaging.¹⁸

In addition to the aforementioned scholars, another relevant work to my study from this movement is that of Pascal-François Bertrand, whose 2006 article presents a multi-layered analysis of the Valois tapestries' political significance based on the relationship between their crypto-portraits of the royal family and the background festival scenes, as well as the commissioning process, materials, and function of the series in the court context. Bertrand's assertion that mid-sixteenth century art commissions could be (and often were) intended to have plural meanings is an important complication that I will be considering in my research. I will also emulate Bertrand in his innovative diversion from older studies of the politics of tapestry (especially Yates): the ideological implications of space in tapestry, and the interpellation of the viewer through composition.¹⁹

However, this thesis is most indebted to Campbell's monograph *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court* (2007), the only major work focusing

¹⁸ See especially Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance and Henry VIII*; Guy Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000); Ibid., *Los Honores* (Ghent: Vermeulen, 2000); Buchanan, *Habsburg Tapestries*; Elizabeth Cleland et al, *Grand Design: Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Renaissance Tapestry* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2014). For more recent work on the "politics of tapestry," see Bertrand, "A New Method;" Kociszewska, "Woven Bloodlines;" Katja Schmitz von Ledebr, *Die Planeten und Ihre Kinder: Eine Brüsseler Tapisserienserie des 16. Jahrhunderts aus der Sammlung Herzog Albrechts V. in München* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

¹⁹ Pascal-Francois Bertrand, "A New Method," 27-52. Kociszewska follows a similar methodology in "Woven Bloodlines."

primarily on the politics of a tapestry collection since Yates. Campbell coined the titular term “the art of majesty,” referring to the use of visual art (i.e. tapestry) to convey magnificence, which I will apply to Sigismund’s tapestries. In many ways, Campbell has laid the methodological foundations for my research. His core thesis, that Henry VIII used tapestry as the main visual vehicle (a “tool of suggestion”) to communicate magnificence and a nuanced political/religious programme, is precisely what I will assess in Sigismund’s collection.²⁰ Campbell explains how patrons played vital roles in crafting the visual and didactic programmes of commissions. Most relevantly to the *Genesis* series, he shows how Henry used biblical imagery as allegory for his own image and contemporary events. In these tapestries, as in Sigismund’s, Old Testament patriarchs frequently featured as avatars and role models for the king. Campbell also argues that the biblical tapestries reveal the complex relationship between religion and kingship, both for Henry personally and for the English Crown as an institution. This is precisely the relationship that this thesis will examine. In order to construct his close readings, Campbell contextualises the commissions, as I will do, among other written and visual media from the period.²¹ Other areas in which Campbell has inspired my study are the inclusion of borders in discussions of the tapestries’ narratives and morals, the links between the tapestries’ imagery and the events at which they were displayed, the understanding of tapestries as moral and didactic instruments for owners and their families, and the treatment of sixteenth-century patrons and audiences as sensitive viewers both to overt allegories and subtler analogies. On the whole, Campbell’s approach can address one of the main methodological issues that necessarily arise in any study of *Genesis*: the establishment of Sigismund’s leading role in

²⁰ Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 79.

²¹ Bertrand also relies on contemporary treatises and other literature in his readings of the Valois tapestries. Thus, I consider a reliance on these external sources to be fundamental in the current methodology for the politics of tapestry.

the commission and its messaging, based on the examples of his peers in their own patronage.

On the other hand, I also consider that Henry's early patronage is not a direct parallel to Sigismund's, as the former inherited a more secure claim to an increasingly-centralised throne, and therefore focused mainly on increasing his own splendour. While Henry's divorce and excommunication eventually necessitated more obviously propagandic themes, Sigismund acceded on more precarious political footing. Therefore, I will adapt Campbell's methodology, an exploration of the commissions of an established ruler, to examine how this may differ for a king striving to solidify and promote his own nascent kingship.

To a certain extent, Polish scholars of the Jagiellonian tapestries have been inspired by the work of Campbell and his colleagues, particularly in the most recent decade. While Western researchers have only mentioned the Wawel tapestries tangentially, Polish art historians have applied some of their methodology to the Jagiellonian collection. Nevertheless, many of the most important scholarly interventions have focused more on the provenance, stylistic content, and material splendour (all of which, however, are topics that Campbell et al do mention in their works on other series). In 1990, Hennel-Bernasikowa convincingly argued that *Genesis* was an original design (*editio princeps*) for Sigismund, as opposed to a pre-made design from a workshop's catalogue, which was the more popular method for commissions.²² Twenty years later, Marek Janicki discovered the most relevant document for establishing a timeline of the commission and Sigismund's personal involvement in it: a 1547 Royal Treasury record for an order of designs (*imagines*) for the Adam and Eve and Noah series, which solidified Hennel-Bernasikowa's claim. This

²² Maria Hennel-Bernasikowa, "Sprawa *editio princeps* arrasów Zygmunta Augusta," *Rocznik Krakowski*, no. 56 (1990): 95-102.

helped to answer the question voiced by previous scholars of Sigismund's interest in the actual content of the series beyond its aesthetic merits and overall grandeur.²³ Studies such as Hennel-Bernasikowa's and Janicki's may not be in direct dialogue with the politics of tapestry *à la* Campbell, but their work in uncovering key evidence of the commission, especially with such a dearth of surviving records, has provided key groundwork for this study. Based on the work of these two scholars, we are able to estimate a timeline of the commission, thereby allowing us to examine its historical context. We are also able to argue for Sigismund's personal involvement in the creative process of the commission, and to appreciate the many levels on which *Genesis* was a groundbreaking enterprise for the European tapestry market. Using this information, it is possible for this thesis to take studies of the *Genesis* tapestries several steps further, especially regarding the tapestries' place within Polish court culture and political significance.

In one respect, Polish scholars actually have been able to go further in their analysis of the Jagiellonian collection than researchers of other European collections. This is thanks to one incredibly crucial primary source: the *ekphrasis* by Stanisław Orzechowski in his wedding panegyric for Sigismund. Indeed, part of the reason why there has been a dearth of tapestry studies since the early 2000s may be that the core question asked by Yates and later Campbell et al, that of Renaissance tapestry as princely "propaganda" (in the words of Jeffrey Chipps Smith), was quite definitively answered.²⁴ What these scholars were unable to discuss in great depth, most probably (and understandably) due to a lack of sources, is the reception of this "propaganda" by contemporary viewers.²⁵ In this study, I

²³ Marek Janicki, "Imagines biblijne, alegoryczne, i historyczne zamawiane dla Zygmunta Augusta w świetle kilku zapisów rachunkowych z lat 1547-1548: Przyczynek do genezy królewskiej kolekcji arrasów," in *Amicissima: Studia Magdalenae Piwocka oblata*, ed. Grażyna Korpala et al, 139-152 (Kraków: Fundacja "Nomina Rosae" Ogród Kultury Dawnej, 2010).

²⁴ Jeffrey Chipps Smith, "Portable Propaganda: Tapestries as Princely Metaphors at the Courts of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold," *Art Journal* 48, no. 2 (1989):123-129.

²⁵ The notable exception to this would be the collection of Henry VIII, for which there are some extant sources on their reception, as discussed by Campbell, although none as descriptive as Orzechowski's

want to propose a new method for reading tapestry as a didactic vehicle for rulers. I want to move away from the previous top-down approach that sees the “meaning” of tapestry as the manifestation of the patron’s agenda. I also want to avoid considering tapestries as “propaganda” altogether, which has remained largely unchallenged since Yates’s work many decades ago. Instead, by including the reception of the tapestries, which is equally as important in the outcomes of image-creation efforts, tapestry becomes a space of negotiation, not merely projection, of power. By expanding the methodological framework, we find that there are, in fact, still many unanswered questions about the politics of tapestry, which warrant a return to the medium.

Although documents on the contemporary reception of tapestries are extremely scarce, *Genesis* scholars have the rare opportunity to delve into the viewers’ reactions and their associations between the tapestries and the patron’s vision. Thus, we are able to at least partially resolve another major methodological issue in any study of *Genesis*: whether the audience perceived the same messages that, we hypothesise, were “intended” by the patron. For many other famous series, this remains a matter of pure speculation, but the *ekphrasis* makes an analysis of *Genesis*’s messaging even more fruitful ground for study.

Despite its generic conventions (discussed in Chapter Three), the *ekphrasis* is the most important primary source for this thesis. However, the only art historian in the past century who has analysed the *ekphrasis* is Marcin Fabiański, who has published two articles

ekphrasis. Most of the documents to which Campbell refers are rather laconic in their descriptions, listing titles and locations in contrast to Orzechowski’s vivid, affective rhetoric and detailed descriptions of the scenes. Perhaps the prime example of this is an excerpt from a description of the “arrasses” decorating Bridewell for the visit of Charles V in 1520: in the author’s words, “my witte is too dull to describe them.” Campbell also mentions two eyewitness accounts of the *Battle of Pavia* in 1549, “detailed accounts” of the *Furti di Giove* at Genoa in 1553, a piece of correspondence describing the same tapestries from 1536, and a record of a conversation between Francis I and the Venetian ambassador to the French court comparing the *Acts* tapestries and *The Triumphs of Scipio*. Other than Orzechowski’s text, the best potential source for studying the responses of contemporary viewers would be the description of the iconography of Mary of Hungary’s *Seven Deadly Sins* (c. 1544), a manuscript of which survives in the Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid. However, to the best of my knowledge, these texts have not been examined in depth in a reception context. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 264, 270, 355, 410.

on the tapestries' unveiling at the 1553 wedding via close readings of the text.²⁶ Fabiański provides some valuable background regarding Orzechowski's motivations for writing the panegyric, as well as the history of panegyric and *ekphrasis* at the Polish court. He also aptly analyses the text for its descriptions of the tapestries' affective power, and includes his own aforementioned map recreations of the unveiling. I will, in part, be basing my own discussions of affect and audience response on Fabiański's contributions, especially regarding the lifelike (or larger-than-life) nature of the images, and the intensity of the characters' emotions and physicality. However, I will be taking his reflections further by delving deeper into the material affective qualities of the tapestries beyond the images they contain, including the manipulation of sight and sound during the unveiling and the impact of the borders.

To date, only two scholars have attempted a reading of the Jagiellonian collection in terms of Sigismund's persona and agenda, thereby adopting some elements of the most recent waves of tapestry scholarship, specifically the "politics of tapestry." The first (and only one writing in English) is Carmen Cramer Niekrasz, whose doctoral dissertation on natural history in Flemish tapestry (2007) presents Sigismund's collection as an expression of magnificence via science, wisdom, and the bounty of creation, inspired by the early modern interest in overseas exploration.²⁷ It is possible that Sigismund may have wanted to evoke mastery over the natural world and scientific wisdom (especially through the figures of Noah and Adam). However, there is no evidence that Sigismund was particularly interested in the natural sciences or overseas exploration. Moreover, at the time of the

²⁶ Marcin Fabiański, "On King, Priest, and Wanton Girls: Looking at Flemish Renaissance Tapestries in Kraków," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 29, no. 2 (2010): 8-14; Ibid., "Renaissance Nudes as *Materia Exercendae Virtutis*? A Contemporary Account of the Royal Tapestries in Cracow," *Artibus et Historiae* 32, no. 64 (2011): 243-276.

²⁷ Carmen Cramer Niekrasz, "Woven Theaters of Nature: Flemish Tapestry and Natural History, 1550-1600," PhD diss. (Northwestern University, 2007).

commission, seminal works in early modern natural history such as Conrad Gessner's *Historia animalium* had not yet been fully published. We also know from library inventories that Sigismund did not have many zoological texts as compared to other subjects, and was generally more interested in history, philosophy, and politics than the natural sciences.²⁸ Overall, I would argue that this reading would be better applied to the *verdures* (which Niekrasz also discusses) than the biblical tapestries, and I will present what I believe to be a more likely reading based on the series' political and theological context.

The second scholar, and the only Polish art historian to explicitly engage with the "politics of tapestry," has been Magdalena Piwocka, who adopted Campbell's term of "the art of majesty" and applied it to *Genesis* in a 2015 article.²⁹ In addition to claiming that *Genesis* is an overall statement of magnificence due to its medium, Piwocka briefly posits that Sigismund's use of nonviolent biblical patriarchs in the tapestries may have reflected his commitment to peacekeeping and tolerance, as opposed to military conquest over heretics.³⁰ I want to expound Piwocka's arguments and go several steps further by considering the use of the tapestries as tools of magnificence, and any other possible aims, in greater depth. I will also delve into the materiality of majesty in tapestries, discuss the implications of style, narrative, and iconography, and provide a didactic reading of the series beyond the reflection on toleration. In this thesis, I argue that we must view luxury consumption not just as an index of power but as a tool of power. The question, then, becomes *how* the tapestries convey power, and to what end. In order to answer this question, we must contextualise Sigismund's kingship in terms of the events surrounding his early reign, as well as primary sources related to the commission, content, and reception

²⁸ Alodia Kawecka-Gryczowa, *Biblioteka ostatniego Jagiellona* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1988), 49, 123.

²⁹ Piwocka has referenced Niekrasz's work in publications subsequent to the latter's thesis, most notably in Maria Hennel-Bernasikowa and Magdalena Piwocka, *Katalog arrasów Króla Zygmunta Augusta* (Kraków: Zamek Królewski Na Wawelu, 2017).

³⁰ Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 397-408.

of *Genesis* (especially the *ekphrasis*). Moreover, one aspect that Piwocka ignores and that this thesis seeks to explore is the religious angle of a reading of *Genesis*, due to the centrality of religion both in the artworks and in Sigismund's kingship. As Campbell touched on in his study of Henry VIII, the politics of tapestry are inextricable from religion in an age where kingship itself was a religious institution. Thus, by building on the groundwork laid by Piwocka, we arrive at the foundation of the historical/art historical methodology proposed in the opening of this thesis.

In general, while Campbell and his colleagues resurrected Yates's political approach to Renaissance tapestry for the new millennium, very few scholars have continued to study the politics of tapestry in the past two decades, even though the use of tapestry as loci for negotiations of power and ideology has been well-documented and remains fairly non-controversial among scholars. In this thesis, I want to revisit this approach and apply it to a series that has not received sufficient attention from English-language research, despite its importance for the development of the medium in the early modern period. In fact, this dissertation is one of the few works on the *Genesis* series in English (apart from museum catalogues) in the past several decades.³¹ Giving *Genesis* a similar scholarly treatment to the Tudor, Valois, and Habsburg collections will bring the Wawel tapestries in closer scholarly contact with the wider world of European tapestry, and address significant gaps in the current discourse surrounding the collection, especially by making a necessary political and religious intervention. Simultaneously, it may shed more light on the tapestry medium itself through a new interpretive methodology.

³¹ Since their repatriation, only a handful of aforementioned articles have ever been published in a language other than Polish, most of which appeared in the period between the 1920s and 1970s. Two catalogues of the tapestries have been translated into English (1972 and 2017, the latter available only through the Wawel Museum), but no monographs have been published originally in English.

2. The reign of Sigismund Augustus and religion in the “Golden Age”

In Polish historiography, research on the “Golden Age” has been fairly prolific throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As opposed to studies of the Jagiellonian tapestries, historical research on sixteenth-century Poland was never necessarily limited to its home country. During the Cold War, especially from the 1960s onward, a few German, French, and American historians wrote important monographs and articles on the Polish Renaissance and Reformation, although the history of Poland was and remains significantly underrepresented in Western historical scholarship overall.

While Sigismund the Old has, on balance, received more attention than Sigismund Augustus, especially in Polish research, the past several decades have produced two major biographies, both of which analyse Sigismund’s religious and political programme in exhaustive detail.³² In particular, the first, a 1988 monograph by Stanisław Cynarski, provides a nuanced examination of Sigismund’s complex relationship with religion and purposely-ambiguous political and ecclesiastical manoeuvring.

In comparison to his father, whose reign has essentially become synonymous with prosperity, cultural and intellectual flourishing, and political strength, Sigismund Augustus has often been approached with a more critical eye. While his successes at domestic peacekeeping, patronage of the arts and architecture, and landmark achievement of the 1569 Union of Lublin (formally uniting the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) are universally recognised, the area that has caused the most controversy among historians is his relationship to religion. For decades, scholars have remained divided on the extent of

³² Stanisław Cynarski, *Zygmunt August* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1988); Anna Sucheni-Grabowska, *Zygmunt August, Król Polski i Wielki Książę Litewski, 1520-1562* (Warsaw: Krupski i S-ka, 1996).

his interest in theology, his piety, his reformed inclinations, and the motivations behind his religious policies.

In the 1960s, two major scholars concluded that Sigismund was not particularly interested in religious matters beyond their political significance. He was a conservative at heart, his Protestant leanings were surface level at best, and his conciliatory policies indicated a lack of political resoluteness and personal conviction. In 1960, Joseph Lecler wrote that “he was easy-going and conciliatory; without showing any definite inclination toward the Reformation, his Catholicism was somewhat tepid.”³³ Gottfried Schramm’s landmark study, *Die polnische Adel und die Reformation* (1965), similarly argued that Sigismund was “more of a prudent than a deeply religious Renaissance man.”³⁴ Six years later, Wiktor Weintraub echoed these conclusions, stating that Sigismund merely “flirted with Protestantism.”³⁵ In 1984, Janusz Maciuszko added a touch of nuance to these assessments, but nevertheless cemented this general view in his monograph on the Warsaw Confederation. While, he argued, it is “difficult to characterise the stance of Sigismund Augustus” in terms of religion, and while it would be “injurious” to make a generalised statement of his “indecisiveness,” it would appear that Sigismund’s reluctance to take a strong stance on Protestantism or Catholicism stemmed either from his disinterest in religion, or his irresoluteness when faced with political pressure.³⁶

It is interesting that all of these studies emerged in the aftermath of a “religious turn” in worldwide Reformation scholarship. In Poland, the state-sponsored materialist Reformation historiography of the 1950s and 1960s had led to the enormous success of

³³ Joseph Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1960), 386.

³⁴ Gottfried Schramm, *Der polnische Adel und die Reformation, 1548-1607* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1965), 294.

³⁵ Wiktor Weintraub, “Tolerance and Intolerance in Old Poland,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 13, no. 1 (1971): 37.

³⁶ Janusz Maciuszko, *Konfederacja Warszawska 1573 r.: Geneza, pierwsze lata obowiązywania* (Warsaw: Chrześcijańska Akademia Teologiczna, 1984), 29.

monographs by Engelsian historians writing for the journal *Renaissance and Reformation in Poland* (most notably its editor, Janusz Tazbir), who posited that the Reformation was an economic and class enterprise with little to no religious motivation. Schramm's *Der polnische Adel und die Reformation*, published at the height of this discourse, was the first major monograph to question this metanarrative, and one of the first seminal works in the Polish "religious turn." In Schramm's estimation, the elites leading the Reformation were not merely cloaking class oppression in religious polemics, but appear to have been genuinely invested in their respective faiths, nor did the Polish Reformation ever take on a revolutionary character among the lower classes.³⁷ Since then, historians have centred the role of religion during the Polish Reformation instead of the purely material motivations presented by earlier works, yet this religious turn does not seem to have impacted research on Sigismund Augustus specifically.

However, in 1988, Stanisław Cynarski offered an alternative perspective: the ambiguity of Sigismund's stance toward religion was not an indication of apathy or tepidity. It was intentional, and, in fact, a brilliant strategy. His closer inspection of Sigismund's religious actions, both public and private, reveals that the king did have a genuine interest in theology, was a very pious individual, and espoused ideas on purgatory, the saints, devotional "superstition," clerical celibacy, and the primacy of Rome that were also found among Protestants at the time. Moreover, his indecisiveness on religious politics appears to have been a conscious and calculated strategy to preserve peace in a diverse kingdom with a precarious power base.³⁸

³⁷ The pioneering works in this regard are: Schramm, *Der polnische Adel und die Reformation* (1965); Maciuszko, *Konfederacja warszawska* (1984); Ambroise Jobert, *De Luther à Mohila: La Pologne dans la crise de la Chrétienté, 1517-1648* (Paris: Institut d'Études Slaves, 1974).

³⁸ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 85.

Nevertheless, after the publication of his monograph, Cynarski has continued to be in the minority in this regard, even until the present. In 2011, Paul W. Knoll stated that “although he [Sigismund] was open to new political and intellectual, even religious, currents, his traditionalism and conservatism ensured that he would remain firmly faithful to the Catholic church.”³⁹ Paweł Kras has taken this a step further, claiming that Sigismund’s personal piety was actually extremely conservative, including prayers to the Virgin Mary and the saints, pilgrimages, almsgiving, and the devotional cults of the Cross and the Eucharist.⁴⁰ Kras does not consider that many of these “conservative” elements of piety were actually shared across denominations during the Polish Reformation: it was not uncommon, for example, for Reformed groups to include Marian devotion or cults of certain saints, and devotions to the Cross and the Eucharist were not solely Catholic staples.⁴¹

On the other hand, there are two major scholars who have supported Cynarski’s overall thesis in this same period. The first is Maria Bogucka, one of the most prolific Polish Renaissance historians of the past century. In a 2006 study on the piety of the last Jagiellons, Bogucka notes that Sigismund was raised in an environment where he was surrounded by theological discourse, including from his own parents, and in which daily masses, religious ceremonies, pilgrimages, and patronage were a constant, defining presence. At his father’s court, the pomp and ceremony of religion took centre stage, including through sacral art and architecture commissions. The model of kingship for the sixteenth-century Jagiellons dictated that outward displays of religiosity were crucial for crafting the image of the

³⁹ Paul W. Knoll, “Religious Toleration in Sixteenth-Century Poland,” in *Diversity and Dissent: Negotiating Religious Difference in Central Europe 1500-1800*, ed. Howard Louthan et al (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 34.

⁴⁰ Paweł Kras, “The Religious Policy of Sigismund I and Sigismund II Augustus in the Reformation Period: Status Quaestionis,” *Acta Historica Universitatis Klaipedensis* 29 (2014): 58.

⁴¹ Howard Louthan, “Multiconfessionalism in Central Europe,” in *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World*, ed. Thomas Max Safley, 367-392 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 379.

monarch and setting an example for their subjects. On the other hand, Bogucka notes that there was no unified standard for Jagiellonian piety across the dynasty: while Sigismund the Old and his son tended toward extravagant expressions of courtly religiosity, Sigismund Augustus's grandfather, Casimir IV, was known for his asceticism. Overall, because of his strong religious roots, his understanding of religion as a core part of kingship, and his overt participation in religious life throughout his reign, Bogucka argues against the notion that Sigismund was an irreligious man. Based on his letters and court records, Bogucka also notes an increase in his expressions of personal and public piety during the illness of his second wife, Barbara, and after her death: a period which overlapped with the production of *Genesis*.

Still, Bogucka posits that the majority of Sigismund's evocations of religion in court culture as an adult stemmed more from established familial traditions than personal piety.⁴² In other words, Bogucka separates Sigismund's private and public relationship(s) with religion. This is the same dichotomy that a second historian, Agnieszka Januszek-Sieradzka, addresses in her 2013 study on Sigismund Augustus's beliefs. While lends more credence to Sigismund's private piety than Bogucka, citing his time in Vilnius (1544-1555) as a period of his intensifying interest in theology and religious politics, Januszek-Sieradzka focuses on the dualism between faith and Church that typified Sigismund's personal and public treatment of religion. Based on correspondences from 1548, the year of his full coronation, she sees this as a turning point from his treatment of religion as a merely personal issue to a political and very public matter. Here, we find direct confirmation of Sigismund's awareness of the power of religion for his persona and politics. Januszek-Sieradzka also notes that Sigismund's donations to churches and cloisters suggest a

⁴² Maria Bogucka, "Renesansowa władca a religia: Kilka refleksji na temat pobożności ostatnich Jagiellonów," in *Ecclesia – Cultura – Potestas: Studia z dziejów kultury i społeczeństwa*, ed. Paweł Kras, 501-511 (Kraków: Societas Vistulana, 2006), 503, 506-507, 510-511.

personal investment in his patronage: there are clear patterns in the cults that he promoted, and he seems, for example, to have had a particular interest in supporting the Bernardine order.⁴³

However, whether or not Sigismund was as personally pious as his public persona would suggest, and whether his personal convictions leaned toward Rome or Geneva, are of secondary importance for this study. Sigismund's personal doctrinal beliefs are not necessary for understanding the project of *Genesis*. Rather, the key point that Cynarski, Bogucka, and Januszek-Sieradzka have effectively made is that Sigismund's kingship cannot be discussed in without considering religion: in terms of the religiosity of the Polish Crown and court, of Sigismund's understanding of the importance of religion for crafting kingship, of the dynastic heritage of Jagiellonian piety (especially based on his father's court), and of the centrality of religion in his political manoeuvring and domestic policies.

It is difficult to say definitively why historians are so divided on the issue of Sigismund and religion, and why Cynarski and Bogucka's view is held by the minority. However, the answer may lie in the contentious politics of Polish religious historiography, especially after 1945. The importance of Roman Catholicism to Polish identity and resistance movements during the Cold War may have made a figure like Sigismund Augustus problematic for a national metanarrative. This is particularly pertinent considering the staunch Catholicism of the other "Golden Age" monarchs: Sigismund Augustus's father, as well as his successors, Stephen Batory and Sigismund III Vasa. In fact, every Polish king in history was (at least in public profession) Roman Catholic, with several converting to Catholicism from Lutheranism to secure their candidacy for the

⁴³ Agnieszka Januszek-Sieradzka, "W co wierzył Król Zygmunt August?" in *Rycerze, wędrowcy, kacerze: Studia z historii średniowiecznej i wczesnonowożytnej Europy Środkowej*, ed. Beata Wojciechowska and Waldemar Kowalski (Kielce: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jana Kochanowskiego, 2013), 278, 280-281, 283, 285.

throne, meaning that the very institution of the monarchy was indelibly Catholic. Sigismund Augustus's unorthodox Catholicism and tendencies toward the Reformed faith challenge the link between Catholicism and Polish kingship, sovereignty, and identity. As Sigismund does not fit the mould of a Polish Catholic monarch, there is a temptation to explain him away as an irreligious anomaly, or (like Knoll and Kras) to argue for his Catholicism, or to largely skip over him in dynastic studies of Jagiellonian piety (a historiographic trend that Januszek-Sieradzka points out in her 2013 study). In the end, there is little room left for ambiguity or complexity.

However, there is a more fruitful approach that has already gained traction among Polish Reformation historians since the aforementioned religious turn across early modern European history as a whole.⁴⁴ Especially in the past two decades, scholars have consistently demonstrated that the religious climate of sixteenth century Poland was anything but black and white. For example, Natalia Nowakowska and Howard Louthan have cogently shown that Polish religion, both prior to and during the Reformation, was incredibly complex and often defied categorisation, just like in many other polities across the continent.⁴⁵ In his monograph *Calvinism in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth 1548-1648* (2020), Kazimierz Bem has demonstrated the diversity of belief and practice even within one religious group or even one family, and the frequency with which nobles vacillated between confessional camps. In short, it would be anachronistic to apply post-Tridentine confessional labels to the heterogeneous milieu of pre-Tridentine Poland—or, indeed, pre-Tridentine Europe in general. In this light, Sigismund Augustus is anything but an anomaly.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Weintraub, "Renaissance Poland and 'Antemurale Christianitatis,'" *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3/4, no. 2 (1979-1980): 920-930.

⁴⁵ Nowakowska, "Forgetting Lutheranism," 298; Louthan, "Multiconfessionalism," 367-392.

The current generation of Polish Reformation historians have also placed much greater weight on the intellectual and theological depth of the Polish Reformation. Among the supporters of this theory, Bem challenges the thesis that “economics, politics, or a combination of both factors was the principal reason underlying conversion.”⁴⁶ Louthan goes as far as to argue that the Polish Reformation was “primarily ideological, as religious leaders of all stripes argued and disputed key theological issues,” including “the most creative and inventive discussions on the Trinity since the christological controversies of the patristic period.”⁴⁷ In general, the religious impetus of the Polish Reformation can be seen in the widespread interest in theological and scriptural education, the focus on international religious exchange, and the amount of religious writing and publishing. In my study, I will adopt the view that questions of ecclesiology, doctrine, belief, and practice, however eclectic, were central to the sixteenth-century Polish cultural milieu. Religion was a major force in secular politics and lay society, including the highest rungs of government.

This allows us to formulate several hypotheses for a reading of *Genesis*. First, contemporary viewers were primed to consider religious content in the depicted narratives. Second, these artworks were intended for a confessionally-eclectic audience; therefore, an irenically-inclined patron such as Sigismund would have to ensure that they carefully navigated any controversial content. Third, Sigismund could not have conceived his kingship, whether in terms of image or agenda, in absence of religion. This stands in opposition to theories of Sigismund’s disinterested and/or purely pragmatic approach to religion. While it is extremely likely that Sigismund’s conciliatory agenda did stem at least in part from the material necessities of ruling such a large, diverse, and decentralised polity, I will argue in this thesis that this is only part of the picture. It appears from my research

⁴⁶ Bem, *Calvinism*, 166.

⁴⁷ Louthan, “Multiconfessionalism,” 383.

that Sigismund's eschewing of force and religious absolutism were not only the result of the obvious futility of such endeavours in a kingdom such as Poland, or motivated purely by financial and political rewards, but stemmed from deeper considerations about the very nature of Christian kingship. Like most other sixteenth-century European monarchs, Sigismund chose to craft a meta-confessional princely persona for a multiconfessional polity.

While much of the religio-historical groundwork for this thesis has been set by the work of Nowakowska, Louthan, and their colleagues, Polish Reformation studies have rarely breached the boundaries of intellectual and print culture. In this dissertation, I would like to apply a similar methodology to material culture. I posit that the *Genesis* tapestries are just as important sources as texts on the nature of religion and kingship in Renaissance Poland. By studying the political and religious issues of Sigismund Augustus's early reign via artworks, I hope to shine a light on a need for an (increased) material and visual turn in Polish Reformation history.

Furthermore, much like the oversight of the Jagiellonian series in European tapestry studies, there is currently a palpable absence of Central-Eastern Europe in anglophone early modern historiography. Scholars such as Nowakowska, Louthan, and Bem have sought to remedy this by publishing in English. However, as Piotr Wilczek explains in *Polonia Reformata* (2016), Poland and its neighbours have been somewhat ghettoised in mainstream Reformation studies, and the few mentions of the Polish Reformation are typically based on outdated secondary sources (i.e. often from the 1940s-1950s) and only those written in English. The same can be said for the history of pre-twentieth century Poland in general, including its art history.⁴⁸ Remedying this, at least for studies of the

⁴⁸ Piotr Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata: Essays on the Polish Reformation(s)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 12-13.

sixteenth century, requires knowledge of Polish, both in its modern and early modern variations. Therefore, scholars writing in English with proficiency in Polish are best-positioned to undertake the necessary research to move Poland from the periphery to the core of early modern European history. As my own linguistic skills allow me to engage in this discourse, I am inspired by the work of Wilczek, Nowakowska, and their colleagues to continue pushing for an expansion of the traditional boundaries of Christendom beyond the Oder.

Discussion of key terms

In presenting the methodology of this thesis, it is necessary to define a few key yet contested terms that will be used throughout.

1. Dynasty

In 1547, the House of Jagiellon had been ruling Poland-Lithuania for 161 years. By 1500, members or direct descendants of the House ruled more land in Europe than any other royal family.⁴⁹ However, the term “dynasty” when applied to the Jagiellons, in contrast to other major ruling houses like the Habsburgs, has sometimes been seen as controversial by historians, as there was no official consensus in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century sources as to the members of the Jagiellonian family. Much like other “dynasties” of the Renaissance, the boundaries and structure of the family were porous and heterogeneous, far from a clearly-delineated family tree. As Natalia Nowakowska has deduced from depictions of the Jagiellons in contemporary texts, sources sometimes presented rulers as descendants of different Jagiellonian kings, as members of multiple houses at once (e.g. Jagiellon and Habsburg), or as members of a vast continental kinship

⁴⁹ Robert Frost, *The Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania: Volume I: The Making of the Polish-Lithuanian Union, 1385-1569* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 278, 282.

network of inter-married monarchs, the “society of princes.” On the other hand, Nowakowska’s research shows that, by around 1510, humanist authors began referring to the “Jagiellon family” more frequently. Royal secretary Justus Ludwig Decius’s (1485-1545) genealogical chronicle *De Iagellonum Familia* (1521) was the first to use the term in its title, while funeral elegies for the death of Sigismund I in 1548 truly popularised the term.⁵⁰ Thus, by the time of Sigismund Augustus’s coronation, the concept of a Jagiellonian dynasty was established within the cultural consciousness.⁵¹

During Sigismund Augustus’s reign, textual references to his father and comparisons between the two monarchs increased the sense of the Jagiellons as a continuous line of kings, and of Sigismund as a continuation of a familial tradition. One of the clearest examples of dynastic discourse can be found in Johannes Dantiscus’s (1485-1548) poem “*Ad libellum, de turbatis nostris temporibus*” (1548):

And indeed, only the land of the Sarmatian
Is safe from these upheavals, and that is because of her two
Kings, he who ended his life recently,
Pious and saintly, and he
Who remains alive so that he might more justly direct
The affairs of state and wield the sceptre.⁵²

⁵⁰ Natalia Nowakowska, “What’s in a word? The etymology and historiography of dynasty, Renaissance Europe and beyond,” *Journal of Intellectual History* (2020): 9-13.

⁵¹ For some of the most important works on the Jagiellonians as a “dynasty,” empire, cultural force, and court, see *Remembering the Jagiellonians*, ed. Natalia Nowakowska (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019); *Jagiellonowie i ich świat: Dynastia królewska w drugiej połowie XV i w XVI wieku*, ed. Bożena Czwajdrak et al (Kraków: Societas Vistulana, 2015); *Europa Jagellonica 1386–1572: Sztuka, kultura i polityka w Europie Środkowej za panowania Jagiellonów*, ed. Przemysław Mrozowski et al (Warsaw: Arx Regia, 2015); *Die Jagiellonen: Kunst und Kultur einer europäischen Dynastie an der Wende zur Neuzeit*, ed. Dietmar Popp et al (Nürnberg: Germanisches Nationalmuseum, 2002); *Theatrum Ceremoniale na dworze książąt i królów polskich*, ed. Ryszard Skowron and Maria Markiewicz (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 1999).

⁵² Johannes Dantiscus, “*Ad libellum, de turbatis nostris temporibus*,” in *Carmina*, ed. Stanisław Skimina (Cracow: Academia Polonica Litterarum et Scientiarum, 1950), 293, in Harold B. Segel, *Renaissance Culture in Poland: The Rise of Humanism, 1470-1543* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 186.

In short, when examining the reign of Sigismund Augustus, it is not anachronistic to refer to the concept of a Jagiellonian dynasty. For the purposes of this study, the definition of “dynasty” is borrowed from Liesbeth Geervers and Mirella Marini’s *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe* (2015): a ruling group with a curated identity based on a family history, props memorialising this history (such as portraits and mausoleums), common social status and religious affiliation, and a dynastic name. This identity was not fixed, but could be moulded across time and space to serve the needs of the dynasty.⁵³

Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that the dynastic prospects for Sigismund Augustus were considerably different than that of the Jagiellon kings at the height of the family’s power in the late fifteenth century. From 1492, the Jagiellons had lost some territory to the Ottomans, Tatars, and Muscovites. In 1526, they suffered a severe blow with the death of Sigismund the Old’s nephew, Louis II of Hungary (1506-1526), and the loss of Bohemia and their remaining territory in Hungary to the Habsburgs. By 1537, Lithuania had lost a third of its territory to Muscovy in a series of wars.⁵⁴ Furthermore, as the only son of the previous king, Sigismund Augustus was highly conscious of (and increasingly paranoid about) the extinction of his house if he did not produce an heir. Therefore, dynasty, past and present, would have been a present issue both in the cultural/intellectual milieu of the court and in the mind of the king himself.

2. Magnificence

When employing a nebulous term such as “magnificence” in reference to Sigismund Augustus’s kingship, we must consider how the meanings and subtextual implications of magnificence changed throughout time and remained flexible as they were expressed in

⁵³ Liesbeth Geervers and Mirella Marini, eds., *Dynastic Identity in Early Modern Europe: Rulers, Aristocrats, and the Formation of Identities* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1-22.

⁵⁴ Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 282-285.

various media. While today's definition of magnificence tends to refer to objects and their potential to elicit feelings of wonder or admiration, examining "magnificence" through the lens of *Begriffsgeschichte* reveals that this is a very modern understanding of the word. From ancient Greece to the Renaissance, magnificence was nearly always considered within a social context of power relations, and referred both to the occasion for which an object was created and the people who had created or commissioned it. It was, in other words, a virtue attached to a specific person: in the Renaissance, typically a secular or religious ruler. The creation of magnificence could combine elements from theology, philosophy, economics, politics, fine art, and literature.⁵⁵

In part, Renaissance magnificence drew on Aristotle's definition from the *Nicomachean Ethics*: a "fitting expenditure involving largeness of scale." The key word here is "fitting," for magnificence must be evoked in a manner befitting one's social status and the occasion. One should have the means to afford magnificence, but it should be done tastefully and with a social purpose (e.g. the construction of a cathedral or a coronation festival), not merely to flaunt and amass luxury goods.⁵⁶ A man with means had a certain obligation toward magnificence, as it was appropriate to his station, and should not be miserly with his wealth. The patron had to find, in Gijs Versteegen and Stijn Bussels's words, "the golden mean between avarice and extravagance."⁵⁷

Seneca understood magnificence in a more metaphysical sense. He saw magnificence in the beauty of nature and in a good man's soul, "pure and gleaming with

⁵⁵ Gijs Versteegen and Stijn Bussels, "Introduction," in *Magnificence in the Seventeenth Century: Performing Splendour in Catholic and Protestant Contexts*, ed. Gijs Versteegen et al, 1-2 (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2; Guido Guerzoni, "Liberalitas, Magnificentia, Splendor: The Classic Origins of Italian Renaissance Lifestyles," in *Economic Engagements with Art*, ed. Neil De Marchi and Craufurd D.W. Goodwin, 332-378 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 345.

⁵⁷ Versteegen and Bussels, "Introduction," 3.

grandeur and calmness...all glowing with temperance and prudence.”⁵⁸ Therefore, magnificence was not decadence, but emulation of the divine order and natural moral precepts. In the Middle Ages, magnificence became associated with elevation above the mundane, similar to Longinus’s notion of the sublime. In the *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas gave magnificence a theological spin, equating it to imitation and glorification of the divine: “In fact no aim of human works is greater than honouring God, and for this reason magnificence principally makes great works in order to honour God.”⁵⁹ Giles of Rome applied this version of magnificence to politics in *De regimine principum*, arguing that princes had a natural inclination toward magnificence by nature of their divine birthright, and therefore, their material splendour should mimic the splendour of the monarchy.⁶⁰ This was the intellectual basis for the magnificence of Renaissance rulers, who created or solidified claims to legitimacy through patronage, and was reiterated in treatises such as Alberti’s *De re aedificatoria* (1452).

In this study, I will be considering all of these ancient and medieval elements of magnificence, as they comprised the definition that would have been understood at a mid-sixteenth-century European court. I will treat it as an established yet malleable imperative of Renaissance kingship, a transmedial concept encompassing nobility, eminence, largesse, political engagement, piety, and cosmic harmony. It will be most important in assessing the relationship between the magnificence of the patron, the court, the tapestry medium, and the biblical subjects. I will also consider the tensions and complications that arise when concepts interact with contexts, and ideas interact with media. In other words, it is not just

⁵⁸ Seneca, “Letter 115,” in *Selected Letters*, trans. Elaine Fantham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 21.6.

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ques. 134, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/3134.htm> (accessed 13 December 2022).

⁶⁰ Graham McAlleer, “Giles of Rome on Political Authority,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 1 (1999): 21-36.

the artwork that gains new meaning through the lens of magnificence, but also our understanding of magnificence that can take on new dimensions through studying the artwork.

3. Authorship

The final term that requires explanation is the tapestries' "authorship." For a collective enterprise such as tapestry, involving multiple artists and weavers in addition to the patron, it is difficult (and perhaps erroneous) to point to a single "author." Instead of focusing on the role of the artist(s), this dissertation considers that the meaning of an artwork is constituted just as much through the patron's motives and vision, as well as through the audience reception. In other words, this is what we can term "situational authorship." While I will not be referring to Sigismund Augustus as the "author" of the tapestries, nor will I argue for his input into the minutia of their designs, I will consider him to be the progenitor of the overall project. In cases of situational authorship, the "meaning" intended by the artist (i.e. Coxcie) can become subordinate to the intentions of the patron, as well as to the interpretations of the viewers.

This does, however, raise one crucial issue: to what extent can we realistically attribute the creative vision of the tapestries to Sigismund Augustus, as opposed to their makers? Although much of the archival material surrounding the ordering of the tapestries was unfortunately destroyed during WWII, we do have records from the Royal Treasury on Sigismund's order of *petit patrons* for the Genesis tapestries on 14 January 1547.⁶¹ Indeed, it was expected for clients funding entirely new tapestry designs to approve these

⁶¹ "Pro imaginibus," 14 January 1547, ASK 1, RK 137, 20r/v, Central Archives of Historical Record, Warsaw, Poland.

detailed renderings (*petit patrons*) and the full-scale cartoons before the tapestry could be woven, as will be discussed .

During his youth, Sigismund would have seen this process countless times over: we have records of Sigismund I and his wife, Bona Sforza, ordering and assessing *petit patrons* for their own extensive tapestry collection.⁶² We also know that Sigismund employed two tapestry merchants, Roderick Dermoyen and Jost van Mollenbrok, who acquired the Flemish tapestries for him and personally supervised part of their production in Brussels.⁶³ However, there is no record of these merchants at court during the production of *Genesis*; the earliest mention of them is a contract from 1559 in the Antwerp *Certificatieboek*.⁶⁴ If Sigismund only engaged tapestry merchants later, this would have required him to play a more direct role in the *Genesis* commission. In fact, as Thomas Campbell argues, the incredible cost of tapestries necessitated the monarchs's direct and continuous involvement in the commission. This was not a project that could be helmed by an intermediary, with little consultation with the patron.⁶⁵ Interestingly, in his panegyric written directly after their unveiling, Orzechowski equally centres the authorship of the tapestries on Coxcie and Sigismund, urging his reader to consider them as an expression “not only of the work of a remarkable artist, but also of the person of the noble monarch, which is most fully expressed through his love for such [artworks].”⁶⁶

Sigismund Augustus had received a model of court culture and kingship from his father. In addition to patronising many humanist scholars, Sigismund the Old realised the

⁶² Szablowski et al, *Arrasy*, 40. It should be noted that this was a fairly standard process of ordering tapestries from Flemish workshops by Renaissance courts, including Burgundy, France, England, and the Habsburgs.

⁶³ Mieczysław Gębarowicz and Tadeusz Mańkowski, *Arrasy Zygmunta Augusta* (Kraków: Rocznik Krakowski, 1937), 16.

⁶⁴ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 20.

⁶⁵ Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 100, 117.

⁶⁶ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in Szablowski, *Arrasy*, 51.

importance of artistic patronage, both secular and religious, and the propagation of princely magnificence.⁶⁷ Crucially, he was not merely the financial patron of these projects: his heavy involvement in the creative process, especially in that of the Sigismund Chapel, has been well-documented.⁶⁸ Following his father's example, Sigismund Augustus made his first commissions early in his reign. From 1545, he employed the renowned hardstone carver and armourer Giana Giacomina Caraglia of Verona, whom he later naturalised into the Polish nobility (*szlachta*).⁶⁹ In the late 1540s, he also oversaw the reconstruction and redesign of the palace at Vilnius and his favourite hunting lodge at Niepołomice, created a painting gallery at Vilnius, and kept sculptors, medallists, goldsmiths, weavers, jewellers, garment designers, painters, and musicians on staff.⁷⁰ His court was renowned for its lavish festivities and tournaments, and he amassed a collection of miniatures, portrait medals, jewels, armour, textiles, silverware, and decorative wares.⁷¹ According to papal nuncio Bernardo Bongiovanni, his collections rivalled that of the Venetian and papal treasuries.⁷²

In general, Sigismund was heavily involved in the greater artistic project of his court, which surpassed that of his father in its productivity, dynamism, and splendour. Having fashioned himself as a philosopher-king, Sigismund surrounded himself with humanists and innovative artists of all media.⁷³ Based on his library inventories, we can deduce that he was familiar with the Italian aesthetic canon, with works such as Alberti's

⁶⁷ Bogucka, "Renesansowa władca a religia," 503.

⁶⁸ Kenneth Lewalski, "Sigismund I of Poland: Renaissance King and Patron," *Studies in the Renaissance* 14 (1967), 65.

⁶⁹ Fabiański, *Wokół wawelskiego dworu*, 180.

⁷⁰ Including pieces by court painters, international commissions by Lucas Cranach, and purchases from Titian and Paolo Veronese. Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 78.

⁷¹ Niekraś, "Woven Theatres," 121.

⁷² Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 72-78; Sucheni-Grabowska, *Zygmunt August*, 169-170.

⁷³ Szablowski et al, *Arrasy*, 40; *Documenta ex archivio Ioannis Morone ad Poloniam spectantia, quae in Archivo Secreto et in Bibliotheca Vaticana asservantur, II pars: 1539-1579*, ed. Carolina Lanckorońska (Rome: Institutum Historicum Polonicum Romae, 1984), 5; *Źródła do historii sztuki i cywilizacji w Polsce 1: Rachunki dworu królewskiego 1544-1567* (Kraków: A. Chmiel, 1911), 178-179, 269.

De pictura and *De re aedificatoria*.⁷⁴ Furthermore, treatises from Sigismund Augustus's reign dedicated to the king echo his understanding of the centrality and nature of patronage at court. For example, in *De scholis seu academiis* (1551), Cracow University professor Szymon Marycjusz uses Alexander the Great, who was renowned for his artistic patronage and cultivation of learning, as an example for kings. As Marcin Fabiański mentions, Sigismund Augustus had been compared to Alexander the Great in past literature, making the implied connection between the two monarchs clear. In explaining the commissioning process, Marycjusz alludes to the role of the patron in the overall vision of the artwork:

“They [the patron] must find a master (*artifex*) who appears superior to others and who can be safely entrusted with the work. They must then describe their concept| to him, that is, the idea of the entire work.”⁷⁵

The finished product, therefore, is the fruit of cooperation between patron and master. However, as Martin Gosman explains, in such cases, the creative agency of the artist is restricted by the political ideology of the patron and by existing court or dynastic iconography. The finished work must, first and foremost, reflect the patron's vision.⁷⁶ All of this supports the argument that Sigismund was the originator of the themes and overall agenda of the tapestries, and that we may therefore refer to them as a vehicle for his image-creation and didactic programme.

⁷⁴ Kawecka-Gryczowa, *Biblioteka Ostatniego Jagiellona*, 293.

Based on his correspondence with his librarian, Łukasz Górnicki, it is possible to disprove an earlier thesis about Sigismund's library, propagated by Kazimierz Piekarski (1932): that he was a dedicated collector, not a reader, and that his intellect was more of a crafted persona than a reality. In fact, Sigismund was a voracious reader, and frequently ordered Górnicki to supply him with more titles for his consumption. Jan Pirożyński, “Royal Book Collections in Poland during the Renaissance,” *Libraries & Culture* 24, no. 1 (1989): 29.

⁷⁵ Szymon Marycjusz, *De scholis seu academiis libri duo* (Kraków: Hieronim Wietor, 1551), B2v.

⁷⁶ Gosman lists numerous other examples of iconographic programmes at Renaissance courts, including Henry VII's at Richmond, Francis I's at Fontainebleau, and Catherine de Medici's Valois tapestries, in which the vision of the patron superseded the input of the artist. Martin Gosman, “Princely Culture: Friendship or Patronage?” in *Princes and Princely Culture, 1450-1600*, vol. 1, ed. Martin Gosman et al, 1-29 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 10.

Nevertheless, it is important to clarify which parts of the commission were likely to have been driven by Sigismund's input, and which were more likely under the creative control of the artists. While we can safely state that the patron had to make decisions regarding the genre and narratives of the tapestries, the choice of style and iconography was most probably Coxcie's. On the other hand, as Sigismund would have had to approve the entire commission before its completion, not only narratively but aesthetically, Coxcie had to choose a visual language that was appropriate for the aims of the series as stated by the patron.⁷⁷ Therefore, we may consider the narrative, the realm of the patron, as the foundation of a reading of *Genesis*, the most fruitful ground for its didactic content. Meanwhile, the visual content devised by Coxcie added detail, nuance, and support to the overall programme of the series.

4. The viewer

Finally, if we are to approach the *Genesis* tapestries both from the perspective of the patron and the viewer, then it is necessary to establish who this imagined viewer may have been.

As the reception context for this thesis is specifically the 1553 wedding, our viewer would have been one of the wedding guests present at the initial unveiling. While we do not have a complete list of attendees, Orzechowsk's panegyric does list some of the most notable figures who were present at the post-wedding festivities at the castle, including:

- Ferdinand II, Archduke of Further Austria (Catherine's brother)
- Albrecht Hohenzollern, Duke of Prussia (Sigismund's cousin)
- Bona Sforza, dowager Queen of Poland (Sigismund's mother)
- Izabella, Queen of Hungary (Sigismund's sister) and her son, John Sigismund Zapolya, King of Hungary

⁷⁷ The tapestry commissioning process will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter 2.1.

- Katarzyna, Zofia, and Anna, Sigismund's other sisters
- Piotr Kmita, Grand Marshall of the Crown (highest-ranked minister)
- Stanisław Maciejowski, Crown Court Marshall (second-highest-ranked minister)
- Florian Zebrzydowski, Court Hetman and Hetman of the Mercenary Army
- Mikołaj Myszkowski and Mikołaj Radziejowski, Grand Treasurers of the Crown
- Walenty Dembinski, royal secretary
- Łukasz and Andrzej Górka, sons of the Starost General of Wielkopolska and Castellan of Kalisz
- Papal and imperial legates
- Other "princes" and "men of note."⁷⁸

Extrapolating from this list, we can ascertain that our imagined viewer would have been an educated elite, likely a royal, magnate, or otherwise high-ranking noble. They would be very familiar with the biblical stories depicted, and would have viewed works of art with stylistic similarities to *Genesis*. In the case of individuals like Piotr Kmita, who spent his youth at the imperial court of Maximilian I, they may have viewed some of these works in person, or if not, then through the circulation of prints. According to Helena Kozakiewicz, the presence of Italian and German artists in Poland greatly accelerated the spread of new trends and styles. From the mid-sixteenth century onward, there was an increase in art patronage among the magnates and, in this same period, art appreciation began spreading from the highest strata of society to the middle *szlachta*.⁷⁹ As early modern Europeans, our viewer would also have been steeped in the propensity toward visual thinking, and therefore primed to seek out conspicuous uses of natural symbolism.⁸⁰

For the purposes of this thesis, our imaginary viewer will be Polish-Lithuanian, as this thesis is most concerned with the negotiation of power and princely identity between

⁷⁸ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dziela w niektórych przedmiotach pisane Stanisława Orzechowskiego*, vol. 2, trans. Zygmunt Aleksander Włyński (Wrocław: Wilhelm Bogumił Korn, 1826), 129.

⁷⁹ Helena Kozakiewicz, *Renesans i manieryzm w Polsce* (Warsaw: Auriga, 1978), 67.

⁸⁰ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966, reis., New York: Random House, 1994).

Sigismund and his own subjects. The reception of these tapestries by foreign viewers (e.g. from Coxcie's own Flemish context, or by Catherine Habsburg's entourage from Vienna, or from visiting royals from nearby kingdoms) is beyond the scope of this research, as *Genesis* in the context of various region-specific literary and visual cultures would be a study on its own. However, due to the universal knowledge of the Bible, the proliferation of important political and theological texts in Latin throughout the "Republic of Letters," and the familiarity of early modern elites with art trends through the circulation of prints and courtly art collections, it is likely that the general themes of *Genesis* would not have differed greatly among other European guests. The exception here would naturally be interpretations based on contemporary Polish politics and political writing, as well as any visual links drawn to Polish symbolic and visual culture.

The gender of our imagined viewer is a potential point of contention. We know that women were present at the wedding unveiling, as Orzechowski mentions many of them by name. In addition to the aforementioned relatives of Sigismund, it is very likely that other women Orzechowski mentions as distinguished guests who accompanied Catherine during the celebrations were also present, including Barbara Herbut-Kmicina, wife of Piotr Kmita, and Zofia Targowicka-Szydłowiecka, widow of the late Chancellor Krzysztof Szydłowiecki.⁸¹ However, the question of whether the majority of female guests at the unveiling would have read the tapestries in the same way as their male counterparts is not an easy one to answer. In 1553, female literacy was certainly lower than male literacy in Poland. Based on Wacław Urban's research, by 1575 only around twenty percent of women in Kraków were able to sign their name, compared to between fifty and sixty-five percent of men. However, these figures were significantly higher for the nobility: by the end of the sixteenth century, ninety percent of magnate women and fifty percent of middle and lower

⁸¹ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dziela*, 116.

noblewomen were literate.⁸² Considering that any female guests at the wedding would have been members of one of these two groups, it is more likely than not that she would have been literate.

Indeed, a certain degree of female literacy and education seems to have been encouraged by contemporary Polish court culture. Aside from the popularity of Erasmus's writing, who advocated for female education, we find the treatises of Andrzej Glaber (1500-1555), a humanist professor of the University of Kraków who argued for full equal access to education among men and women.⁸³ Female intelligence was also praised in the primary sixteenth-century handbook for courtly behaviour, Łukasz Górnicki's *Dworzanin polski* (1566). Here, the author writes that the ideal woman should be able to hold her own in conversation with "everyone with whom she comes into contact," including men, with clever remarks and sharp ripostes. However, Górnicki also writes that a courtly woman must be able to read, suggesting that wit alone was not enough for an accomplished woman in elite circles.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, it is unlikely that a female guest, unless she came from a royal or magnate family, would have been familiar with the same breadth of texts as the male guests. The majority of recommended reading materials for sixteenth century Polish women were religious and devotional, including psalmodies, prayer books, and the Bible. They were much less likely to have read some of the more academic exegetical and political texts used in this dissertation to analyse the tapestries. On the other hand, since the subject matter of the tapestries was religious, and covered well-known Old Testament stories, a female

⁸² Waław Urban, "Umiejętność pisania w Małopolsce w II połowie XVI w.," in *Przegląd Historyczny* no. 2 (1977): 245; Maria Bogucka, *Białogłowa w dawnej Polsce: Kobieta w społeczeństwie polskim XVI-XVIII wieku na tle porównawczym* (Warsaw: Trio, 1998), 171

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 164, 169.

viewer would have been familiar with the events and characters depicted, and is likely to have read some theological writings referencing them. Naturally, women would have also heard the same sermons referencing these Bible stories as men. Moreover, it is worthy of note that private home education for noble girls often included Latin, meaning that women would also have been able to access texts not written in or translated into the vernacular (as is the case with many of the texts referenced in this thesis).⁸⁵

Finally, the cultural literacy of a female guest would also have varied depending on her position within elite society. While women of the lower or middle *szlachta* did not necessarily receive a robust education in the arts, women educated at royal and magnate courts certainly did. These courts functioned as “academies” for young girls and women to learn languages, mathematics, etiquette, and appreciation of theatre, music, and fine arts.⁸⁶ Therefore, these women may have been able to engage in discussion about the tapestries’ artistic merits on a fairly equal playing field with men. While they may not have travelled to Italy to see similar works as some of the male guests had done, they would have appreciated the skill, style, and influences that went into creating these artworks.

With all this said, it would be overly simplistic to state that a female guest would or would not have been able to appreciate the content of *Genesis* in the same way as a male guest. This would depend on their social situation and correlated educational background. However, it is more than likely that a woman present at the unveiling would have had the education necessary to read *Genesis* beyond the surface level in some capacity. She may not have been able to draw comparisons with patristic exegesis or recent political treatises, but she would have had enough theological background to understand the implications of the scenes and the morals they contained. In addition, those from magnate and royal

⁸⁵ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 174.

families would have possessed the cultural capital to view *Genesis* as spectacular and innovative artworks, perhaps even being able to draw comparisons between the tapestries and the Italian and Flemish works that inspired them.

The female viewing context of *Genesis* in comparison to that of men is a topic worthy of study on its own, but it is beyond the scope of this research. For the purposes of this thesis, I will not be distinguishing whether or not a female viewer is likely to have picked up on each element of my reading. Without records of the names of the guests, or of the texts in typical curricula for noblewomen, this would require too much speculation. When referring to “the viewer” in this thesis, I assume that the default viewer is male, as, most probably, the patron himself would have done. Because a primary focus of this research is how Sigismund tried to communicate to his viewer through tapestries, we must conclude that he was most interested in appealing to the political class, to people who held secular and ecclesiastical power: mostly, elite men. However, as discussed here, this is not to say that the majority of female guests would not have been able to appreciate *Genesis* in similar ways, both narratively and stylistically, even though they were not the target audience of the commission.

The viewership of *Genesis* in other display contexts is also outside the purview of this thesis. While we know that Sigismund’s tapestry collection did travel with him to his various residences, we have no documented evidence of their use at other specific events, any information regarding their display locations within these residences, or any other primary sources like Orzechowski’s detailing their reception on subsequent occasions. Based on mentions of tapestry repairs in Royal Treasury records, we only know that at least some of his collection hung in Vilnius at least as early as 1559, and in Krasnystaw in 1560.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ These documents are noted in Birutė Rūta Vitkauskienė, “XVI-XVIII a. Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės valdovų rūmai istoriniuose šaltiniuose,” in *Vilniaus Žemutinė pilis XIV a. – XIX a.*

From Sigismund's 1571 will, we know that many of the tapestries were at his beloved castle at Tykocin, where he spent much of the final years of his life and kept most of his most expensive treasures.⁸⁸ Beyond this, we have no information about the occasions or precise locations of the tapestries' display.

Finally, it must be mentioned that Michiel Coxcie's possible intentions behind certain choices in style and iconography, as well as a reading of the tapestries in the Flemish context, is also beyond the scope of this thesis. The aforementioned approach of situational authorship allows us to recentre the discussion on Sigismund and his viewers, which is more relevant to a reading of the tapestries in terms of Sigismund's image and agenda. However, the obvious Flemish style of the tapestries and its significance for Sigismund's image in the eye of the viewer is a relevant point for my analysis, and will be discussed in Chapters Four and Six.

Reading tapestry

1. Method

As I have alluded in the Historiography section, a full and holistic reading of a tapestry cannot focus only on materials, or symbolism, or expressions of a single theme, but must consider a plurality of potential meanings. The reading should, therefore, be multi-layered and interdisciplinary, using a variety of external sources to understand the tapestry, and considering both the potential vision of the patron and the various receptive contexts of the audience. I propose the following steps that add up to a political reading of Renaissance tapestry, which I will be applying in my thesis:

pradžioje. 2002–2004 m. istorinių šaltinių paieškos, ed. Raimonda Ragauskienė, 72-242 (Vilnius: Lietuvos pilys, 2006), 226-228.

⁸⁸ Ieva Jedzinskaitė-Kuizininė, *Tapestries of the Palace of The Grand Dukes of Lithuania*, trans. Albina Strunga (Vilnius: Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, 2012), 37.

1. The tapestry medium as a signifier of magnificence, wealth, elite social status, cultural capital, dynastic heritage, longevity, and stability of one's power.⁸⁹
2. The intentions behind the timing of the commission, e.g. to celebrate wealth, victory, and prosperity, to herald a new reign or marriage, to support an image of power in unstable times, etc. In other words, the commission must be contextualised within the surrounding historical events pertaining to the patron and audience.⁹⁰
3. The connotations of the chosen genre in a domestic/regional context and in the context of the European tapestry market: in this case, the biblical genre as an index of princely power, image-creation, and political/religious messaging.⁹¹ Here, and in all of the following stages, we may also look for references to other popular tapestry series, either visually or narratively, to assess whether the work is in direct dialogue with its contemporaries at other courts.
4. The materiality of tapestry and its effect on audience reception, including its size, weight, colours, textures, impact on light and sound, display location, etc.⁹²
5. The style(s) of the tapestries (e.g. for *Genesis*, mannerism and Netherlandish grotesque), its connotations in the courtly art sphere, and its affective and didactic potential for the viewer.⁹³
6. The moral, political, and religious messages emerging from the narratives and protagonists of the series. Here, relevant external texts (literary, political,

⁸⁹ See e.g. Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance and Henry VIII*; Buchanan, *Habsburg Tapestries*; Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*.

⁹⁰ Ibid.; see also Bertrand, "A New Method."

⁹¹ See e.g. Campbell, *Henry VIII*.

⁹² See e.g. Susanna Burgharz et al, "Introduction: Materializing Identities: The Affective Values of Matter in Early Modern Europe," in *Materialized Identities in Early Modern Culture, 1450-1750: Objects, Affects, Effects*, ed. Susanna Burghartz et al, 23-54 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021); Catherine Richardson and Tara Hamling, "Ways of Seeing Early Modern Decorative Textiles," *Textile History* 47, no. 1 (2016): 4-26.

⁹³ See e.g. Cleland et al, *Grand Design*; Piwocka, "Art of majesty," Ibid., "Nie Tylko Rafael...O kilku rzymskich inspiracjach w projektach Michiela Coxciena do arrasów Zygmunta Augusta," in *Żeby Wiedzieć*, ed. Wojciech Walanus et al (Kraków: Letra-Graphic, 2008), Anna Misiąg-Bocheńska, "Arrasy biblijne: Sceny z księgi Genesis," in *Arrasy*, ed. Szablowski, 73-188.

exegetical, theological, historical, etc.) should be used to contextualise the messages, and to assess whether the patron's intentions and the audience reception would have converged or diverged.⁹⁴

7. Potential use of iconography in the tapestries and borders, either specific to the display location or within the wider European symbolic lexicon, and its implications for the overall messaging of the series.⁹⁵

This seven-step process illuminates the need for an interdisciplinary reading of tapestry, one that combines methodology both from history and from art history. History sets the scene of the commission and contextualises it within the political, religious, social, economic, and cultural environment, whereas art history brings issues of style, iconography, and materiality to light. Both disciplines are required to fully answer questions of the patron's intentions and vision, and of the audience's reception.

With the exception of the first point in the method, we must remember that, in absence of external sources definitively stating the patron's or artist's intentions, any themes, references, or symbolism that a researcher may find cannot be regarded as absolute. However, depending on the nature of the series and the intellectual/cultural milieu of the patron's court, certain assumptions can be made: if not necessarily about intentional references, then about references that courtly viewers would have found themselves.

In the case of *Genesis*, although we do not have any surviving contracts or documents from the artists or workshops, and only have scant records of the commission from the patron's side (as will be discussed in Chapter 2.1), we do have the biblical inscriptions in each tapestry's top border. These give us some information as to the overall

⁹⁴ See e.g. Campbell, *Henry VIII*; Bertrand, "A New Method."

⁹⁵ See e.g. Markiewicz, "Iconography;" Schmitz von Ledeber, *Die Planeten*.

moral(s) of the episode, major narrative beats, or characterisation of the protagonists as imagined by the artists and approved by the patron. The inscriptions will be discussed in reference to the series's hermeneutic content in Chapter Five.

Regarding the audience reception, the only extant document is the *ekphrasis*, but it is important to note in general that the first two generations of sixteenth-century Polish nobles were, on the whole, well-educated, and many families had a profound interest in learning. At the turn of the century, there was an increased interest in rigorous education among the nobles stemming from the rising fashion of Italian humanism at the Wawel court, spurred by Sigismund the Old's Italian Neoplatonist tutor, Filippo "Callimachus" Buonaccorsi.⁹⁶ The vogue of humanist education and the conservatism and scholarly decline of Kraków University led to the popularity of studying abroad at prestigious schools, particularly in Italy (Padua, Bologna, Rome) as well as in Königsberg, Wittenberg, Nuremberg, Leipzig, and Basel, despite Sigismund the Old's repeated edicts prohibiting attendance at Protestant institutions.⁹⁷ As the Reformation gained momentum in subsequent decades, it took on an increasingly intellectual character on both sides, as can be deduced from the boom in publishing of religious polemics, catechisms, synodal acts, and confessions of faith around the time of the Council of Trent.⁹⁸ According to Gottfried Schramm, the intense theological debates among nobles in the capital region of Małopolska in particular were possible only due to the high level of religious and humanist education among the region's elites.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Jerzy Kłoczowski, *A History of Polish Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 91.

⁹⁷ Bem, *Calvinism*, 18; Pirożyński, "Royal Book Collections," 21.

⁹⁸ Waldemar Kowalski, "'To jest owczarnia onego dobrego pasterza': Pojęcie prawdziwego Kościoła w polskich szesnastowiecznych katechizmach," *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* 60 (2016): 29-71.

⁹⁹ Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*, 41.

In the case of the *Genesis* tapestries, even more opaque exegetical nods would not have gone unnoticed by many viewers, considering the popularity of scriptural studies and hermeneutics during the Polish Reformation. As David A. Frick notes, Lorenzo Valla's *Adnotationes in Novum Testamentum* (1443) and Erasmus's commentaries would have been cornerstones in the humanist education of elite religious actors of all denominations.¹⁰⁰ Instead of the dry and abstract scholastic approach, the humanists pushed for a return to intensive philological study (*philologia sacra*) of the original sources.¹⁰¹ References to other texts, such as ancient literature, contemporary treatises, or emblem books would likely depend on the educational background of the individual audience member. However, the tapestries were commissioned as pieces of court art, to be displayed at royal palaces when the king was in residence and travel with him and his entourage. Therefore, it is safe to assume that the majority of viewers would have possessed the intellectual and cultural background to decipher their meanings, or posit their own interpretations, beyond the surface level.

2. Primary sources

In order to construct my reading of the tapestries according to the aforementioned methodology, I will use a variety of primary sources. The only eyewitness account of the unveiling is *Panegyricus nuptiarum Sigismundi Augusti regis Poloniae*, written by Stanislaw Orzechowski for the 1553 wedding. The text recounts their original placement within Wawel Castle, their chronology, the reactions of the guests, and the author's own interpretations of their themes and morals. Orzechowski's panegyric and the *ekphrasis* it

¹⁰⁰ David A. Frick, *Polish Sacred Philology in the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1989, 6.

¹⁰¹ Tomasz Nastulczyk, "List dedykacyjny Mikołaja Radziwiłła jako program ideowy "Biblii Brzeskiej." Wokół humanistycznych kontekstów i uwarunkowań studiów biblijnych," *Tematy i Konteksty* 4 (2014): 36-45.

contains is perhaps the most valuable source for this project, as it offers a window into the reception, affective potential, and audience readings of the series as they were first displayed.

The problems of using a text abiding by generic and rhetorical conventions as an “eyewitness account” will be discussed in Chapter Three. However, it must be mentioned that the use of panegyric for art history is itself somewhat controversial. In the eighteenth century, the term “panegyric” took on a pejorative meaning in English literary criticism, synonymous with exaggerated praise of any person or thing and used to ridicule poetry. Unfortunately, this connotation has endured to the present day. This is not, however, how sixteenth-century authors viewed the genre. In fact, one of its most vocal proponents was Erasmus, the most popular humanist in Poland at the time. Erasmus defined the panegyric as “exhorting to virtue under pretext of praise.” He and other Renaissance authors understood the genre in its classical contexts: in ancient Greece, the panegyric was a speech delivered at a festival, and in the late Roman Empire, it was an oration in praise of a public figure, usually the emperor.¹⁰² As opposed to eighteenth-century panegyrics, these texts were very much considered to be “serious” literature and given immense socio-political importance.¹⁰³ However, according to Erasmus, a panegyric should be aimed primarily at the instruction of the monarch, much like *specula principum*:

Those persons who think panegyrics are nothing but flattery, appear not to know with what design this kind of writing was invented by men of great sagacity, whose object it was, that by having the image of virtue put before them, bad princes might be made better, the good encouraged, the ignorant instructed, the mistaken set right,

¹⁰² James D. Garrison, *Dryden and the Tradition of Panegyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 18-21.

¹⁰³ Stijn Bussels, “The Wondrous Town Hall of Amsterdam: Laudatory Poems on the Impact of Art and Architecture,” in *The Places of Early Modern Criticism*, ed. Gavin Alexander et al, 155-175 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 175.

the wavering quickened, and even the abandoned brought to some sense of shame.¹⁰⁴

Based on these contemporary definitions, the panegyric emerges as an incredibly fruitful source on the understanding of kingship at the Polish court. However, because of the necessarily laudatory nature of the genre and the possible political or didactic aims that may obscure the author's reports of the actual artworks, a panegyric cannot simply be taken at face-value as an objective "eyewitness" account of the proceedings. Still, the generic constraints and political involvement of panegyrics do not detract from the fact that their authors could provide perceptive insight into the artwork, courts, and personages they described.¹⁰⁵

Orzechowski's panegyric is, in fact, an atypical case, as it was not commissioned by the king, and the author was not financially compensated. Orzechowski presented the text to the king as a gift in an effort to secure the vacant position of court chronicler. Therefore, Orzechowski used his *ekphrasis* of the tapestries as a commentary on the magnificence and princely virtues that he believed they depicted—or, on what he believed the king intended them to depict. It is important to remember that the panegyric is not the king's own expression of his magnificence via the pen of a hired author, but an articulation of Sigismund's kingship as perceived by an external actor. In this way, while the *ekphrasis* does not necessarily give us insight into the king's own vision behind the tapestries, it is an invaluable glimpse into how a guest at the unveiling may have viewed the series and understood their relationship to their patron.

¹⁰⁴ Erasmus, "Epistle 177," *The Epistles of Erasmus*, trans. Francis Morgan Nichols, 3 vols. (London, 1901), I, 366.

¹⁰⁵ Bussels, "The Wondrous Town Hall," 175.

Alongside the panegyric, my reading of the narrative content of the tapestries will be based on the scriptural texts in the Vulgate as well as patristic, mediaeval, and Renaissance theology and exegesis. I will also draw on contemporary Polish political literature and primary sources such as parliamentary records and letters to situate the tapestries within the historical context of Sigismund's early reign and assess any potential references to current events or issues. The visual reading will be based on stylistic and iconographic comparisons to other artworks (ancient and contemporary, in Poland and abroad), symbolism in the Book of Genesis, mediaeval bestiaries, emblem books, and contemporary literature.

These materials form a diverse body of primary sources, but I propose that they are all relevant in an assessment of kingship and religion in Polish court art. They all address different aspects of the religious, social, and political context of the tapestry commission and unveiling. As primary sources, many of which were written by players in these events or observers at court, they bring us as close as possible to replicating the climate of Sigismund Augustus's early reign. They also all tie into different facets of kingship and magnificence, including wisdom, erudition, piety, wealth, political acumen, and esoteric knowledge. Furthermore, if we are to argue for situational authorship and plural meaning-making, then we must consider many bodies of knowledge with which the king and the original audience may have been familiar, and which may have informed the commission and its contemporary readings.

Having outlined my methodology, I will begin Chapter One by exploring the questions: why did Sigismund commission tapestry specifically among all possible media, and why make such an expensive commission at that specific time? I will consider the king's potential motivations for choosing the tapestry medium due to its cultural capital, the material and spatial qualities of tapestry in conveying magnificence, and the context

surrounding Sigismund that may have made such an extravagant purchase a wise strategy at that particular moment. This political and religious backdrop will also allow us to consider the context in which the viewer would have read the tapestries in 1553. In Chapter Two, I will expand the discussion from the domestic to the international context, and question the political significance of the *Genesis* commission in light of other tapestry commissions across Europe around the same time. Was Sigismund conforming to established models of kingship across the continent, or trying to set himself apart from his princely peers, or perhaps both? Moreover, what was the significance of the biblical tapestry genre for patrons at the time?

After establishing the motivations for the commission, in the following chapters, I will provide a layered reading of the tapestries. I will examine their methods of conveying princely power, facilitating Sigismund's image-creation, and communicating the new king's political and religious vision for his kingdom during his reign. In Chapter Three, I will embark on a close reading of the *ekphrasis*, which reveals much about the perceived messaging of the tapestries, and especially their relationship to Sigismund's princely persona. In Chapters Four through Six, I will analyse *Genesis* in terms of its style (specifically mannerism and Netherlandish grotesque), its narrative and exegetical content, and its iconography.

Chapter One: The Reasons for the Commission

Sigismund Augustus had not even been crowned sole ruler of Poland before he made an exorbitant, labour-intensive, and time-consuming commission using a medium that was the primary European cultural signifier of majesty. The first step in analysing this commission is to explore the intentions behind this decision. Given the scale and expense of the *Genesis* series, it is reasonable to assume that this was a conscious choice on the part of the king to make a clear and impactful statement upon his accession, both to his fellow princes and to his elite subjects. Therefore, we must interrogate the possible reasons behind this choice. While the ideological reasoning behind the choices of tapestry themes will be explored in subsequent chapters, we may begin with an exploration of the medium's significance for royal patrons. Following this, we may consider the political and religious issues surrounding Sigismund's early reign which may have motivated him to make the commission when he did.

In short, this chapter will seek to answer two questions: why make such an expensive commission as tapestry, and why make the commission at this particular time? Because this thesis considers not only the agency of Sigismund as the patron but also of the viewers as co-agents in meaning-making, our timeline will cover events from the estimated start of the commission (January 1547) to the moment of unveiling (July 1553). In this way, we can understand the context in which Sigismund devised the commission, in which he continued to collaborate on it during the production process, and in which the viewer beheld the finished artworks at the wedding celebration.

1.1. The Medium of Princes

In the late 1540s, tapestry had an unquestioned reputation as the ultimate artistic expression of wealth and magnificence, with figural tapestry as the most expensive and coveted subgenre. This was largely due to the centuries-long patronage of tapestry workshops by the Burgundian court, and their continued propagation by the Habsburgs in particular. Tapestry's status as luxury art was not arbitrary, however; there was good reason for its exorbitant cost. The production of one piece was a multi-step and years-long process involving cartoonists, border artists, weavers, dyers, and merchants. Many of the tapestries in royal collections used gold thread, which could increase their price by up to ten times that of a standard wool-and-silk weaving.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, as delicate yet portable art, tapestries required considerable labour to maintain and transport, and so patrons had to have the means to keep a wardrobe as part of their household.¹⁰⁷ Thus, by virtue of their cost alone, tapestry was a prerogative of the highest societal echelon.¹⁰⁸

Documentation on the financing of *Genesis* is very scarce, as Sigismund instructed his sister Anna to destroy all records of the commissioning process upon his death. Perhaps this was an attempt to conceal the truly exorbitant costs (and necessary loans) that had been necessary to fund such a project.¹⁰⁹ What we do know is that Sigismund took out a loan of 72 000 florins in 1560 from the Loitz bank in Gdańsk. On 1 January 1561, Sigismund wrote to his advisor Jacob Herbrodt of Augsburg, stating that he owed 79 404 florins and 6 groschen for "certain jewels, as well as hangings woven in gold and silk," This sum was to be paid off in three annual instalments via lumber and wood products sent to Gdańsk from

¹⁰⁶ Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 17; Bertrand, "A New Method," 37.

¹⁰⁷ Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 23.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

¹⁰⁹ Jedzinskaitė-Kuiziniene, *Tapestries*, 20.

Polish-Lithuanian forests.¹¹⁰ It is very likely that this is the same loan as the one taken out in 1560, with added interest. To put this amount in perspective, Sigismund loaned 100 000 thalers (approx. 119 000 florins) from the Loitz Bank for the Livonian War in 1559. Thus, at this point in his reign, Sigismund was spending about two-thirds of the cost of a military campaign on tapestries. To use another point of comparison, his annual income from Lithuania alone was 500 000 thalers (approx. 595 000 florins), and Catherine's dowry, excluding jewels, gowns, and silver ingots, totaled 100 000 florins.¹¹¹ *Genesis* was also an exorbitant expense compared to past tapestry commissions at Wawel, even taking inflation into account: in 1526, Bona Sforza ordered sixteen tapestries from Antwerp (without gold thread) measuring 200 cubits total (approx. 228.6 m) for only 205 florins and 10 groschen, while her husband's 1533 order of ninety-two heraldics from Bruges at around 1480 cubits (approx. 1691.6 m) totalled over 1170 florins.¹¹²

The 1560 loan is unlikely to have been equivalent to the cost of *Genesis*, as it was taken out over a decade after the start of the commissioning process and six years after the tapestries' delivery. However, we know that it took Sigismund much longer to pay off his 1559 tapestry debts than promised: in 1570, he still owed the Loitzes 29 317 florins and 6 groschen, including interest.¹¹³ Considering that it took Sigismund over a decade to pay off 72 000 florins for unnamed tapestries, it is possible that some of the debts from *Genesis* may have carried over into the amount he loaned from the Loitzes a decade after he commissioned his first set.

¹¹⁰ Maria Hennel-Bernasikowa, *Dzieje arrasów króla Zygmunta Augusta* (Kraków : Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2011), 21-22, see also Ryszard Szmydki, "Kredytowe źródła finansowania tapiserii Zygmunta Augusta a ich wartość materialna w XVII wieku," *Barok* 17, no. 1 (2010): 13-19.

¹¹¹ Jedzinskaitė-Kuizininė, *Tapestries*, 23-25; Małgorzata Duczmał, *Jagiellonowie* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1996), 313.

¹¹² Jedzinskaitė-Kuizininė, *Tapestries*, 19; Gębarowicz and Mańkowski, *Arrasy*, 182.

¹¹³ Irena Kaniewska, *Księga ekspedycji kancelarii nadwornej 1559-1572: Materiały do dziejów dworu królewskiego* (Kraków: Historia Jagiellonica, 1997), 34.

The only other hint we have about the possible costs of Sigismund's tapestries comes from his contract with his tapestry merchant, Roderick Dermoyen, in 1559, in which Sigismund promises a sum of 12 000 florins for gold and silk tapestries.¹¹⁴ Since we do not know which tapestries were included in this order, if they are even among the surviving collection at Wawel, or how many tapestries this amount covered, it is impossible to use this figure to estimate the cost of *Genesis*.

Notably, the wide-scale lumber campaign mentioned in the 1561 letter to Herbrodt had been carried out since at least 1549: in other words, during the commissioning of the original *Genesis* set.¹¹⁵ Historian Ryszard Szmydki has also noted that Sigismund was making money by selling agricultural products, especially grain, from Poland and Lithuania to the Low Countries starting around the same time (late 1540s).¹¹⁶ It is likely that the sales of lumber and grain funded *Genesis* at least in part, but that Sigismund still had to borrow significant amounts which only accumulated over time as he acquired more and more tapestries.

Along with their inherent monetary value, tapestries were perhaps the medium best suited to a prince's propagandic needs. Often referred to as *fresques mobiles du Nord*, tapestries could serve the same function as giant frescoes of the Mediterranean (imposing size and physical beauty), but had the added value of portability. For itinerant northern courts, this meant that the most valuable pieces of a prince's art collection could accompany him wherever he went.¹¹⁷ Much like his Habsburg counterparts, Sigismund was a

¹¹⁴ Hennel-Bernasikowa, *Dzieje arrasów*, 24.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Ryszard Szmydki, "O jagiellońskich tapiseriach odzyskanych w Sztokholmie przez Zygmunta III (1566–1632)," *Kronika Zamkowa* 2, no. 42 (2001): 49.

¹¹⁷ Edith Standen, "'The Twelve Ages of Man: A Further Study of a Set of Early Sixteenth-Century Flemish Tapestries,'" *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 2 (1969): 128.

peripatetic monarch who greatly benefited from the portability of his tapestry collection as he travelled within Poland-Lithuania.

In addition to furnishing royal homes, tapestries were most frequently used to adorn court ceremonies and festivities. Again, this was only possible due to their portability and flexibility in placement. Consequently, tapestry became the essential backdrop for any display of magnificence.¹¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, therefore, Sigismund chose this medium for his wedding to a Habsburg princess. In his study of Henry VIII's tapestry collection, Thomas Campbell also notes that the highest quality and most extravagant tapestries were reserved for special occasions. These were typically large figural series woven with gold thread, of which the *Genesis* series is a prime example.¹¹⁹

Finally, tapestries were heirloom items of the highest calibre. While certain patrons such as Henry VIII did explicitly use tapestry to comment on current events, the expense and lavishness of these purchases meant that the artworks were intended to be reused for decades and even centuries to come. In this way, court tapestries were an index of dynastic and monarchical continuity—an association that may have been quite pertinent to Sigismund, given both his pedigree and his concerns over his lack of progeny. Indeed, we know that Sigismund viewed his entire tapestry collection as a core part of his legacy and the legacy of the Polish Crown. In his will, Sigismund left his tapestry collection to his three sisters and, after their deaths, “to the Kingdom of Poland and the Duchy of Lithuania as one Commonwealth.”¹²⁰ Here, we see Sigismund's awareness of the importance of the

¹¹⁸ Chipps Smith, “Portable Propaganda,” 123, 127; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 4, 23; Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 336.

¹¹⁹ Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 340.

¹²⁰ “Te wszystkie *legata* Ich Mciam zapisane na Koronę Polską i na Księstwo Litewskie jako na jedną Rzeczpospolitą.” Antoni Franaszek et al, ed., *Testament Zygmunta Augusta* (Kraków: PZS, 1975), 28.

collection to the Crown, even beyond his own dynasty, which he knew would end with his death.

By Sigismund Augustus's accession, tapestries (especially figural sets) were an expected fixture of any European court. At the time of Philip II's death, the combined Habsburg collection numbered around seven hundred pieces.¹²¹ Henry VIII alone amassed around 2450 tapestries during his reign, although many of these were acquired as confiscated property.¹²² At the start of the century, Popes Leo X and Clement VII had essentially revolutionised the tapestry medium through commissioning monumental tapestry cartoons by Raphael, copies of which would circulate across the major continental courts. Francis I and many Italian ruling families even set up their own weaving workshops to meet the demands of their commissions. With its long-standing history as the royal artistic medium of choice, surpassing painting and sculpture in the eyes of contemporaries, tapestry had become synonymous with royal power. If Sigismund Augustus wished to make a clear artistic statement of magnificence upon his accession, tapestry was the obvious choice that would be culturally legible by his peers.

A simple commission of existing designs, however, would not suffice. As the king of one of sixteenth century Europe's largest and most powerful polities, Sigismund would have to commission entirely new designs, an even more expensive and time-consuming project undertaken by only the top patrons. This is especially true if one follows the hypothesis of Piwocka and other Polish researchers: that all of Sigismund's biblical and verdure tapestries, as well as many of the grotesques and heraldics, were intended to form one gigantic series of at least 138 pieces. Evidence for this can be found in the nearly-identical borders of all of these tapestries, creating visual continuity, as well as the fact that

¹²¹ Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 101.

¹²² Cambell, *Henry VIII*, ix.

the dimensions of many of these pieces were intended to fit within specific parts of Wawel Castle. As Carmen Cramer Niekrasz points out, the tapestry collection was a cohesive decorative programme intended to furnish an entire building, consisting not only of large wall hangings (like the *Genesis* series) but also of *portieres*, *entre-fenêtres*, friezes, and coverings for window arches, sills, and furniture.¹²³ Weavers' marks do also show that the pieces were produced within the same few workshops, and we do know that all of them arrived in Poland within around a decade. If one does consider these pieces to be one series, then it is the largest tapestry commission ever undertaken in early modern Europe.¹²⁴ Even if one rejects this hypothesis, however, commissioning so many custom designs that would comprise over half of Sigismund's entire collection by his death is a stand-out achievement among Renaissance tapestry patrons. By a certain metric, this would even surpass his father's remarkable 1533 commission of ninety-two heraldic pieces. Although these were all ordered simultaneously, there is no mention of these being original designs. In addition, figural tapestries such as *Genesis* were larger, had a higher cost per cubit (especially given the use of gold and silver thread), and were of a higher artistic echelon than heraldics or grotesques.

By the early 1550s, the Habsburg collection had solidified its primacy among others in Europe in terms of size through the *Conquest of Tunis* tapestries, which were around twenty-five percent larger than the average dimensions of figural pieces at the time. For the Habsburgs, size was a direct indicator of wealth, as few rooms would be big enough to house such a massive series.¹²⁵ The largest pieces in the Jagiellonian *Genesis* series have quite comparable dimensions to the other large figural series in the imperial collection. For

¹²³ Niekrasz, "Woven Theaters," 127.

¹²⁴ Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 406. In her doctoral dissertation, Carmen Cramer Niekrasz also posits this hypothesis, with a focus on the thematic continuity between the biblical and verdure tapestries.

¹²⁵ Hendrik J. Horn, *Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen, Painter of Charles V and his Conquest of Tunis: Paintings, Etchings, Drawings, Cartoons, and Tapestries* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1989), 128.

example, Sigismund's largest pieces (*Paradise Bliss*, *The Building of the Ark*, *The Animals Enter the Ark*, *The Flood*, and *The Animals Exit the Ark*) have very similar dimensions to eminent series such as *The Honours*, *The Triumphs and Deeds of Scipio*, *The Story of Julius Caesar*, *The Battle of Pavia*, and *The Seven Deadly Sins*, and are slightly larger than pieces from *The Hunts of Maximilian* and *The Twelve Ages of Man*.¹²⁶ Consequently, in their size alone, the centrepiece tapestries in the *Genesis* series demanded the same attention as their imperial counterparts.

Sigismund's choice of workshops, border artists, and cartoonist enhanced his message of magnificence through the commission. The tapestries were woven in some of the most prolific and renowned workshops in Brussels, frequently patronised by other princes: namely, those of Willem and Jan de Kempeneer, Jan van Tieghem, and Pieter Coecke van Aelst. The Antwerp grotesque borders from the school of Cornelis Floris and Cornelis Bos were not only an appropriation of a new and fashionable artistic style, but also a relatively novel use of that style in tapestry borders. The earliest examples of engravings by Floris and Bos on which the borders were modelled date back to 1541, six years before the commission, making Sigismund's series a trendsetter in this regard.

As for the cartoonist, Michiel Coxcie had already made a career as the court painter of Mary of Hungary and the official city cartoon painter of Brussels, and had drawn cartoons for major Habsburg tapestry commissions such as the *Story of Abraham* and *The Story of Julius Caesar*.¹²⁷ Thus, by hiring Coxcie, Sigismund further underlined the link between himself and the Habsburgs: the family into which he was about to marry for the second time and to which he was related through his paternal grandmother, and a powerful

¹²⁶ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 139, 175, 297, 321, 329, 346, 383, 410.

¹²⁷ Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 402; Koenraad Jonckheere, *Michiel Coxcie and the Giants of His Age* (London: Harvey Miller, 2013), 33, 102.

yet mercurial neighbour of Poland-Lithuania. Notably, any perceived links between *Genesis* and the Habsburgs would not have been out-of-place at the late Jagiellonian court, which used much of the Spanish model of court behaviour and precedence.¹²⁸



Fig. 3 Detail of Michiel Coxie, *Self-Portrait as St. George*, c. 1575, oil on panel. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

However, the Habsburg connection was not the only example which Sigismund might have been trying to emulate with his commission. More personally, he was continuing his family legacy as avid tapestry collectors in their own right. Panegyrics written after the 1518 wedding of Sigismund the Old and Bona Sforza (1494-1557) all describe the unveiling of sumptuous tapestries commissioned specifically for the event. By 1533, the couple had ordered one hundred more tapestries from Flanders, including ninety-two heraldics from Bruges and sixteen unidentified tapestries from Antwerp.¹²⁹ Sigismund the Old was personally involved in the design process of at least some of these: for one commission, he ordered not only *petit patrons* of the cartoons, but also two full tapestries to be sent to Kraków for inspection before the rest of them could be woven.¹³⁰ In fact, in

¹²⁸ Niekrasz, "Woven Theatres of Nature," 120..

¹²⁹ Agnieszka Bender, *Tapiserie w dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Lublin: KUL, 2004), 83; Jedzinskaitė-Kuiziniene, *Tapestries*, 19.

¹³⁰ Hennel-Bernasikowa, "Sprawa editio princeps," 101.

texts written about and for a young Sigismund Augustus, we see a particular emphasis on patronage, in emulation of his dynastic lineage, as a model for the King. For example, in Klemens Janicki's (1516-1543) poem for Sigismund's 1543 wedding to Elizabeth of Austria (1526-1545), the author urges him to "be loving in your guardianship of learned men...Because of them, the fame of your accomplishments will grow and live; because of them, your name will live through all eternity." Janicki notes that Sigismund's ancestor Jagiełło "was a great admirer of them [learned men]." Later, Janicki describes the devoted artistic patronage of Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund (Sigismund Augustus's great-great-grandfather) and ends his panegyric with this exhortation:

"You are Sigismund Augustus by name; since these are the names by which you are known, honour those whose names you bear by your deeds. Be unto poets what he [Emperor Sigismund] was once upon a time, and do not think shameful what was so seemly to him."¹³¹

It is also worthy of note that Sigismund's maternal grandfather, Galeazzo Maria Sforza, had made a name for himself as an image-conscious patron of the arts, whose collections were renowned for their unrivalled magnificence.¹³²

In sum, a Flemish tapestry commission would have been a calculated choice for the young king. As the luxury medium *par excellence*, it was a necessity for any European monarch to amass his own collection. Not only was tapestry a signifier of wealth and royalty, but it was a practical option for adorning an itinerant court, especially for ceremonies and festivals. For Sigismund personally, the medium drew notable connections both with his own dynasty and with the Habsburgs, the family into which he had married

¹³¹ Klemens Janicki, "Epitalamii serenissimo regi Poloniae domino Sigismundo Augusto," in *Carmina*, trans. Edwin Jedrkiewicz, ed. Jerzy Krókowski (1543, reis., Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1966), 212, in Segel, *Renaissance Culture*, 249.

¹³² Marco Folin, *Courts and Courtly Arts in Renaissance Italy: Art, Culture, and Politics, 1395-1530* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 2011), 124; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 98.

twice and with whom he was nebulously allied. Sigismund met the expected norms of tapestry patronage by choosing renowned Brussels workshops, but went above and beyond by commissioning *editiones principes* and choosing an innovative border style. In general, the commission would have introduced Sigismund onto the European monarchical stage as a learned, cultured, and cosmopolitan prince, whose artistic sensibilities were “most fully expressed through the commissioning of such things,” in Stanisław Orzechowski’s words.¹³³

We may now turn to the second of our initial questions: why did Sigismund commission the *Genesis* series when he did? In order to answer this, we may begin by surveying other major tapestry commissions of the first half of the sixteenth century. Upon doing so, two common underlying motivations, often overlapping, emerge: the praise of magnificence in a time of stability, or the projection of an image of power in a time of turbulence.

1.2. The Strategies of Patronage

As a physical extension of the monarch’s body, Sigismund’s home and court had to reflect his glory and reputation. As Jill Burke explains, it was a theatre for material magnificence and a manifestation of power relations to one’s domestic subjects and foreign visitors.¹³⁴ *Specula principum* stressed the need for rulers to project a magnificent image so as to discourage thoughts of rebellion.¹³⁵ The objects found in the court, such as artworks, had the power to convey messages, initiate dialogue, and institute or propagate symbolic allusions.¹³⁶

¹³³ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 51.

¹³⁴ Jill Burke, “Florentine Art and the Public Good,” in *Viewing Renaissance Art*, ed. Kim W. Woods, Carol M. Richardson, and Angeliki Lymberopoulou (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 71.

¹³⁵ Folini, *Courts and Courtly Arts*, 20.

¹³⁶ Lea R. Clark, *Collecting Art in the Italian Renaissance Court: Objects and Exchanges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 53.

During the first half of the sixteenth century, we see many examples of major ruling houses using tapestry to solidify a pre-existing image of magnificence. To name only a few, Charles V, Mary of Hungary, Cosimo de Medici, Francis I, and Popes Leo X and Clement VII used tapestry as the medium of choice for the glorification of their respective families or divine-right sovereignty.¹³⁷ To use one case study, Henry VIII accumulated tapestries for the purpose of self-glorification at the most secure moments of his reign, including his accession, his marriage to Katherine of Aragon, his sister Mary's marriage to Louis XII of France, and his meeting with Francis I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold. Some of his grandest spending on tapestries occurred during the late 1530s and 1540s, when he had secured "victory" over Roman Catholicism in his kingdom, had acquired millions of pounds from the dissolution of the monasteries, and had finally produced a male heir.¹³⁸

On the other hand, there are many examples of these same rulers commissioning tapestries in moments when their grasp on power was most precarious. Returning to Henry, we find many purchases during the particularly turbulent early 1530s, which included his divorce from Katherine of Aragon, the split from Rome, his short-lived marriage to Anne Boleyn, and increasing concerns about the lack of a male heir. In fact, Campbell believes that some of these issues echoed in the subject matter of the commissions. For example, the *Seven Deadly Sins* series, received around the time of Anne Boleyn's execution, can be interpreted as the lament of a penitent sinner who had once been tempted by lust, greed, and witchcraft, but had subsequently returned to a righteous path.¹³⁹

To take some other examples, Henry VIII's father, Henry VII, attempted to secure his highly-contested claim to the throne after his 1485 coup and establish himself as the

¹³⁷ Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 99-100; Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 3-4.

¹³⁸ Campbell, *Henry VIII*, 78, 103, 116, 143, 251.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 203, 211, 224-226.

father of a new dynasty by commissioning tapestries.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, Leo X commissioned the *Acts of the Apostles* series by Raphael (a series that revolutionised the style of figurative tapestry and would become the most-copied set of all time) as a celebration of the papacy at a time when it was under threat by the concurrent rise of Lutheranism and of Turkish military power.¹⁴¹ Meanwhile, Francis I's increasing italophilic propensities in his art collection may be seen as a compensation for his failure to acquire Italian territory after the Battle of Pavia. After returning from his captivity in Spain, Francis also intensified his tapestry commissioning in order to re-establish his magnificence. Notably, these included the first copies of Leo's *Acts of the Apostles* series and even of the Pope's state bed ensemble by Raphael. Perhaps these commissions served a twofold purpose: not only to convey his power after his captivity, but also to make a visual statement of his tenuous negotiation between papal alignment and the Reformation.¹⁴²

In view of these two overarching motivations in many of the tapestry commissions of European monarchs, we may return to Sigismund Augustus's motivations for commissioning the *Genesis* series when he did, at the very onset of his kingship. In the case of Sigismund, there is certainly a case to be made for the tapestries as a celebratory series, ushering in a new leader of one of Europe's most powerful dynasties, and a happy marriage (at the time, he was married to his second wife, Barbara, a love match). This would fit with the overall image of Sigismund's court, especially in the first decade of his reign, as a theatre of extravagant pageants, tournaments, and ceremonies which would be remembered and emulated by subsequent monarchs.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 68.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴² Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 270.

¹⁴³ Niekrasz, "Woven Theatres of Nature," 120.

Still, there is also evidence supporting the commission as the effort of a new ruler who, despite his wealth and pedigree, had inherited a precarious and potentially volatile political situation. Part of the reasons for Sigismund's predicament upon his accession rested on the limited nature of the Polish monarchy and its relationship with the nobility and the church. Beyond this, Sigismund also faced contemporary political and religious problems that threatened to upset the equilibrium between these three Estates, perhaps even leading to civil war. The possible thematic references to these issues in the tapestries will be discussed in Chapter Five. For now, we must consider the factors making Sigismund's rule so unstable, thereby creating the perfect moment for a commission to help establish his authority.

1.3. The King and the Nobility

1.3.1. The Nature of the Polish Monarchy

The king of Poland held ultimate executive, legislative, and judicial authority, although he was limited by certain privileges granted to the estates. Before his coronation, each king took an oath to be the protector of the laws and freedoms of his subjects. However, there was no exhaustive written codification of these laws and freedoms, leaving the door open for monarchs to interpret the oath in the most expedient manner if the need arose.¹⁴⁴ The king had the authority to appoint all of his regional, local, and court administrators, as well as senators (appointed for life), bishops, and councillors. In this way, the Jagiellons were able to staff most of the highest positions of power in the kingdom with their own supporters.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ Waław Uruszczak, *Historia państwa i prawa polskiego*, 4th ed. (Alphen aan den Rijn: Wolters Kluwer, 2021), 144, 155.

¹⁴⁵ Urszula Borkowska, *Dynastia Jagiellonów w Polsce* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2011), 81.

However, in the legislative branch, the monarchy was quite dependent on a bicameral national representative assembly (*sejm*) established in 1493 consisting of the Senate and House of Deputies. The former was a body of one hundred and thirty-nine nobles (*szlachta*) and clergy appointed for life by the king, while the latter was a diet including around two hundred elected noble deputies representing provinces, as well as the senators. Sessions were called and mediated by the king, who theoretically possessed the right of veto, although exercising it would have been a potentially incendiary act.¹⁴⁶ Overall, the Polish monarchy was dependent on cooperation between the estates, although this was hindered by ongoing rifts between the magnates and middle and lower nobility, between the representatives of the Polish, Lithuanian, and Prussian provinces, and between the lay nobility and episcopate.¹⁴⁷ The *sejm* asserted its power to “elect” monarchs, although prior to 1573, this was not truly an “election” but rather a confirmation of the next heir in the Jagiellon family.¹⁴⁸

Nearly a century before Sigismund Augustus acceded the throne, his grandfather Casimir IV enshrined the nature of the Polish monarchy and its relation to the other estates in several laws, including the 1454 Nieszawa Statutes. These included the requirement for the king to obtain the *szlachta*’s approval before passing laws, introducing new taxes, declaring war, or mobilising an army. On the other hand, the Statutes gave the king the authority to appoint bishops as well as lay offices, including voivodes and castellans. This allowed Casimir to construct a council, chancery, government, and episcopate that would be favourable to him. However, as Robert Frost notes, many historians see the Statutes’

¹⁴⁶ Juliusz Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu polskiego* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2011), 43.

¹⁴⁷ Felicia Rosu, “Electing Kings with All Manner of Freedom: The Polish-Lithuanian Elective Monarchy in Context,” in *The Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth: History, Memory, Legacy*, ed. Andrzej Chwalba and Krzysztof Zamorski, 179-194 (New York: Routledge, 2021), 182; Rosu, “Free from Obedience: Constitutional Expressions of the Right of Resistance in Early Modern Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania,” *European History Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2017): 7.

¹⁴⁸ Jacek Jędruch, *Constitutions, Elections, and Legislatures of Poland, 1493-1993: A Guide to Their History* (New York: EJJ Books, 1998), 29.

privileges to the *szlachta* as opening the door for potential political anarchy. In addition, Casimir's abuses of his privileges to surround himself with favourites, loyalists, and relatives while alienating critics led to a growing concern of the overextension of royal power, permeating all levels of the kingdom's provinces, and potentially clashing with the local and regional authority of the *szlachta*.¹⁴⁹

This history set the groundwork for one of the most significant traditions in early modern Polish political thought: the "right of resistance" (*prawo oporu*), legally enshrined by the 1501 article of *De non praestanda oboedientia* by Alexander Jagiellon (1461-1506). Although the precise terms were somewhat vague and hotly debated, the decree stipulated that the nobility was at liberty to oppose the ruler and even seek foreign assistance for this purpose if these terms were violated by the king.¹⁵⁰ In 1505, the *Nihil novi* act outlined the legislative role of the *sejm* and prohibited the king from passing any laws without consent of the *szlachta*.¹⁵¹ This effectively established what would become known as the "republic of nobles" and its immense legislative power alongside the monarch.¹⁵² Taking all this into consideration, the position of the monarch over the nobility was fairly tenuous, and the legitimacy of rule and law derived mainly from the consensus of the *szlachta*.

1.3.2. Crown and *Szlachta* until 1553

During Sigismund Augustus's reign, arguably the most important political movement was the executionist movement (*ruch egzekucyjny*), that was spearheaded by members of the middle and lower *szlachta* from the 1560s onward. In general, the executionists viewed the Republic as separated into three governing bodies: the King, the

¹⁴⁹ Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 265, 269, 276.

¹⁵⁰ Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu*, 17.

¹⁵¹ Wojciech Krieger, *Between State and Church: Confessional Relations from Reformation to Enlightenment: Poland-Lithuania-Germany-Netherlands* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016); Rosu, "Free from Obedience," 7.

¹⁵² Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu*, 23.

Senate, and the House of Deputies, although they intended for the latter to hold the most authority. The movement aimed to strengthen the position of the lesser and middle nobility, revoke the illegal privileges of the magnates (e.g. by returning Crown lands “stolen” by magnates to the king), and curtail the power of the Church and (to a certain extent) the Crown. Although the executionist movement only became an active political force around 1560, its seeds were already germinating by the end of Sigismund the Old’s rule, and would continue to manifest themselves during Sigismund Augustus’s early *sejms*.

One of the earliest direct antecedents of the clashes between the *szlachta* and the king that would flare up in the mid-sixteenth century surrounded the first coronation of Sigismund Augustus in 1530. Sigismund the Old had his son elected co-regent (*vivente rege*), which contradicted the precedent that monarchical elections could be held only after a king’s death. At the time, the *sejm* accepted the election, but passed a resolution forbidding *vivente rege* elections from happening again. In 1536, a clause was submitted to Sigismund the Old exempting all subjects from allegiance to the young heir unless he (Sigismund Augustus) reaffirmed all of the laws, privileges, and liberties ensured by previous kings upon their elections.¹⁵³

Mere months later, the aforementioned “Chicken War” erupted: an organised rebellion of the *szlachta* against the Crown and magnates in response to decades of alleged financial corruption, administrative incompetence, manipulation of the law, and steps toward royal absolutism. Although the rebels did not achieve all of their demanded judicial and political reforms, they did successfully campaign for holding *sejms* in Piotrków and Kraków, for the King to execute the laws made by *sejms*, to publish no laws without the

¹⁵³ Rosu, “Free from Obedience,” 7.

sejm's consent, and to legalise the attendance of all members of the gentry at subsequent royal elections.¹⁵⁴

No other armed rebellion occurred throughout the remainder of Sigismund the Old's reign. Meanwhile, the co-regent Sigismund Augustus began his political fall from favour. Prior to his 1530 coronation, many nobles hoped that, unlike his ageing father and authoritarian mother, the prince would be a fresh new ruler who was open-minded to political and religious reform.¹⁵⁵ However, the bookish boy-king raised to be a humanistic virtuoso-prince sparked the ire of many magnates and nobles, one of whom received an ovation at the 1537 *sejm* upon denouncing Queen Bona for "having made the heir to the throne unfit to rule a nation of warriors."¹⁵⁶ Doubts circulated about Sigismund's commitment to his own kingdom, having been surrounded by Italian courtiers and tutors since birth and having maintained a close relationship with his Lutheran cousin, Duke Albrecht of Prussia (1490-1568). Then, Sigismund's move to Vilnius in 1544 upon his coronation as Grand Duke of Lithuania raised a new spectre that threatened the *szlachta*'s influence over the young king. His love affair with Barbara Radziwiłł (1520-1551), daughter of the most powerful magnate house in Lithuania, led to the increasing influence of her family, especially her brother Mikołaj "The Red" (1512-1584) and cousin Mikołaj "The Black" (1515-1565). Both men soon became inseparable friends with Sigismund. Many among the Polish *szlachta* feared that Sigismund had created "overmighty subjects" out of the Radziwiłłs. Moreover, his secret marriage to Barbara, a commoner and Sigismund's subject, prevented him from engineering a politically advantageous marriage

¹⁵⁴ Jędruch, *Constitutions*, 60; Bardach, *Dzieje sejmu*, 23.

¹⁵⁵ Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 440.

¹⁵⁶ James Miller, *The Nobility in Polish Renaissance Society, 1548-1572*, vol.1 (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1981), 13.

with another kingdom. The Grand Duke, meanwhile, spent most of his time in Vilnius, rarely coming to Kraków. This preference would continue until 1555.¹⁵⁷

The judicial court system, while still in the hands of the Crown in 1547, was also a point of contention. Sigismund had inherited an enormous backlog of trial appeals to the *sejm* from his father's reign, and now faced proposals in his earliest *sejms* to separate the legislative and judicial systems in order to speed up the appeals process. However, the young king was not keen on limiting his royal prerogatives, in this or any other area.¹⁵⁸

Thus, by Sigismund's first *sejm* as sole monarch in 1548, he was already a contentious figure, simultaneously viewed as a hope for political and religious reform, a weak-willed puppet of the Lithuanian magnates, a latent despot, and (perhaps the dominant view) an unpredictable and slippery character who had yet to show his true colours. At this *sejm*, the issue of Sigismund's marriage to Barbara and its implications for Polish-Lithuanian politics dominated the debates. The starost general of Wielkopolska, Andrzej Górka (1500-1551), gave a speech warning the King that the people of the kingdom of Poland were free, and could not be ruled by absolute power. He reminded the king that he was an elected monarch and the servant, not the master, of freedom, who was subject to the same laws as the other Estates. Certain members of the *szlachta* called for *rokosz* or dethronement.¹⁵⁹

Here, however, was the first chance for Sigismund Augustus to demonstrate the patience and persistence that would characterise him as a ruler. While he complained of his subjects' brazenness to his cousin, Duke Albrecht Hohenzollern, he knew that Polish

¹⁵⁷ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 69.

¹⁵⁸ Felicia Rosu, "Monarch, Citizens, and the Law under Stefan Batory: The Legal Reform of 1578," in *Citizenship and Identity in a Multinational Commonwealth*, ed. Karin Friedrich and Barbara Pendzich (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 20-21.

¹⁵⁹ Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 440.

citizens had the legal right to denounce the monarch for breaking or manipulating the law. As Stanisław Orzechowski wrote, “We speak freely with our king, as with any other man.”¹⁶⁰ Thus, while not taking public offence, Sigismund resolutely stood by his marriage and waited for tempers to cool, then brokered a deal with the episcopate to ensure her coronation in exchange for passing an edict which would punish heretics disrupting the public peace with *infamia*. Specifically, this entailed a loss of protection from the law and a ban on serving as a public official.¹⁶¹

Nevertheless, the incident had a lasting impact on the king’s approach to the other Estates. He became more reliant on the counsel of the Radziwiłł cousins, especially after the trauma of Barbara’s premature death from cancer in 1551. On several occasions between 1548 and 1553, he showed a disregard for statutes that concerned the *szlachta*: he distributed generous land leases without consulting the *sejm*, took out mortgages on Crown lands that would reach almost half a million *złotych* by 1562, and repeatedly called for raising taxes to replenish the depleted treasury. In the eyes of the King’s opponents, the fears expressed at the 1548 *sejm* appeared to be coming true. Having cut his teeth in Lithuania, a duchy with more extensive prerogatives for its ruler, Sigismund had a more patrimonial approach to rule than the established limited monarchy in Poland. The middle and lower *szlachta*, who held their rights and liberties to be indelible and the foundation of the kingdom, resented the magnates and royal officials who benefited from the King’s imperious wielding of the law. As the executionists gained in number and momentum,

¹⁶⁰ Stanisław Orzechowski, “Rozmowa albo dyjalog pierwszy około egzekucyjnej polskiej korony,” in *Stanisława Orzechowskiego polskie dialogi polityczne*, ed. Jan Łoś (Kraków: Stanisław Kot, 1919), 78.

¹⁶¹ Maciuszko, *Konfederacja Warszawska*, 64.

Sigismund was faced with an increasingly problematic position in Poland, and an increasingly unsettled and influential bloc in the *sejm*.¹⁶²

On the other hand, the wedding to Catherine, planned toward the end of the *Genesis* commissioning process, was a chance to rectify some of the perceived mistakes Sigismund had made with his second marriage. Because of her dynastic pedigree and wealth, Catherine was one of the most advantageous matches Sigismund could have made in 1553. Moreover, as the daughter of Archduke Ferdinand (soon to be Emperor Ferdinand I), she carried with her the promise of a renewed alliance with the Habsburgs, a necessary partner for Poland-Lithuania's defences against the increasingly-expansionist Muscovy. Still, the Habsburgs hardly enjoyed unified support at the Polish court, especially those in Queen Mother Bona's anti-Habsburg faction. Moreover, Ferdinand had deposed Jan Zapolya (husband of Sigismund's sister Izabella) from the Hungarian throne, and Izabella was currently living in Poland while fighting for the restoration of her son, Jan Sigismund.¹⁶³ For all of these reasons, the Habsburgs were viewed as the enemy by many at Sigismund's court, including members of his most immediate family, which complicated the beneficial aspects of his new marital alliance.

1.4. The King and the Church

1.4.1. The Religious Milieu of Renaissance Poland

Catholicism had been the official religion of the Kingdom of Poland since 966. Because of the intertwining of church and state, the clergy and episcopate enjoyed special privileges, including in the Senate and in ecclesiastical jurisprudence.¹⁶⁴ However, Catholicism was not a strong majority religion across the region as a whole, even before

¹⁶² Frost, *Oxford History of Poland-Lithuania*, 443-445.

¹⁶³ Sucheni-Grabowska, *Zygmunt August*, 323-325.

¹⁶⁴ Uruszczak, *Historia państwa*, 133.

1517. As Jerzy Kłoczowski points out, Christianity itself was relatively young in Renaissance Poland, and Lithuania had only been officially converted in the 1400s.¹⁶⁵ In Poland, there were large minorities of Eastern Orthodox, Jews, and Armenian Monophysites, and smaller minorities of Muslims and Utraquists, while the majority of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was Eastern Orthodox. During the Reformation, aside from Calvinists and Lutherans, the existing religious minorities were joined by communities of Bohemian Brethren, Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Antitrinitarians. Protestant ministers were legally recognised as members of the clerical Estate alongside Catholics and Eastern Orthodox.¹⁶⁶ By the end of the 1550s, one sixth of parishes in the kingdom were Protestant.¹⁶⁷ As Wacław Uruszczak explains, religious tolerance was one of the most important legal pillars of Jagiellonian Poland. It was defined as the freedom for (elite and urban) non-Catholics in territories held by the Polish Crown to practise their own faith, both individually and communally, without persecution.¹⁶⁸

In order to rule such a religiously and ethnically heterogeneous population, the Jagiellons, presiding over the largest polity (territorially) in Europe with relatively decentralised power, had to adopt a policy of religious toleration by necessity. The monarchs had to find pragmatic solutions to theological disputes, make concessions when possible, exercise discipline with caution, tolerate dissenters, and moderate dialogue that would ideally lead to religious unification. The view of the prolific author and courtier Andrzej Krzycki (1482-1537), whose writings circulated widely at the court of Sigismund the Old, is perhaps exemplary of the prevailing attitude in the early Reformation: if Polish

¹⁶⁵ Jerzy Kłoczowski, *History of Polish Christianity*, 75.

¹⁶⁶ Uruszczak, *Historia państwa*, 134.

¹⁶⁷ Paul W. Knoll, "Religious Toleration in Sixteenth-Century Poland," in *Diversity and Dissent: Negotiating Religious Difference in Central Europe 1500-1800*, ed. Howard Louthan et al (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 41.

¹⁶⁸ Uruszczak, *Historia państwa*, 131, 141.

Catholics had managed to coexist for centuries with Jews, Orthodox, Muslims, and Monophysites, then they could coexist with Lutherans.¹⁶⁹ This did not necessarily stem from any Enlightenment-esque commitment to religious liberty, but from the belief that religious concord was indispensable for political and social stability.

As the aforementioned irenicism of religious writers suggests, Erasmus's influence at the Polish court, episcopate, nobility, and intelligentsia cannot be understated. According to Wiktor Weintraub, "the spiritual climate of Poland was especially favourable for the diffusion of Erasmian ideas, which stressed Christian ethics and mutual understanding, and played down the importance of dogma and doctrinal difference."¹⁷⁰ Peter Bietenholz argues that Erasmus's calls for Christian unity in particular appealed to humanists in such a heterogeneous polity.¹⁷¹ Reading, corresponding with, and visiting Erasmus in Basel was an "intellectual fashion statement," and his writings served as a kind of canon for church and state reform in Poland for others, Catholics and Protestants alike.¹⁷²

The Reformation reached Poland quite early: in 1517, copies of the *Ninety-Five Theses* were already circulating in Prussian cities.¹⁷³ In fact, despite having a staunchly Catholic monarch, Sigismund the Old's Poland was a pioneering state in the early European Reformation. Specifically, in 1525, it became the first legally bi-confessional polity when it recognised its vassal, Ducal Prussia, as a Lutheran state with a Lutheran princely elector.¹⁷⁴ Ducal Prussia, Royal Prussia, and Wielkopolska became the centres of

¹⁶⁹ *Acta Tomiciana*, vol. 8, ed. Stanisław Górski. (Poznań: Merzbach, 1857), 251-252.

¹⁷⁰ Weintraub, "Tolerance and Intolerance," 21-44.

¹⁷¹ Peter G. Bietenholz, "Concordia Christiana: Erasmus's Thought and the Polish Reality," *Erasmus Studies* 21, no. 1 (2001): 49, 59.

¹⁷² Louthan, "A Model for Christendom," 21. See also Ptaszyński, *Reformacja w Polsce a Dziedzictwo Erazma z Rotterdamu* (Warsaw: University of Warsaw Press, 2018); Konstanty Żantuan, "Erasmus and the Cracow Humanists: The Purchase of His Library by Łaski," *The Polish Review* 10, no. 2 (1965): 3-36.

¹⁷³ Ptaszyński, "Between Marginalization and Orthodoxy," 1-29.

¹⁷⁴ Natalia Nowakowska, *King Sigismund of Poland and Martin Luther* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7.

Lutheranism (and indeed, of the Polish Reformation in general) until the 1540s. From that point, the popularity of Calvinism among the southern nobility led Małopolska (the capital region) and, as of 1550, Lithuania to become the centres of Calvinism.¹⁷⁵

Aside from the spread of Lutheranism through German-speaking urban populations in Ducal and Royal Prussia, the Polish Reformation occurred mainly in elite spheres. Its momentum derived much more from discourse at royal and noble courts and in intellectual circles (both secular and clerical) than in urban movements, and largely circumvented the peasant population. Barring one revolt in Gdańsk in 1525, it never took on a revolutionary character.¹⁷⁶

In particular, the role of the magnates and *szlachta* (which itself made up roughly six to eight percent of the kingdom's population) in the Polish Reformation cannot be understated.¹⁷⁷ One bitter Catholic observer wrote in 1555 that “nearly all of the great families of Wielkopolska have joined the sectarians, and heretical leaders have been elected to the *sejm*.”¹⁷⁸ According to recent scholarly estimations, approximately twenty-five percent of the *szlachta* left the Roman Church and joined a Protestant group during the Reformation.¹⁷⁹ The popularity of Protestantism among the nobility allowed the Reformation to move beyond the academies and into the political sphere, especially the royal court and *sejm*.

¹⁷⁵ It should be noted that Lutheranism did attract some followers in Lithuania prior to this, and *sejm* records from the 1540s do show several anticlerical debates, e.g. on the removal of clergy from land courts and the removal of ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the nobility in secular legal cases. Gottfried Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*, 170-175.

¹⁷⁶ Kłoczowski, *History of Polish Christianity*, 92, 93, 100; Louthan, “Model for Christendom,” 19.

¹⁷⁷ This statistic an estimated average across Poland-Lithuania, but the figure would have been much higher in, for example, Mazovia (25%, in some areas of the region, as high as 90%) and Podlasie (20%), but lower in the Lithuanian and Ruthenian palatinates (1-3%). Because a lack of sources makes it difficult to reach exact percentages of *szlachta* per region, these figures are under debate. See Felicia Rosu, *Elective Monarchy in Transylvania and Poland-Lithuania, 1569-1587* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

¹⁷⁸ Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*, 102.

¹⁷⁹ Tetiana Shevchenko, “Hosius and Mohyla: Catholicism and Orthodoxy in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Early Modern Times- A History of a Transcultural Reform Movement,” *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa- Forschung* 60, no. 3 (2011): 325-377.

Two of the *szlachta*'s main religious grievances that shaped church-state politics in the sixteenth century were anticlericalism and antipapalism. The latter more directly influenced the relationship between nobility, Church, and Crown. The justification for Polish antipapism was often presented as loyalty to the King over the Bishop of Rome. Although the practice of Polish kings, bishops, and clergy swearing loyalty to Rome was a religious, not political act, it could have been (and was) interpreted as a contradiction to one of the core tenets of the Kingdom of Poland: the sovereignty of the Crown over all authorities, internal and external.¹⁸⁰ The *Codex iuris canonici* was seen as a foreign legal code at odds with Polish law, and loyalty to Rome was presented as treason against the Polish monarchy.¹⁸¹

Faced with this religious milieu, and having ruled as co-regent since the age of ten, Sigismund Augustus would have learned several important lessons from his father that he carried into his own policies. These included an aversion to the use of force, resistance to new religious groups only when they incited violence or posed a genuine political threat, wariness of the papacy, a commitment to irenicism, shrewd political manoeuvring between different confessional groups, and an attitude of pastoral stewardship over his subjects as a secular and spiritual ruler.

1.4.2. Sigismund and the Reformation

In 1548, the death of the old Catholic king propelled noble Protestants into public political action, as they saw the accession of his son Sigismund Augustus as a golden opportunity for a princely and magisterial Reformation. Although many nobles believed Sigismund to be weak and politically Janus-faced, all parties were well aware of his

¹⁸⁰ Uruszczak, *Historia państwa*, 143.

¹⁸¹ Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*, 235.

reforming sympathies, and of the collection of heretics that he had already patronised at his court.¹⁸²

When Sigismund became Grand Duke of Lithuania in 1544, he was able to experience the confessional diversity of Vilnius, which likely influenced his tolerant attitude toward other faiths. According to the Arian leader and historian Andrzej Lubieniecki (1551-1623), Sigismund's "country and court were populated by men who opposed the Holy See."¹⁸³ He filled his palace in Vilnius with Protestants: his court preachers, Jan of Koźmiń and Wawrzyniec "Discordia" of Przasnysz (1515-1566/9), had both been found guilty of heresy in the Kraków archdiocese. In 1547, Sigismund resisted pressure from the Archbishop to remove them, stating that he had never heard them preach anything worthy of condemnation.¹⁸⁴ When Sigismund returned to Kraków after his father's death, he brought along his preachers, who openly preached Protestant sermons.¹⁸⁵ Jan of Koźmiń also served as the royal librarian, along with the Reformed author Andrzej Trzeciecki and his Protestant father.¹⁸⁶ In his library, Sigismund collected both Protestant and Catholic texts.¹⁸⁷ In 1550, Sigismund appointed the Calvinist Francesco Lismanini to be his theological advisor.¹⁸⁸ In the royal chancellery and secretariat, a collection of the sharpest minds at court, Sigismund was surrounded by some of the country's leading reformers.¹⁸⁹ He was perhaps closest to his secretary, Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, who dedicated his five-volume magnum opus, *De republica emendanda*, to the King. Of all

¹⁸² Ibid., 290.

¹⁸³ Andrzej Lubieniecki, *Poloneutychia*, eds. Alina Linda et al (Warsaw: PWN, 1982), 139-140.

¹⁸⁴ Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*, 290.

¹⁸⁵ Jobert, *Luther*, 34.

¹⁸⁶ Kras, "Religious Policy," 64; Katarzyna Meller, "Noc przeszła, a dzień się przybliżył:" *Studia o polskim piśmiennictwie reformacyjnym XVI wieku* (Poznań: UAM, 2004) 77-79.

¹⁸⁷ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 93.

¹⁸⁸ Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church*, 365.

¹⁸⁹ Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church*, 365. The proportion of "heretics" appointed by Sigismund to the secretariat was so significant that it caused unrest among the Catholic senators and papal nuncios. Meller, *Noc Przeszła*, 75.

currents, Sigismund seemed closest to the Reformed Church: Lismanini reportedly read sections of Calvin's *Institutes* to him twice a week, and prepared his own commentary on the *Institutes* for him.¹⁹⁰ Sigismund also corresponded personally with Calvin and, in 1549, Calvin dedicated his *Commentarii in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* to the king.¹⁹¹ While he remained a practising Catholic throughout his life, from an orthodox perspective, Sigismund certainly held some heretical beliefs. He was allegedly not a believer in prayers to the saints, purgatory, or clerical celibacy, insisted on taking communion *sub utraque*, and was suspicious of devotional superstitions. Moreover, like his father, Sigismund's relationship with Rome, particularly with Paul IV, and with the papal nuncios was turbulent, and seemed likely to break down completely on several occasions during his reign.¹⁹²

For Polish Protestants, with Sigismund in power, the climate finally seemed favourable to launch a full-scale national Reformation. Overall, the 1550s became the apex of the Polish Reformation, a time in which reformers gained a significant foothold in government and the disorganised and disempowered Catholic episcopate struggled to maintain their political, ecclesiastical, and ideological power.

Although Sigismund's first *sejm* in 1548 was focused (fruitlessly) on the issue of his disputed marriage to Barbara Radziwiłł, the 1550 *sejm* became a battleground for religious issues in tandem with the ongoing marital scandal. Protestant delegates proposed their initial agenda to the king: to convene a national council, and to abolish ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the nobility. Meanwhile, the majority of noble delegates, regardless of confession, remained hostile toward the royal marriage, which drove a wedge between the

¹⁹⁰ Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church*. 365.

¹⁹¹ Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata*, 25.

¹⁹² Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 89-90.

szlachta and the King. Sigismund began to give way to paranoia, and even suspected the Protestant castellan of Poznań and one of the Radziwiłłs' strongest opponents, Andrzej Górka, of plotting with the Queen Mother to usurp the throne.¹⁹³ Seeing an opportunity to strengthen church-state relations, the bishops proposed a compromise to end the crisis: they would support Barbara's coronation if Sigismund passed an anti-heresy edict. Sigismund, aware of his precarious position and the necessity of strengthening his power base, and unwilling to dissolve his marriage, accepted. As noted above, in December 1550, five days after his wife's coronation, Sigismund introduced a decree that proven heretics would be punished with *infamia* if they disrupted public peace. As a result, many Protestants, including Sigismund's own court preachers, fled abroad or went into hiding.¹⁹⁴

In her biography of Sigismund, Anna Sucheni-Grabowska argues that the edict was intended to be more preventative than repressive: it was aimed at stopping the further spread of heresy, but was not an attempt to eradicate heresy entirely. Rather, it was intended to protect domestic peace and avoid the kinds of violent unrest that had already erupted in neighbouring polities, and to gain the support of the episcopate for the Crown. Its content was far too vague and lenient to pose a significant threat to Protestant minorities, and could only potentially impact public leaders. Additionally, it made no mention of re-Catholicising Protestant churches or communities.¹⁹⁵ According to Agnieszka Januszek-Sieradzka, Sigismund was never interested in stamping out or even hindering Protestantism as a creed, but would not allow any religious movement to disrupt civil peace.¹⁹⁶ Wojciech Kriegseisen

¹⁹³ Jan Wijaczka, "The Reformation in Sixteenth Century Poland: A Success Story or Failure?" *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 17 (2015): 13. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, at that same sejm, Sigismund agreed with the landed deputies that ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the nobility and their lands should be revoked, which was the first step toward the complete abolishment of this jurisdiction in 1557. (Kriegseisen, *Between State and Church*, 368.)

¹⁹⁴ Jobert, *Luther*. 36.

¹⁹⁵ Sucheni-Grabowska, *Zygmunt August*, 308-309.

¹⁹⁶ Januszek-Sieradzka, "W co wierzył Król Zygmunt August," 284

also notes that Sigismund wanted to curb the spread of the Reformation “which had started to undermine the power of the state authorities, and to reduce it to the religious sphere without attacking Catholic structures. He hoped that the Protestants would be able to reach a compromise with a reforming Catholic party.”¹⁹⁷ Most importantly, however, the punishments dictated by the edict were never enforced.¹⁹⁸ The document was released *privatim* (i.e. unofficially) to the episcopate, but was never entered into law. In effect, the king successfully appeased the Catholic camp by masquerading as *defensor fidei*, but avoided taking tangible legal action against reformers.¹⁹⁹

It would soon be apparent that this was Sigismund’s preferred strategy for navigating the stormy waters of multiconfessionalism. Like his father, Sigismund was an irenicist at heart, and a firm believer in the power of a universal council to peacefully heal the schisms of Christendom.²⁰⁰ Indeed, Sigismund’s own concept of religious leadership emerged from the Jagiellonian traditions: rule without the use of force, achieved by fostering dialogue between opposing sides.²⁰¹ Gottfried Schramm even believes that Sigismund’s “Catholicism” may have stemmed more from his commitment to the traditions and legacy of his dynasty, and that his concessions with reformers on adiaphoric matters such as clerical celibacy were ultimately aimed at restoring ecclesiastical unity. On a more pragmatic level, Schramm notes that Sigismund relied on the Church both for political and financial support, and so any definitive break from Catholicism might have proven disastrous for the decentralised monarchy.²⁰²

¹⁹⁷ Kriegseisen, *Between Church and State*, 461.

¹⁹⁸ Kras, “Religious Policy,” 67.

¹⁹⁹ Maciuszko, *Konfederacja Warszawska*, 63; Anna Sucheni-Grabowska, *Monarchia dwu ostatnich Jagiellonów a ruch egzekucyjny*, vol. 1 (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1974), 145.

²⁰⁰ Kras, “Religious Policy,” 59-60.

²⁰¹ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 50.

²⁰² Schramm, *Der polnische Adel*, 295-296.

By the next sejm in 1552, the winds had changed for Protestants. In May 1551, Queen Barbara unexpectedly died, thereby removing the main source of conflict between the *szlachta* and the King. The door was open to establish a cooperation with the King with the ultimate aim of initiating a princely Reformation and creating a national Church. The 1552 *sejm* marked the beginning of a series of political successes for the Protestant camp. This was a kind of “lightning in a bottle” moment for the Polish Reformation, taking advantage of a ruler who was amenable to reform, before the aftermath of the Council of Trent and Catholic renewal could gain a solid foothold.²⁰³

Never before were the Protestants more outspoken than at the 1552 *sejm*. The delegates demanded that the King call a general assembly to resolve disputes between church and state authorities, repeated their appeals against abuses of clerical power, and criticised the King for acquiescing to episcopal pressure in 1550. In the end, Sigismund agreed to strip the ecclesiastical courts of their jurisdiction over the *szlachta* for twelve months, and to halt all ongoing cases. The interim would be extended at each subsequent *sejm* until this jurisdiction was permanently abolished in 1557.²⁰⁴ However, in order not to cut the crown off from the financial support of the clergy and completely alienate himself from the bishops, Sigismund did not agree to abolish tithing.²⁰⁵

Considering the course of church-state relations around the time of his accession, Sigismund had good reason to project an image aligned with that of his father: namely, an image of a tolerant, irenic steward of all confessional groups in the kingdom. However, he also had to navigate between a staunch Catholic episcopate and an increasingly Protestant nobility. The former expected an orthodox *defensor fidei*, while the latter hoped for an

²⁰³ Ibid., 291.

²⁰⁴ Wijaczka, “The Reformation in Sixteenth Century Poland,” 14; Kras, “Religious Policy,” 68.

²⁰⁵ Jobert, *Luther*. 68.

antipapal head of a Reformed national Church. Because the king was dependent on both the *szlachta* and the church for the security and legitimacy of his authority, Sigismund had to appease both sides. In 1568, the papal nuncio Giulio Ruggieri wrote that Sigismund “is not copious in words, rather secretive, cautious, and sceptical. In negotiation, he demonstrates unusual talent, yet in his answers he expresses himself so ambiguously...that it is easy to assume that he aims never to strip hope away from those with whom he fraternises.”²⁰⁶

In fact, throughout his entire reign, Sigismund’s confessional sympathies remained enigmatic even to his closest circle, which was a source of anxiety for Protestants and Catholics alike. While reformers placed their hopes for a national Church in him, the papal nuncios wrote panicked briefs about the King’s possible conversion to Protestantism.²⁰⁷ Some of his opponents saw him as a “wavering and indecisive ruler,” who displayed a suspicious “lack of fervency and support” for Protestantism and Catholicism. In 1560, the papal nuncio Bernardo Bongiovanni (d. 1574) wrote that “the king is so good-hearted that he does not want to offend anyone. I would prefer that he were stricter in religious matters.”²⁰⁸

However, to the more astute observer—and, indeed, to the majority of his contemporaries—Sigismund’s master plan for religion in his kingdom was clear. He was admired above all for his prudence, wisdom, and patience. This is evident from the mottos on his medals, such as one from 1571, which reads: “with patience, I break the tough.”²⁰⁹ In the king’s own words, “all things that move slowly and with good caution are useful, but

²⁰⁶ Cynarski, *Zygmunt*, 97.

²⁰⁷ Kras, “Religious Policy,” 69.

²⁰⁸ Cited in Bogucka, “Renesansowa władca a religia,” 506.

²⁰⁹ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 97.

quick judgements can be harmful.”²¹⁰ Sigismund knew how to navigate religion at his court, never firmly declaring himself for either side, and keeping both camps guessing as to his convictions. For example, Katarzyna Meller notes how his international “book-buying missions” may have been a shrewd political manoeuvre: by sending known Protestants on these trips, he distanced himself enough from them to assuage the fears of his Catholic senators, yet simultaneously relied on them to procure heretical texts and serve as his intermediaries in international reformed centres.²¹¹ On another occasion, upon receiving a Lutheran prayer book from Albrecht Hohenzollern, Sigismund thanked his cousin, adding that he had to keep his views on the book private.²¹²

Thus, we are left with an image of a devout king with a deep interest in theology, who never apostatised from the Roman Church, yet clearly respected and even admired certain reforming currents. Nevertheless, his decision to put domestic stability over his personal preferences indicates that he was aware of the political advantages of papal allegiance, and of the potentially disastrous effects of abandoning it. In Bongiovanni’s words, the king “allowed everyone to live as he chose,” believing that faith was an individual matter of conscience as long as it did not become a political nuisance.²¹³ He therefore sought to ensure security for reformers within Poland, and to take as many steps toward reform as possible without crossing a doctrinal Rubicon. In his leadership, he was guided by one core principle: just as his father had declared himself the king of both “goats and sheep,” Sigismund told his subjects, “I am not the king of your consciences.”²¹⁴

²¹⁰ Letter from Sigismund II Augustus to Jan Chodkiewicz, 1567, MNK no. 743, 103, Princes Czartoryski Library, Kraków, Poland.

²¹¹ Meller, *Noc Przeszła*, 77.

²¹² Januszek-Sieradzka, “W co wierzył Król Zygmunt August,” 282.

²¹³ Cited in Januszek-Sieradzka, “W co wierzył Zygmunt August,” 283.

²¹⁴ Cited in Joseph Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation* (London: Longmans, 1960), 406.

1.5. Conclusion

To summarise, the nature of the sixteenth-century Polish state can perhaps be described as a triangular relationship between king, church, and nobility: a relationship in which trifold equilibrium had to be maintained in order to ensure a balance of power and peace in the polity. All three estates depended on one another for authority and legitimacy, yet all acted as buffers against one accumulating too much power over the others. The *szlachta* had privileges granted by the monarchy and had some autonomy from the church, yet were curtailed by monarchical authority and ecclesiastical jurisdiction. This ecclesiastical jurisdiction, alongside positions in the senate and royal council, kept the episcopate in power, although they were limited by the Crown's jurisdiction over the church and the constant struggle against the virulently anticlerical *szlachta*. The monarch held the highest position in this triangular relationship, aided by the power of appointments, veto, and ultimate authority in the legal system. Still, the Crown was dependent on the support and cooperation of the nobles and bishops, either of whom had the potential to cause political chaos and instability through dissidence.

Consequently, the newly-crowned Sigismund found himself at the head of a high-stakes balancing act which had become increasingly hazardous since his *vivente rege* coronation. Faced with a Church that doubted his confessional loyalties, a nobility that doubted his regnal competence, a dying dynasty, and a continent around him engulfed by religious conflict, it was necessary for the young king to make a bold, clear, and comprehensive statement of magnificence and acumen as early as possible, while taking care not to alienate any much-needed allies from his political and religious agenda.

This is the domestic historical context in which Sigismund undertook the commission of the *Genesis* tapestries, a necessary backdrop for understanding their didactic

content and impact on their patron and audience. Having established this, we may now consider another layer of the context of the commission: specifically, the implications of the genre and subject matter both at Sigismund's court and in the wider world of tapestry commissions across European courts.

Chapter Two: Princes and Patriarchs

The medium of Sigismund's commission and the political/religious context of its timing are only two of the factors that may inform our reading of the tapestries as didactic agents. Another vital component is the intentionality and political relevance of their subjects. As the latest addition to a royal art collection, the choice of genre and overall subject matter of *Genesis* had certain implications within the Polish court, especially in their relationship to Sigismund's persona. However, as with any tapestry commission, *Genesis* cannot be read in a domestic vacuum, but within the larger ecosystem of European tapestry design, production, and collection. Therefore, when considering the intentionality and political relevance of the series' subjects, it is also important to discuss how *Genesis* was in dialogue with the established norms and trends of the tapestry market regarding biblical series, a very popular genre among princely patrons.

This chapter will begin with an explanation of the typical process of commissioning a large set of figural tapestries, based on surviving examples of contracts between a patron and a Flemish workshop. As we have almost no documents regarding the *Genesis* commission, and since the process of tapestry commission was fairly uniform among Flemish workshops at this time, we may use these examples as models for the process that Sigismund underwent. Then, using the documents we do have, we will examine the designs that Sigismund was offered but chose not to commission, and the possible reasons for these rejections through the lens of image-creation and political agenda. Finally, we reach the designs that he did order, the *Genesis* series. We may interrogate why Sigismund opted for the biblical genre, why he chose these specific stories out of other more popular options, and how *Genesis* fit into the wider world of sixteenth century biblical tapestry, both in its imitations and diversions from trends.

2.1. The Commissioning Process

Unfortunately, no contract for the *Genesis* tapestries has survived to the present. In fact, we have very few original contracts from this time period across Europe. From the Wawel court, we do have a royal treasury account from 1553 for expenses related to Sigismund the Old's order of ninety-two heraldic tapestries from Bruges, but no contract stipulating further instructions such as colours, designs, or materials.²¹⁵ However, as tapestry commissioning was a fairly standardised process, it is possible to look at the most complete extant documents for a good idea of how the process would have transpired at Wawel. The documents in question are the 1546 contract between Mary of Hungary (acting as an agent for her brother, Charles V) and Jan Cornelisz Vermeyen for cartoons of the *Conquest of Tunis*, the 1548 contracts between Mary and Willem de Pannemaker for the *Conquest of Tunis* weavings, and the 1562 contract between Philip II and Willem de Pannemaker for the *History of Noah* (based on Sigismund's *editio princeps*). These documents have been previously studied by Hendrik J. Horn, Katja Schmitz von Ledebur, and Iain Buchanan.²¹⁶

Firstly, although Sigismund the Old's 1533 record does not reveal much about his involvement in the commission, it does provide one piece of important information for our purposes. The document notes that two sample textiles were to be sent from Flanders to

²¹⁵ Specifically, this document lists an order for twenty tapestries with the arms of Poland, Lithuania, and the Duchy of Milan, twenty-six with green borders, six with the image of a falcon, and the remainder without specified designs. It also lists payments due to an employee of Mauricius Hernyck (a weaver in Antwerp), who was to travel back and forth to Bruges to aid in the production process. The tapestries were then transported from Bruges to Kraków via Hernyck's workshop in Antwerp, wrapped and packed in chests. For the reprinted document, see Gębarowicz and Mańkowski, *Arrasy*, 182-183.

²¹⁶ See Horn, *Vermeyen*; Katja Schmitz von Ledebur, "Threads of Power" (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien, 2015); *Ibid.*, "Emperor Charles V Captures Tunis: A Unique Set of Tapestry Cartoons," *Studia Bruxellae* 13 (2019); Iain Buchanan, "The Contract for King Philip II's Tapestries of the 'History of Noah,'" *The Burlington Magazine* 148, no. 1239 (2006): 406-415.

Kraków for inspection by Sigismund the Old.²¹⁷ Since Sigismund was heavily influenced by his father's approach to patronage, it is highly probable that he, too, would have inspected woven samples of *Genesis*, not just drawings, before giving final approval to the weavers. However, for further insight into the typical process of commissioning tapestries, we must turn to the records of Sigismund's peers and fellow textile collectors: the Habsburgs.

In the initial 1546 contract for *Tunis*, Vermeyen agreed to finish the cartoons within eighteen months. The dimensions of the cartoons were specified (seven and a half ells high, including a half-ell border), as were the materials (charcoal pencil, watercolour, gouache paint), and they were to be executed "on good paper and in the size of the tapestries to be woven with the best and finest vibrant colours."²¹⁸ The contract also stipulated that Mary and Charles could make any changes they wished to Vermeyen's drawings, and that Vermeyen could collaborate with other artists at his own cost. By the time Vermeyen produced the final cartoons, however, Mary would have already approved one or two rounds of sketches.²¹⁹ Although no preliminary sketches of *Tunis* survive (only the finished cartoons), another imperial series, the *Hunts of Maximillian*, sheds light on the typical design process. Van Orley completed at least two (extant) sets of sketches for the *Hunts*: one more spontaneous and schematic, the other more detailed, shaded, and carefully drawn. The first set would have been preliminary drawings shown to the patron for initial approval, taking into account that the patron could make any changes to the design (see Fig. 4). The second set, the *petit patrons*, would have been more labour-intensive to produce, and would

²¹⁷ "Zamówienie arrasów we Flandrii dla Zygmunta Starego i Bony," 1533, AKAD XIV/IV, nr. 2, p. 41v and 42, Central Archives of Historical Record, Warsaw, Poland. Reprinted in Gębarowicz and Mańkowski, *Arrasy*, 182-183.

²¹⁸ Contract reprinted in Horn, *Vermeyen*, 344.

²¹⁹ Schmitz von Ledebur, "Threads of Power," 7.

have been presented after making the required changes for final approval (see Fig. 5). These could then be used as *modelli* for the full-scale cartoon painters (see Fig. 6).²²⁰



Fig. 4 Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Elder, *Esther Before Ahasuerus*, 1541-1545, ink on paper. Warsaw, Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie.



Fig. 5 Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Elder, *The Conversion of Saul*, c. 1530, ink on paper. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

²²⁰ Horn, *Vermeyen*, 118-119.

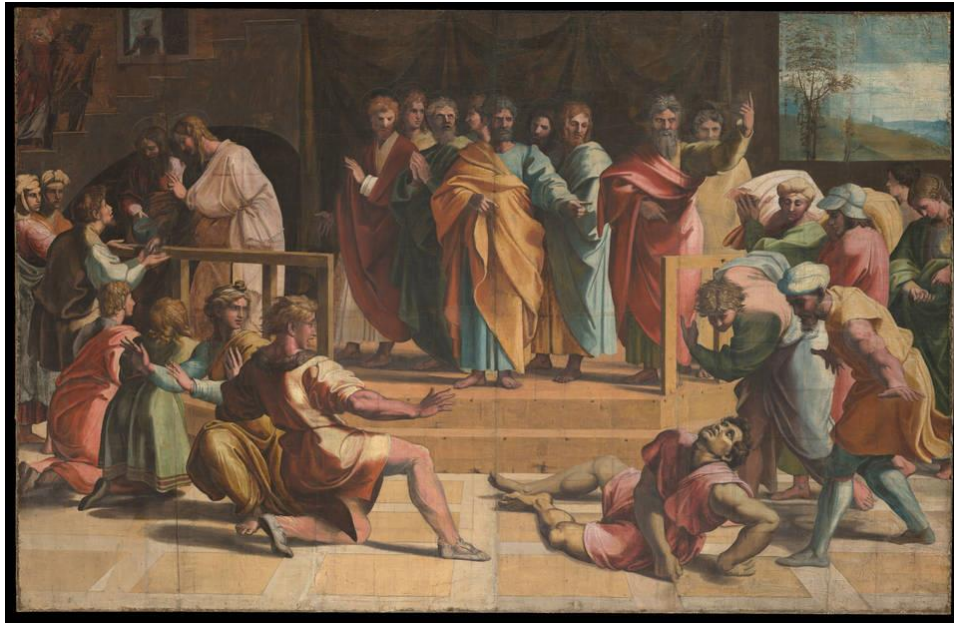


Fig. 6 Raphael, *The Death of Ananias*, c. 1516, bodycolour on paper. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

When the cartoons were finally finished, Mary signed a contract with Willem de Pannemaker for the manufacture of the tapestries at his workshop in Brussels. In it, Pannemaker promised to use the best wool from Lyon, the finest silk from Granada, and the brightest possible threads (although colours are not specified), all supplied by the Emperor. It also dictated the quantities of costly gold and silver thread to be used in certain parts of each tapestry. The series was to be as rich in metallic threads as the *Vertumnus and Pomona* set.²²¹ The tapestries were to be 5.22 metres high, including borders.

The contract for the weaving of Philip II's *History of Noah* set, made fourteen years later, reflects many of the same parameters as its predecessor. Pannemaker agreed to make ten tapestries measuring 579 ells in total length, with a set price of eighteen florins per ell. Philip agreed to supply the cartoons and pay for new cartoons for the borders. After completing the commission, the cartoons were the possession of the patron. Philip was also to send the materials to Brussels within six months of signing, including wool, silk from Granada, and gold and silver thread from Milan. It was specified that these were to be the

²²¹ Schmitz von Ledebur, "Emperor Charles V," 389; Horn, *Vermeyen*, 125.

same materials as those used for Philip's recent *Apocalypse* set. Unlike the *Tunis* contract, this document does dictate the colours and the quantities and costs of each: sixteen libras of crimson, six of "half-crimson," ninety-five of green in six hues, sixty of blue (four hues), twenty of orange (two hues), sixteen of purple (two hues), twelve of brown (three hues), forty-five of yellow (three hues), and thirty-two of white. The set was to be completed within two years, at which point Pannemaker was to deliver it for inspection to Philip's agent in Antwerp and to members of the tapestry guild. If the tapestries did not pass inspection, Pannemaker was to take them back and refund his advance payment to Philip.²²²

Interestingly, there was some disagreement regarding the borders for *Noah*: Philip's tapestry merchant insisted to Pannemaker that the initial designs for borders had to be changed, including adding biblical figures linked to the main scenes, as well as sky, water, and landscape decorations. Pannemaker complained of the additional costs and labour hours, and also believed that the landscape designs were not well-suited to such borders. The patron's vision, naturally, prevailed.²²³

Considered together, these contracts give us a model for the cooperation between patrons, cartoonists, and workshops for a major figural tapestry commission. While there are certain elements of these contracts that were clearly unique to their commissions and which may not have been present in Sigismund's contract (e.g. the comparisons in quality to other Habsburg sets, and perhaps the provenance of some of the materials), what stands out in particular is the degree of the patron's involvement and control throughout the process, whether by amending or approving designs for scenes and borders or providing materials. The patron could make changes at will (a cause of difficulty for the artists), and could nullify years of work if the finished product did not pass their final inspection. With

²²² Buchanan, "Contract," 406-407.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 409.

this dynamic in mind, we may zoom in to Sigismund's own commission. Lacking a contract, we must rely on the documents we do have, which describe an array of designs presented to the king, from which he eventually chose the *Genesis* series.

2.2. The Rejected Tapestries

Two archival documents reveal some of the *petit patrons* delivered to Sigismund for his consideration before finalising the commission. The first is an entry in the royal treasury records dated 14 January 1547, entitled "*Pro imaginibus*." It lists eight *images* of "the virtues," five of Charles V's military campaign against Hayreddin Barbarossa, "The Creation of Man," and "Noah's Ark in the Flood." The second document is a 1548 register of expenses from Vilnius, which includes three entries related to designs. The first, dated 6 April 1548, two days before the news of Sigismund the Old's death reached Vilnius, lists expenditures for sixteen *images*: eight of the "Story of Joseph," and eight of the "Peregrinations of Abraham" (see Fig. 7 for an example of how these designs may have looked). Shortly afterward, two consecutive entries list nine *images* of virtues and twenty *images* of "various figures," referring to figural tapestries.²²⁴ This last set of drawings may have been the *images* of the full Genesis series, which numbered twenty upon their initial unveiling.

²²⁴ Janicki, "*Images*," 142-145.



Fig. 7 Michiel Coxie, *The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek*, 16th c., ink on paper. Paris, Institut Néerlandais.

What, then, became of these other proposed series, and why may Sigismund have decided against them for his first commission? In the case of the “virtues” *imagines*, it does not appear that this series was ever commissioned, perhaps due to a lack of funds or simply a lack of interest from Sigismund. There is some confusion among scholars regarding this series, however: in her catalogue of the tapestries of the palace at Vilnius, Ieva Jedzinskaitė-Kuizininienė claims that Sigismund probably did commission this series, which, she writes, were listed in a 1572 inventory as “tapestries with muses.”²²⁵ In actuality, however, the inventory lists “tapestries with Fortunes” (*opony z Fortunami*) and does not specify the number of hangings in the series.²²⁶ It is impossible to say for certain whether these are connected to the proposed sets of either eight or nine tapestries with virtues.

Further confusion has stemmed from the fact that the record of Catherine of Habsburg’s wedding progress to Kraków lists eight tapestries depicting unnamed virtues, and seven *viridices* (tapestries with predominantly green colouring) depicting the cardinal and theological virtues. This latter set is the *Allegories of the Virtues* designed by Michiel

²²⁵ Jedzinskaitė-Kuizininienė, *Tapestries*, 25.

²²⁶ Inventory reprinted in Gębarowicz and Mankowski, *Arrasy*, 23.

Coxcie, which passed into the possession of Catherine's brother, Maximillian II, after her death in 1572, but the former, with the same number of entries as Sigismund's first proposed virtues series, remains unidentified.²²⁷

It does not seem possible that Sigismund ordered this set as a gift to his future third bride, as he began the ordering process at least as early as 1547, when he had not yet married his mistress Barbara. One possibility is that the tapestries were originally intended for Barbara (or himself), but were not received by the time of Barbara's untimely death in 1551, and were then reappropriated as a wedding gift to Catherine in 1553. However, the plausibility of this theory falters when one considers that royal brides typically brought their own luxury wares (such as tapestries) with them as part of their dowries. Such was the case with Sigismund's first wife and Catherine's sister, Elizabeth, who arrived in Kraków with Flemish sets of *The Story of Nebuchadnezzar* and *The Story of Romulus and Remus*.²²⁸ Therefore, it is likely that Catherine's virtue tapestries were her own, and that Sigismund had independently commissioned a separate series, perhaps even based on the same cartoons.

As far as we know, based on royal inventories and any other surviving documents, the rest of the designs offered to Sigismund were also never commissioned. In the case of the military series, the reasoning for the rejection may have been political. Firstly, it is important to note that, judging by the specific Habsburg-centric subject of the Barbarossa *petit patrons*, it is very likely that the images Sigismund received may have been used as a kind of sample platter of different subgenres of figural tapestry (historical/military, mythological, biblical, etc.). Otherwise, the offering of a series extolling the valour of the incumbent Holy Roman Emperor to the King of Poland seems quite absurd. Therefore, it

²²⁷ Janicki, "Imagines," 146.

²²⁸ Jedzinskaite-Kuiziniene, *Tapestries*, 20.

is more helpful to interrogate why Sigismund decided against a military series in general, not the Barbarossa set in particular.

As previously noted, Sigismund was not a military-minded monarch, especially as a young king. If anything, many noblemen bemoaned his lack of enthusiasm for combat and physical pursuits, and doubted whether he would be capable enough to lead an army and defend the kingdom if the need arose. In addition, Sigismund was known for his tolerance toward heretics and his underlying political strategy of appeasement and peacekeeping above all. Considering that these were well-known facets of the king's image to his contemporaries, to the point where they became heated talking-points at parliamentary sessions, a commission of military tapestries could have been interpreted as anachronistic or disingenuous.²²⁹

For all of these reasons, a protagonist of a military set would not have been a suitable avatar for Sigismund. A much more suitable choice was a biblical protagonist, which carried a wealth of recognisable and virtuous implications and much less political baggage. Although Sigismund did choose biblical tapestries for the commission, it is interesting that he turned down series of Abraham and Joseph. One reason for this, much like the virtues tapestries, may simply have been a matter of cost and prioritising his wishes. We also know that Sigismund already owned an older Abraham set from his mother, commissioned several decades prior. However, in the case of Abraham, there may have been one further issue determining his choice, which may illuminate some of the reasons for his choice of the specific Genesis stories.

Around 1543, Henry VIII had acquired a set of *The Story of Abraham*, with cartoons by Coxcie, which eclipsed many other concurrent series in its size, spectacle, quality, and

²²⁹ Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 403.

cost. By 1550, Abraham sets could be found at the courts of the Dukes of Albuquerque and Lorraine, Isabella of Castille, and Joanna of Austria, among others. In many ways, Abraham was a perfect avatar for a sixteenth century king: the father of a nation who had made a special covenant with God, typified by his unyielding faith, loyalty, and strength of character when tested.²³⁰ Henry had chosen Abraham as a parallel to his own efforts as “father” of a new national Church, whereas, according to Elizabeth Cleland, Philip II used imagery of the patriarch (including a tapestry set) to compare his relationship to Charles V to the paternal-filial bond between Abraham and Isaac.²³¹

By the time Sigismund considered an Abraham set in 1548, it was one of the most popular subjects for figural tapestries, and was closely associated with the original patron of the Coxcie set, Henry VIII. There is the possibility that Sigismund simply wanted to order less popular subjects, as we shall see in the following section. Additionally, commissioning a set based on the same cartoons would have gone against his apparent strategy of commissioning new cartoons for the other *Genesis* pieces. However, even if he had chosen a different cartoonist (although this may have disrupted the stylistic cohesion of the rest of the *Genesis* series by Coxcie), it is possible that Sigismund was wary of the political implications of aligning himself with Henry VIII by appropriating a symbol that Henry had explicitly used to establish his autonomous right of ecclesiastical and doctrinal authority. While Sigismund was certainly amenable to reform and did flirt with the idea of a national Polish Church later in the 1550s, he may not have been interested in such a radical notion in the late 1540s. More potently, he may have been wary of any potentially incendiary topics at such a fragile time for Polish religious politics, and wanted to avoid a commission that could have had a controversial reception.

²³⁰ Schmitz von Ledebur, “Threads of Power,” 6; Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 234.

²³¹ Ibid., 235.

Lacking any documents to test these theories, they remain speculative, but the rejected designs give us some hints as to the priorities and motivations behind Sigismund's commissioning process. The one thing of which we can be certain is the twenty-piece set that arrived in Kraków by July 1553. Why, then, did Sigismund opt for these designs over others?

2.3. The Patriarchs at Other Courts

Sigismund's decision to commission tapestries based on Genesis and Exodus was not unprecedented. While Old Testament tapestries became increasingly popular during the early sixteenth century, they were still surpassed by New Testament narratives, particularly the life of Christ, the Passion, and the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed, some of the most influential and frequently copied series of the period were New Testament stories: Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* and *The Life of Christ*, as well as a nine-piece series of the *Life of St. Paul* by Pieter Coecke Van Aelst.²³² However, the turn of the century did bring a new trend for Old Testament stories, most notably the *Story of David*, with versions by eminent cartoonists such as Bernaert van Orley and Pieter Coecke van Aelst.

First and foremost, the ubiquity of the Old Testament made the tapestries legible across the continent and across confessional divides.²³³ Secondly, characters such as David, Jacob, Joseph, Solomon, Abraham, and Esther provided ample narrative material for dramatic and lengthy episodic series, and plenty of potential for political and religious commentary.²³⁴ The protagonists of these series could serve as avatars for their patrons, role models for the courtly elite, and mouthpieces for ideological agendas.²³⁵ Similarly to

²³² Schmitz von Ledebur, "Threads of Power," 4.

²³³ Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 403.

²³⁴ Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 234.

²³⁵ Schmitz von Ledebur, "Threads of Power," 2.

the *Los Honores* series (c. 1525, essentially an educational programme for the the young Charles V), tapestries featuring the Old Testament members of the “Nine Worthies” (Joshua, David, Judas Maccabeus) were models of chivalric virtues, strong leadership, and military conquest.²³⁶ David was the original model for kings: not only in his successful reign, but also in his gift of prophecy, proficiency in arts and letters, and production of many heirs. He was also an example of repentance after sin, and a cautionary tale against the dangers of immorality and violence.²³⁷ Meanwhile, Gideon (a favourite figure of Philip the Good, Charles V, and Philip II) was the patron of the Order of the Golden Fleece, presented as a divinely-appointed knight whose victory over the Midianites mirrored the conflict between Christendom and the Muslim world.²³⁸

Guy Delmarcel also posits that sixteenth-century patrons may have chosen these Old Testament stories for their parallels to ongoing religious conflicts.²³⁹ Delmarcel lists Abraham, Jacob, and Tobias as examples of this, but this is an equally relevant point for the stories of Moses, David, Joshua, Noah, and Joseph, among others.

Based on the exhaustive research of Thomas Campbell, Elizabeth Cleland, Guy Delmarcel, and Koenraad Jonckheere into sixteenth century tapestries at various courts, in addition to royal treasury inventories and museum and auction catalogues, it is possible to draw up a list of known Old Testament tapestries commissioned by European rulers in the first half of the sixteenth century:

- *The Story of Abraham*: 1543-1544 (Henry VIII), 1544 (Beltran de la Cueva, Duke of Albuquerque), c. 1550 (Isabella of Castille), c. 1550 (Joanna of Austria), 1550 (Charles III, Duke of Lorraine)²⁴⁰

²³⁶ Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 214, Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 18.

²³⁷ Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 74.

²³⁸ Chipps Smith, “Portable Propaganda,” 123-127.

²³⁹ Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 18.

²⁴⁰ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 94, 265, 267, 421, 422, 456.

- *The Story of David*: before 1505 (Manuel I of Portugal), 1510 (unknown patron), 1516 (Maximilian I), 1520 (unknown patron), 1525 (unknown patron), 1528 (Henry VIII);²⁴¹
- *The Story of Joshua*: before 1497 (Margaret of Austria), 1538 (Francis I), 1544 (Mary of Hungary for Charles V), before 1547 (Henry VIII);²⁴²
- *The Story of Tobias*: 1539 (Cosimo de Medici), 1546 (Henry VIII), 1547 (Mary of Hungary), 1547 (Ferrante Gonzaga);²⁴³
- *The Story of Moses*: c. 1545-1550 (Ferrante Gonzaga);²⁴⁴
- *The Story of Jacob*: 1538 (Cardinal Campeggio);²⁴⁵
- *The Story of Noah*: 1522 (Charles V);²⁴⁶
- *The Story of Creation*: 1551 (Cosimo de Medici);²⁴⁷
- *The Story of Joseph the Hebrew*: c. 1549-1553 (Cosimo de Medici);²⁴⁸
- *The Story of Daniel*: pre-1550 (Charles V);²⁴⁹
- *The Story of Samson* commissioned c. 1550, cartoon circulating prior to commission (Henri II, unfinished due to king's death);²⁵⁰
- *The Story of Gideon*: by 1468 (Philip the Good) but used frequently by Charles V and Philip II;²⁵¹
- *The Story of Esther*: 1545-1550 drawing by Pieter Coecke van Aelst, unknown if ever woven and for whom.²⁵²

In several ways, the *Genesis* series stands out from its contemporaries above. Perhaps most blatantly, it is the only example of multiple biblical stories within one set: an episodic exploration across millennia of Old Testament history, rather than a focused study

²⁴¹ Ibid., 136, 137, 139, 279, 133, 149, 161, 179, 278, 267, 301.

²⁴² Ibid., 267, 270, 282, 381-384, 422.

²⁴³ Tobias also features in two tapestries in *The Twelve Ages of Man* (1515, commissioned by Margaret of Austria). Ibid., 282, 370, 402, 457, 499.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 348, 391, 392-393.

²⁴⁵ Jacob also features in one tapestry in *The Twelve Ages of Man*. Ibid., 278, 300-302, 335, 380, 381.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 278.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 276, 278, 281, 385, 389-391, 414, 427, 501.

²⁴⁸ Joseph also features in one tapestry in *The Twelve Ages of Man*. Ibid., 497-499, 517, 521-525.

²⁴⁹ Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 96.

²⁵⁰ Ruben Suykerbuyk, "Michiel Coxcie and the "Story of Samson" Tapestry Series," *Master Drawings* 52, no. 3 (2014): 377.

²⁵¹ Chipps Smith, "Portable Propaganda," 123-127.

²⁵² The *petit patron* for one of the *Esther* tapestries is held by the Royal Castle in Warsaw. Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 292.

of one character. The series's narrative scope, therefore, is significantly more epic than other sets, and adds yet another layer of magnificence to the commission in comparison to its counterparts at other courts.

On the other hand, the longer narrative of *Genesis* meant that the individual stories had to be abridged to key moments, while single-protagonist sets could flesh out the story and characters more thoroughly. This would have been particularly valuable for patrons such as Henry VIII whose image-creation was so closely linked to specific figures, such as Abraham. Sigismund, however, did not have any biblical characters who featured prominently in his image-creation. Therefore, it may have been more expedient for him to maximise the space in which he could explore larger themes across multiple narratives, rather than bearing the exorbitant cost of a series dedicated to one personal avatar.

Although the designs and scope of Sigismund's tapestries were new, their subject matter was largely not. Still, compared to the sets of Abraham, David, Joshua, and Tobias, three of the four narratives of the *Genesis* series had only one known precursor each among the most prominent European courts. There is no extant precursor for the Cain and Abel set. In this sense, while Sigismund was not (with this one exception) introducing new subjects to the established tapestry canon, he was also not drawing on the most ubiquitous choices. Nevertheless, as publicly-displayed court art, his tapestries were necessarily in dialogue with their counterparts across Europe, especially those with the same subject matter.

To begin with the most oblique case, that of the lost Moses tapestries, the only other known set from the first half of the sixteenth century was commissioned by Ferrante Gonzaga almost simultaneously to Sigismund's (see Fig. 8). In fact, there is a chance that Sigismund was the precursor, if we assume that his commissioning process began in 1547

or earlier, and we take Thomas Campbell and Guy Delmarcel's estimate that Gonzaga's could have been commissioned anywhere between 1545 and 1550.²⁵³



Fig. 8 Giovanni Battista Bertani (cartoon) and Nicholas Kercher (workshop), *The Brazen Serpent*, 1554-1556, wool, silk, silver and gold thread. Milan, Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo di Milano.

Whereas Sigismund's Moses set includes only five tapestries, the Gonzaga set includes twelve pieces. Three of them overlap with the episodes in Sigismund's set (*The Crossing of the Red Sea*, *Moses Receives the Ten Commandments*, *The Battle with the Amalekites*), but the others are quite different: *Moses and the Burning Bush*, *Moses and Aaron Going to Find the Pharaoh*, *The Brazen Serpent*, *Moses Collecting Gold from the Egyptians*, *The Song of the Sister of Moses*, *The Collection of Manna*, *Moses Strikes the Rock*, *The Adoration of the Golden Calf*, and *The Abduction of the Midianite Women and*

²⁵³ Clifford M. Brown and Delmarcel, *Tapestries for the Courts of Federico II, Ercole, and Ferrante Gonzaga, 1522-63* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 194-205.

Children.²⁵⁴ For Ferrante Gonzaga, the Moses series must have been attractive or pertinent enough to commission such a long series based on this one protagonist, whereas for Sigismund, the story of Moses seems to have been one episode in a longer metanarrative of salvation history and a lineage of patriarchal models.

As for the Noah tapestries, their only known sixteenth-century precursor may be quite significant. Charles V's series, completed around 1522, comprised fourteen pieces, although their exact subjects are unknown.²⁵⁵ Sigismund's Noah set, by contrast, comprised eight tapestries. Without knowing how Charles V's set presented the Flood story, it is not possible to compare the narrative framing or focus of the two sets. However, it is noteworthy that, in choosing the story of Noah, Sigismund was, in a sense, emulating a Habsburg commission. Considering the renown of the imperial collection among patrons, it is likely that Sigismund was aware of Charles's *Story of Noah*, or at least had been informed of its existence at some point during the commissioning process.

On the other hand, Charles's set was over twenty years old at the time of Sigismund's commission, and likely would have been very different in their style and composition than the Coxcie cartoons. The 1520s were a transitional decade in tapestry production: the influence of Raphael's cartoons was just beginning to take hold internationally, while major commissions such as Charles V's *Los Honores* still reflected the busier, planar style of early sixteenth century tapestry. With so much time between Charles's and Sigismund's commissions, both the intentional and perceived link between the two series may have been less salient or even impalpable, especially since Sigismund's series did not copy Charles's cartoons. Moreover, similarly to his approach to the Moses

²⁵⁴ "Banque d'Images du Monuments," Centre des Monuments Nationaux, accessed 24 January 2024, <https://regards.monuments-nationaux.fr/fr/recherche>.

²⁵⁵ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 278.

tapestries, Sigismund chose a truncated version of the story as part of a larger Old Testament saga, whereas Charles V was attracted enough to the Flood story to focus an entire commission on it, nearly double the length of Sigismund's.

The case of the Adam and Eve tapestries is similar to that of the Moses tapestries due to the very close dates of commissioning between Sigismund's and the other known set, ordered by Cosimo de Medici (see Fig. 9). According to Lucia Meoni, author of the comprehensive catalogue of Medici tapestry, the cartoons by Pieter Coecke van Aelst for the Florentine set were designed before Michiel Coxcie's. However, Meoni estimates the date of tapestries' completion to be around 1547-1548, although they were delivered in 1551.²⁵⁶ This would mean that Cosimo made the commission a few years before Sigismund, although Meoni does not provide any supporting evidence for this claim, or explain why they may have been completed so long before they were delivered, even taking travel from Brussels to Florence into consideration. Lacking sufficient primary sources to prove the starting dates of either Cosimo's or Sigismund's commission, the question of which series was the precursor remains unanswered. There is also no indication of whether Sigismund would have known that Cosimo was commissioning an Eden set at the same time as he, although it is possible, as some of the *Genesis* series (albeit not *Paradise Bliss*) were woven in the same workshop of Jan van Tieghem, where Cosimo's set was produced.

Of course, any inspiration that Sigismund may have drawn from Cosimo should not be read as tacit support for Florentine culture or politics, considering that his own maternal heritage was Milanese, and that the Sforza family was by no means allied with the Medici. In fact, the Medicis' connections both with the papacy and with France would have placed

²⁵⁶ Lucia Meoni in Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 304.

them at odds with Sigismund's lineage, as the Sforzas had been deposed from their Milanese seat in 1499 by Louis XII, only to be restored in 1521 by Charles V.

However, if we read this as Sigismund's emulation of Italian models more broadly, or "Italianness" as an aesthetic and cultural concept, it would have been rather unsurprising. Sigismund had been deeply entrenched in his Italian heritage since birth, educated and surrounded almost entirely by Italian courtiers until his move to Vilnius, and had based much of his public image, from fashion to intellectual interests, on the ideal of the humanist *virtuoso* prince. This was so noticeable that many among the *szlachta* doubted his "Polishness" and his commitment to his own kingdom. On the other hand, in the 1540s, "Italianness" at the Polish court was heavily associated with Sigismund's mother, Bona Sforza, who had gained a reputation for scheming and corruption. Her strong influence over Sigismund, even into his adulthood, was also well-known. However, by the time of the tapestry commission, Sigismund had fallen out with his mother, largely due to her attempts to derail his relationship with Barbara Radziwiłł, although the conflict had been brewing since she opposed his move to Vilnius in 1544.

In short, Sigismund's public and private relationship to Italy was fraught and complex. If *Paradise Bliss* did follow the Medici commission, and if his Moses set followed Gonzaga's, then this does call into question whether Sigismund was actively inspired by this side of his heritage and personal identity. Even if this was not the case, it is possible that Cosimo's set, renowned for its magnificence, may have been known to some of the guests at the unveiling of *Paradise Bliss* in 1553. Thus, even if there was no intentional reference on Sigismund's part, some viewers may have drawn a connection between Cosimo and Sigismund.

Another interesting aspect in the relationship between the two sets is their significantly different approach to the creation story. Sigismund's set collects the entire Garden of Eden story into one tapestry, followed by the tale of Adam's cultivation of the land after his expulsion and the tragedy of Cain and Abel; the Medici set focuses only on the events in Eden. The seven-piece set includes *The Creation of Adam*, *God Leads Adam into the Garden of Eden*, *Adam Names the Animal Kingdom*, *The Creation of Eve*, *The Original Sin*, *God Accuses Adam and Eve After the Fall*, and *The Expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden*.²⁵⁷ Thus, the Medici set spends much more time on Adam and Eve's story, and much more time in the Garden both before and during the Fall. One possible reason for this may be Cosimo's documented interest in and promotion of natural history and Neoplatonism, linked to the search for the "lost language of Adam," as discussed by Carmen Cramer Niekrasz.²⁵⁸

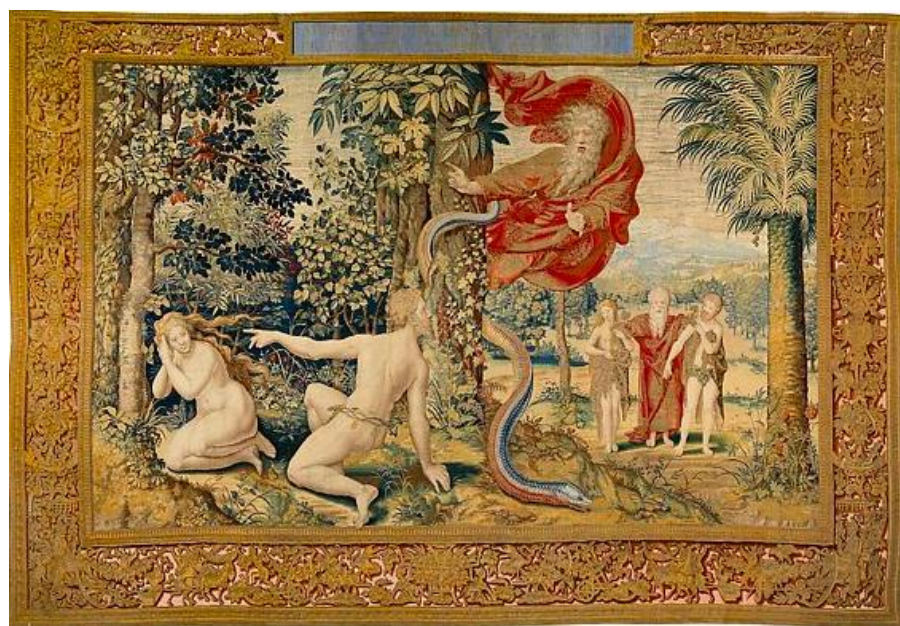


Fig. 9 Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Elder (cartoon), Jan de Kempeneer and Frans Ghieteels (workshops), *God Accuses Adam and Eve After the Fall*, 1551, wool, silk, gold and silver thread. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

²⁵⁷ Meoni in Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 304.

²⁵⁸ Niekrasz, *Woven Theaters*. 151-156.

In contrast, the Wawel set moves immediately from the Garden to the bleak tribulations of Adam and Eve after their expulsion. At first glance, this may make Sigismund's series appear less hopeful and optimistic than Cosimo's, but this would be an oversimplification. Cosimo's may spend more time in the Garden, but it does not focus primarily on the idyllic, prelapsarian world; an equal amount of time is spent on the creation story and on the Fall (four tapestries each). Sigismund's narrative may skip quickly into the postlapsarian world after *Paradise Bliss*, but this is mainly because the Adam and Eve story is one episode in the series' metanarrative which includes many other moments of hope, prosperity, and salvation, as we will see in Chapter Five.

Finally, we must note the issue of the Cain and Abel set and their lack of any (known) counterparts at other European courts. While the thematic implications of this story will be discussed in Chapter Four, this choice of subject matter makes the *Genesis* set stand out from others. Just like the multi-narrative scope and the relative scarcity of the rest of *Genesis*'s stories in other collections, the Cain and Abel tapestries added another layer of novelty to Sigismund's commission.

As for the other contemporary Old Testament tapestries that do not share the same subject material as Sigismund's set, many of their themes are still echoed in the *Genesis* series. Nearly all of the biblical narratives listed above feature protagonists placing total trust and faith in God in the midst of imminent danger or catastrophe, and several of these characters (Abraham, David, Jacob, and Joseph) were lauded as fathers of nations with innumerable descendants. Like Jacob, Joseph, and Daniel, the *Genesis* protagonists were also granted with knowledge straight from God.

However, unlike the other most popular story, that of Joshua (as well as Gideon, Daniel, and Samson), the *Genesis* tapestries do not glorify military conquest (with the

potential exception of “The Battle of the Amalekites”). Notably, Sigismund’s series also avoids any potentially incendiary subjects such as Gideon, used simultaneously as the patron of the Order of the Golden Fleece and a hero of Protestant iconoclasm, or Tobias, the protagonist of a book deemed apocryphal by Luther and Calvin.

It is also interesting that, in selecting the Old Testament protagonists for his tapestries, Sigismund did not rely on the established models of biblical exemplars set forth by his father. In much of his personal imagery, Sigismund the Old used the figure of Solomon, most notably in his grandest commission, the Sigismund Chapel at Wawel Cathedral. Sigismund the Old was intensely involved in the design and construction of the chapel, which included a cryptoportrait of the king as Solomon surrounded by saints and other Old Testament figures, as well as a relief of Solomon holding a sceptre and scroll above a statue of St. Sigismund (Fig. 10). In general, the wise King Solomon was a common archetype for kings, and the Polish coronation rite featured many references to Solomon.²⁵⁹ In fact, in a letter to Sigismund the Old, Erasmus compared the erudite humanist king to Solomon.²⁶⁰ Sigismund the Old also drew on the figure of David, who appears in the Sigismund Chapel as a statue holding a harp and scroll (Fig. 11), and was included in the coronation rite.²⁶¹ As one of the “Nine Worthies,” David was arguably the most popular Old Testament avatar for princely virtue.

²⁵⁹ Helena and Stefan Kozakiewicz, *The Renaissance in Poland* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1976), 30, 33.

²⁶⁰ Louthan, “A Model for Christendom,” 34.

²⁶¹ Kozakiewicz, *The Renaissance in Poland*, 33.



Fig. 10 Tondo of Solomon in the Sigismund Chapel, c. 1531. Kraków, Bazylika Archikatedralna św. Stanisława i św. Wacława.



Fig. 11 Tondo of David in the Sigismund Chapel, c. 1531, Kraków, Bazylika Archikatedralna św. Stanisława i św. Wacława.

Sigismund Augustus, on the other hand, did not make frequent references to either Solomon or David in his personal iconography, including his tapestries. Perhaps this was an attempt to forge a separate identity for himself out of his father's shadow, having served with him as co-regent for so many years. Perhaps other Old Testament figures would have been more fitting conduits for his image-creation and agenda, as we shall explore in Chapter Five.

2.4. Conclusion

In order to understand the *Genesis* commission, it is not sufficient or accurate to view the set as merely the brainchild of an auteur-patron, divorced from the domestic and international context of its creation. Alongside the political and religious context that may have propelled the commission in the first place, the choice of the Book of Genesis as the backdrop for the series must be read in the context of Sigismund's patronly persona, as well as the wider world of courtly tapestry commissioning across Europe. While we may only speculate as to why he rejected certain sets in favour of *Genesis*, there does appear to be an element of conscious choice in finding stories that best reflected his image and politics.

While the biblical genre was not a novelty at Wawel, and was in fact a contemporary trend at other courts, the stories of *Genesis* were new to the Polish tapestry collection and fairly new in the European arena. By choosing stories that were familiar to all viewers yet not ubiquitous on the tapestry market, Sigismund could straddle the line between playing on existing, easily legible imagery and carving out a new niche for himself as an influential patron.

The next step in establishing the context of *Genesis*, before moving on to the series' content, is a close reading of the most important primary source on their unveiling: Stanisław Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*, which provides the groundwork for uncovering the moral, political, and religious messages of the series.

Chapter Three: The *Ekphrasis* and the Tapestries

As we approach the only eyewitness account of the *Genesis* series, the *ekphrasis* within Stanisław Orzechowski's wedding panegyric, it is necessary to consider the generic and rhetorical conventions to which the *ekphrasis* is bound, as well as the circumstances of its composition. Before adopting the text into our methodology of interpreting the series, we must question the extent to which we can rely on the *ekphrasis* to reconstruct contemporary readings of the tapestries. Taking all of this into account, however, we may examine the interplay between the *ekphrasis* and the tapestries, especially regarding the image-creation and agenda of Sigismund Augustus and its legibility for a viewer at the unveiling.

After an overview of the author's motivations for writing the text and the culture surrounding *ekphrasis* at the Polish court, this chapter will provide a close reading of the *ekphrasis*, beginning with its position within the wedding panegyric. It will then discuss how Orzechowski's conscious use of the generic conventions of *ekphrasis* allow him to craft an image not only of the tapestries, but of their patron, including through his commentary on their stylistic value, their narrative morals, and their explicit links to the king's person.

3.1. The *Ekphrastic* Author

If one reads the *ekphrasis* as an attempt at the most accurate depiction of the unveiling, a kind of forensic recreation of events, one is immediately struck by several "errors" in the account. Orzechowski omits *Fratricide Conceived* and *Noah's Drunkenness*, separates *Paradise Bliss* into three hangings and *The Building of the Ark* into two, and

conflates *The Animals Exit the Ark* and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*.²⁶² Arguably, therefore, it is not particularly productive to interrogate the “accuracy” of Orzechowski’s text as an eyewitness account, as this stands in conflict with the aims of the text. The panegyric was written for the king and gifted directly to him after its composition. Its primary functions were to aid in the project of magnificence and, by proxy, to elevate the author in the king’s good graces, not to replicate the unveiling for absent readers outside of the court.

In fact, the *ekphrasis* must be read firstly in the light of the dire circumstances in which the author found himself in the summer of 1553, despite his prolific career as an author and orator. Born in 1513 in the city of Przemyśl (southeastern Poland) to a Polish nobleman and the daughter of a Ruthenian priest, Orzechowski entered seminary at the age of twelve. He left Poland in 1528 to study in Vienna, and then spent the next three years living with and studying under Luther in Wittenberg.²⁶³ While there, Orzechowski also drew the attention of Lucas Cranach the Elder and, during a short stay in Nuremberg, Albrecht Dürer, both of whom inspired Orzechowski’s interest in art.²⁶⁴ After leaving Saxony, Orzechowski travelled to Italy to study at the Universities of Venice, Bologna, Padua, and Rome.²⁶⁵ It was in Italy that Orzechowski’s issues with the Church coalesced into the two agendas that would define his career: the abolition of clerical celibacy, and the extension of communion with Rome to the Eastern Church to create a truly “catholic” Church.²⁶⁶ Upon his return to Poland, Orzechowski cultivated infamy for a decade of

²⁶² There is also a chance that he made a mistake in the chronology of the Moses series as well because, according to Exodus, the battle with the Amalekites occurred before the bestowing of the Ten Commandments, not after.

²⁶³ Ludwik Kubala, *Stanisław Orzechowski i jego wpływ na rozwój i upadek Reformacji w Polsce* (Lwów: H. Altenberg, 1906), 2-4.

²⁶⁴ Jerzy Starnawski, “Wstęp,” In *Wybór pism: Stanisław Orzechowski*, ed. Jerzy Starnawski (Kraków: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1972), 4.

²⁶⁵ Marcin Fabiański, *Wokół wawelskiego dworu Jagiellonów* (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2020), 184.

²⁶⁶ Kubala, *Orzechowski*, 4.

maverick politicking, heretical treatises, and stirring rhetorical skills, earning the moniker “the Polish Demosthenes.”²⁶⁷ He was an especially vocal opponent of the papacy, including denouncements of indulgences and the sacrament of Confession, and believed that Roman law was at odds with the sovereignty of Polish law. As he wrote in his castigation of Julius III’s papacy, *De lege coelibatus contra Syricium* (1548), Orzechowski declared himself to be “not a popish subject but a royal subject,” in a kingdom where “the king is limited by the law, of which he is a servant.”²⁶⁸

Notably, Orzechowski was also one of the most vocal opponents of Sigismund Augustus’s marriage to Barbara Radziwiłł, including speeches against her in parliament in 1548. In the first of these, he stigmatised the Lithuanian nobility’s passivity toward the royal marriage, and accused the Radziwiłł faction of attempting to usurp the king’s authority. In the second, he focused on the queen’s allegedly salacious past, and gives her family the epithet “Zdradziwiłł” (a pun on the Polish word for treason, *zdrada*).²⁶⁹

In 1551, two years before writing the panegyric, Orzechowski broke his clerical vow of celibacy by marrying Magdalena Chełmska, daughter of the burgrave of Kraków. Consequently, Orzechowski was excommunicated for heresy and sentenced to exile.²⁷⁰ Orzechowski embarked on an appeal process both to the Polish episcopate and even the pope himself, whom he had so virulently attacked in past treatises. Orzechowski argued that he had not committed any crime, spiritual or secular, by marrying. He asked for papal dispensation for marriage to avoid persecution, not because of his loyalty to Rome, and threatened that if he did not receive it, he would be forced to apostatize and spread antipapal

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 5-6, 15.

²⁶⁸ Cited in Ibid., 17-20.

²⁶⁹ Starnawski, “Wstęp,” 25.

²⁷⁰ Hanna Świdorska, “Stanisław Orzechowski: The Uneasy Years, 1550-1559,” *The Polish Review* 8, no. 3: 12-13.

sentiment around Poland. Finally, in 1552, the *sejm* suspended the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts over the *szlachta* and froze all ongoing cases. Orzechowski received absolution from the Polish Primate, Mikołaj Dzierzgowski, reuniting him in communion with the Church.²⁷¹

Still, by the summer of 1553, Orzechowski was in dire financial straits without his clerical income. His reputation had earned him the admiration of some dissident thinkers, but the scorn of the Catholic episcopate and nobility. On the other hand, his insistence on continuing to profess his “Catholic” faith and never officially break from the Roman Church isolated him from many major reformers. In Sigismund’s eyes, Orzechowski’s vitriolic attacks on Barbara on the *sejm* floor had cemented his place as a *persona non grata* at court.²⁷²

For his own part, Orzechowski was no great admirer of the young king, believing him to be weaker and less trustworthy than his father.²⁷³ As he wrote to Jakub Przyluski after the death of Sigismund I:

Everywhere there are rumours of worse tidings, nothing good is predicted, and it seems, rather, that a terrible end threatens us. The wagon of Poland is destroyed along with its driver. Nothing can comfort us, so say all the voices around us, the most distressing and shameful of all.²⁷⁴

Orzechowski had also gained notoriety with a previous treatise addressed to Sigismund, *Fidelis subditus* (1543), published right before his first wedding to Elizabeth of Austria. In a surprisingly blunt, perhaps even somewhat patronising tone, Orzechowski reminds the king that he must serve the kingdom, not the other way around, and that, because of his

²⁷¹ Ibid., 22-24.

²⁷² Ibid., 3-4, 8, 15, 25.

²⁷³ Starnawski, “Wstęp,” 2.

²⁷⁴ Cited in Starnawski, “Wstęp,” 18.

youth, it would behove him to proceed with humility and heed the counsel of older and wiser men:

Why am I speaking to you? Because you are to lead me, and I am to be led by you. You must therefore be wiser than me. If you will be, then I have won: I will be free, wealthy, and happy. If you err, I will die: there will be nothing left for me...other than to leave my homeland...Thus I have decided, while I am still well, to beseech you, to hold you to your holy obligations: study, cultivate your abilities, prepare yourself to protect liberty and your homeland in the hour of danger. And because your age does not allow you to know everything, my benevolence urges me to give you an earnest warning. Do not dismiss it. Remember, that he who does not want to hear the truth will be punished by God with sycophants.²⁷⁵

While we have no record of Sigismund's reaction to the treatise, it is possible that this set the tone for their future relations, which would only be further strained by Orzechowski's polemics against Barbara.

Nevertheless, Orzechowski realised the pragmatic need to return to the king's favour, and his pen had proven to be his most potent weapon thus far. In fact, the panegyric was not Orzechowski's first foray into princely propaganda. In 1544, his *Ad Sigismundum Poloniae Regem Turcica secunda* was an attempt to rehabilitate Sigismund I's authoritative image after it was tarnished during the "Chicken War" between the king and the noble insurgents.²⁷⁶

In the summer of 1553, two opportunities arose to change Orzechowski's circumstances: the opening of the position of court historian at Wawel, and the royal wedding. The panegyric, composed directly after the wedding and sent to Sigismund as a

²⁷⁵ Cited in Kubala, *Orzechowski*, 16.

²⁷⁶ Starnawski, "Wstęp," 9.

gift, was both an attempt to ameliorate the bad blood between him and the king and to demonstrate his literary aptitude for a position that would save him from destitution.²⁷⁷



Fig. 12 Frontispiece of *Panegyricus nuptiarum* from the original printing (1553).

3.2. Writing *Ekphrasis* in Sixteenth-Century Kraków

In addition to the personal motivations of the author, the *ekphrasis* must be read as an example of a rigorously codified classical literary genre. For Renaissance humanists, *ekphrasis* was seen as part of classical rhetorical training,²⁷⁸ and a chance to participate in a longstanding tradition from antiquity. For the rhetoricians of the Second Sophistic who coined the term in the *Progymnasmata* (ancient rhetoric handbooks), *ekphrasis* was “a descriptive speech which brings the things shown vividly before the eyes.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁷ According to Ludwik Kubala, it was “written to restore himself to the king’s good graces” (Kubala, Orzechowski, 38). Hanna Świdorska agrees that its “object was to coax gifts from King Ferdinand and Zygmunt August.” Świdorska, “Stanisław Orzechowski,” 26.

²⁷⁸ Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 28.

²⁷⁹ Jaś Elsner, “Introduction: The Genres of Ekphrasis.” *Ramus* 31, no. 1-2 (2002): 1.

The word “descriptive” is important in the Renaissance context, as the humanists sometimes translated “*ekphrasis*” into Latin as *descriptio*.²⁸⁰ However, *descriptio* entailed much more than a litany of details; the crux of the definition is bringing these descriptions to life for the reader. Nikolaos, author of the last edition of the *Progymnasmata* (late 5th cent. AD), defines *ekphrasis* as the narration of *how* something happened. In fact, this can be deduced from the very etymology of the word “*ekphrasis*”: to tell (*phrazo*) in full (*ek*). The key to this fullness of narration is *enargeia* (“vividness”), the power of the poet to animate the inanimate, absent, or past in the mind’s eye of the reader.²⁸¹ In the words of Hermogenes, “the special virtues of *ekphrasis* are clarity (*sapheneia*) and visibility (*enargeia*); the style should contrive to bring about seeing through hearing.”²⁸²

For his own *ekphrasis*, Orzechowski was probably heavily influenced by the ubiquity of the genre at the sixteenth-century Polish court and in humanist circles in Kraków. At least two *ekphrases* had been written for the occasion of Sigismund Augustus’s first wedding to Elizabeth of Austria in 1543. Pedro Ruiz de Moro, a friend of Orzechowski and professor of Roman law at Kraków, included a detailed description of a collection of golden ornamental vessels in his panegyric. Georgius Sabinus, rector of the Albertina (University of Königsberg), also penned an *ekphrasis* of embroideries of the deeds of great Polish kings which were not present at the wedding, but invented by the author.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ Ruth Webb, “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre,” *Word and Image* 15, no. 1 (1999): 10.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸² Cited in Elsner, “Introduction,” 1.

²⁸³ Fabiański, “Renaissance Nudes,” 256. Other royal wedding panegyrics from the sixteenth century, including those by Justus Decius (1518) and Stanisław Górski (1535) include lists of wedding presents and descriptions of the ceremonial decor, but do not include *ekphrases*. See Decius, *Diarii et earum, quae memoratu digna in splendidissimis, Potentissimi Sigismundi Poloniae regis, et Serenissimae dominae Bonae Mediolani Barique ducis, principis Rossani, nuptiis gesta...descriptio*, trans. Marcin Fabiański, in *Autorzy Złotego Wieku o kulturze i sztuce na Wawelu*, ed. Marcin Fabiański (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2014), 13-41; Górski, *Wesele Królowej Jadwigi i Joachima Brandenburskiego na Wawelu*, trans. Fabiański, in *Autorzy Złotego Wieku*, 109-113.

One of the major ancient works that may have inspired Orzechowski was arguably the most popular classical text in Renaissance Poland: Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Fueled in part by the belief that Ovid had died and was buried in Poland, the text was kept in libraries across the country, and was part of the standard curriculum at Kraków University. Book VI in particular is relevant to Orzechowski's work, as it describes the lifelike figures woven by Arachne, and her expert use of colour and light in creating her illusions. Moreover, Orzechowski's description of *The Flood* tapestry echoes the violence and vividness of the descriptions of the great flood brought on by Jupiter in Book I. The raging waters, stormy skies, intense destruction, and plights of victims caught in the fray in *Metamorphoses* all reverberate in Orzechowski's account:

On the fourth tapestry you could see the heavens split with rain and a storm raging in the sky with lightning bolts; struck with fear, the faithless generation fell to the ground. Here, you could see the shameful flight of Cain's progeny, a sign of their guilty consciences. As some climb trees to escape the rising waters, others climb towering rocks, and others still flee to the high mountains. This tapestry was so full of confusion and so terrified the viewer, that he himself, struck with fear at such a horrible sight, feared for himself in the flood and longed for the Ark.²⁸⁴

However, by far the most popular *ekphrasis* circulating in sixteenth-century Kraków was the *Tabula* of Cebes (likely by a pseudonymous author), an allegorical dialogue between youths observing an enigmatic tablet, and an old man who decodes it for them. The tablet depicts three circles of Life, the path of science and culture, and the dangers of deceit and delusion along the way. In true Platonic fashion, the man teaches that "evil lies in living badly," and that living well must combine the development of the mind

²⁸⁴ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 54-55.

with the development of character and virtue. The harder path is living well; living badly is often the easier choice.²⁸⁵

The *Tabula* was widely available in Poland thanks to the transcontinental distribution of Ludovico Odaxius's Latin translation (Bologna, 1497), which was published in over sixty editions across Europe. It was also published domestically numerous times. In 1515, Hieronim Wietor (one of the most prolific publishers in Poland) printed his first version of the text (without illustrations), followed by a version with a woodcut of the tablet as described by Cebes in 1517. The Latin translation was published by Florian Ungler in 1522 with a foreword by Georgius Libanus (1464-1546), a renowned humanist at Kraków University. Two years later, Wietor published another edition with extensive commentary by the Italian humanist monk Johannes Camers (1448-1546).²⁸⁶

For the Kraków humanists, the most important element of the *Tabula* was its moral teachings. In his introductory poem to his 1515 edition of the *Tabula*, the poet and Kraków University docent Rudolf Agricola Junior (1443/4- 1485) wrote that Cebes replicated the path of human life as accurately as the painters Apelles and Zeuxis. In his *Libellus de erudienda iuventute* (1526), Leonard Cox (1495-1549), a lecturer on classical literature at the same university, argued that youths should be taught the *Tabula* along with the *Sententiae* of Publilius Syrus. His fellow classics lecturer Georgius Libanus encouraged his pupils to study the *Tabula* for its moral content in his *Paraclesis id est adhortatio ad graecorum literarum studiosos* (1535). One year later, King Sigismund I ordered a frieze reconstruction of the *Tabula* as described by Cebes for the Heads' Hall at Wawel. It was

²⁸⁵ Piotr Hordyński, "Tabula Cebetis z oficyny Hieronima Wietora: Zapomniany drzeworyt krakowski z roku 1519," in *Żeby wiedzieć: Studia dedykowane Helenie Małkiewiczównie*, ed. Wojciech Walanus et al (Kraków: Letra-Graphic, 2008), 181-182.

²⁸⁶ Fabiański, *Wokół wawelskiego dworu*, 187-188.

completed in 1541, and included an inscription quoting Agricola's prefatory *Argumentum* to his edition of the *Tabula*, which stresses the moralising potential of the text.²⁸⁷



Fig. 13 Detail of Dionyzy Stuba, *Tabula Cebetis*, 1540, fresco. Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu.

It is relevant to consider the *Tabula* in relation to Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*: not only was it one of the most popular examples of the genre in Poland at the time, but it is also directly referenced by the author in his own text. At the start of the *ekphrasis*, Orzechowski promises that he "will present [the tapestries] in the style of Cebes, so that you will come to know not only the works of an outstanding artist, but also the person of the noble monarch."²⁸⁸ Throughout the text, Orzechowski's explanations of the lessons in each of the tapestries are likely guided by the *Tabula*'s moralising approach to *ekphrasis*. However, it is noteworthy that Orzechowski's style is not actually influenced by Cebes, but is clearly informed by the rhetorical handbooks of the Second Sophistic. Probably, Orzechowski's appeal to Cebes is for the benefit of the contemporary Polish viewer, whose first point of reference for the genre of *ekphrasis* would be the *Tabula*.

²⁸⁷ Fabiański, "Renaissance Nudes," 249-251.

²⁸⁸ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 51.

3.3. The *Ekphrasis* in the Panegyric

Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* is included toward the end of his panegyric. In the original 1553 published version, it takes up only about nine pages of a total of around seventy-four. This version of the panegyric actually begins with a preface addressed to the son of Jan Tarnowski, castellan of Kraków, who had joined the Viennese court of the future Emperor Ferdinand. Orzechowski writes that he has sent the panegyric to the younger Tarnowski

...so that you may come to know the praise of King Ferdinand, at whose magnificent court you reside. A great and memorable king who, among all the other things he has graciously given our homeland, has also given us a joyful and much-desired wedding...I have written to you so that, as you blissfully spend your youth at the court of King Ferdinand, you might learn what is taking place in your homeland during your absence.

After praising the Tarnowski family, especially the senior Jan, Orzechowski asks the junior Jan "to keep me among your followers."²⁸⁹ It is likely that this preface was included for the published version, and that Orzechowski was attempting to curry favour with a new potential benefactor, a member of one of the most powerful magnate families in Poland. Notably, in the published version, Orzechowski never directly addresses Sigismund, although he bestows lavish praise on him throughout.

The panegyric proper begins with an address from Orzechowski to the reader, in which he declares his intentions behind the text:

I understand that you want to hear from me how our king was wed and how the wedding transpired, the nature of the queen's progress, how she was received, who was present....I will succeed in this, and will not allow you to be spared from such great joy, such that I am not sure it can ever be found. I will tell you about things

²⁸⁹ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dzieła*, 105-106.

that are pleasant to hear, and worthy of knowing, which will remain in our books on Poland, worthy of remembrance.

I will refrain from a high style of speech, for it muddles the senses, and I will also not adopt a low style, for it obscures things. I will speak in a mid-brow manner that would bring you joy and pull you out of all hopelessness. You see what my aim is. Now, it is up to you to listen eagerly about the wedding. The act of listening itself will unite you, for you want to learn as much as possible about the wedding from beginning to end. No one has ever heard nor spoken nor read about one more magnificent in expense, more splendid in grandeur, more pleasant in goodwill.²⁹⁰

From here, Orzechowski launches into a laudation of the might, prosperity, and centuries of alliance and intermarriage between the houses of Habsburg and Jagiełło, all of which has led to the marriage between Sigismund and Catherine. He then explains how the marriage was brokered, including how Mikołaj "the Black" Radziwiłł represented the king at the betrothal ceremony in Vienna. Then, he describes Catherine's progress from Vienna to Kraków, with stops in various towns where she was met by dignitaries sent by Sigismund. When Catherine reaches Kraków, he starts his detailed account of the wedding festivities, beginning with a litany of the many bishops, magnates, noble lords, visiting royals, and other dignitaries as they processed through the city to Wawel Cathedral. After a description of the wedding ceremony itself and some of the initial feasting, he stops at the moment when Sigismund and Catherine made their ceremonial entry into the wedding bedchamber on the second night of the celebration, and takes the viewer through an ekphrastic tour of the tapestries adorning the walls.

After the *ekphrasis*, Orzechowski recounts the wedding night ceremony, followed by an overview of the subsequent days' tournaments. In the final pages, he again addresses his readers, exhorting them, "knights of Poland, to support this marriage, and place all your

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 107-108.

hope in it, for how else can we expect to receive help from God in times of great misfortune if we shun the one [Catherine] whom He has given us?" In the face of external danger (Orzechowski specifically mentions the Turks), "let our understanding with the Austrian house plant the seeds of hope for you." Drawing a parallel between the cultural flourishing of Poland under Bona Sforza and the bright future of the kingdom under Catherine, Orzechowski asserts that "not only the unity but also the magnificence of the kingdom rests on this wedding." His parting words to the reader are as follows:

I have been more long-winded than I promised, but if you have whiled away any time in listening to this, may you be rewarded with the particular contentment that you have gained from this wedding.²⁹¹

For the purposes of this analysis, it is important to remember that Orzechowski introduces several themes in the panegyric that are echoed and reinforced in the *ekphrasis*. Chief among them is the magnificence of Sigismund, the legitimacy of his rule, his princely attributes, and his illustrious court. Secondly, the panegyric makes multiple references to the emotions evoked by the wedding, especially in the introduction and conclusion addressed to the reader, which describe the hope, joy, and sense of wonder that Orzechowski hopes to convey to the absent reader. This focus on the audience's affective response to the splendour and might of the Polish Crown carries on into Orzechowski's descriptions of the tapestries.

Indeed, based on the generic conventions of *ekphrasis*, it is entirely justifiable, even necessary, to consider it in the context of the surrounding panegyric. A guiding principle for all *ekphrases* is that they should progress from an account of the events preceding, to the ekphrastic event or object itself, and then to the aftermath. Current scholarly consensus dictates that *ekphrasis* was not intended to be a static moment or arrested point, an

²⁹¹ Ibid., 144-145.

“ornament” or “foreign body” within a text that “sutures” space, time, and narration, an enclosed space which readers may visit or exit at will.²⁹² It is not a device designed to “intrude upon” and “freeze” the discursive flow, and “suspend” the arguments of the author.²⁹³ Rather, *ekphrasis* is less of a pause than an interlude that interfaces with, complements, furthers, and reflects on the totality of the narrative.²⁹⁴ In Ruth Webb’s words, *ekphrasis* is “an evocation of a scene unfolding in time.”²⁹⁵ According to Webb, this is the fundamental difference between mere description and ekphrastic narration within a text: while the former creates a narrative pause, the latter produces an intensification of the narrative thanks to enargeic details. Therefore, *ekphrases* within texts cannot be read as independent, tangential passages, but as a key element of the immersive effect (and affect) of the whole.²⁹⁶ The “ekphrastic moment” allows the subject (in this case, the artwork) to bleed into the surrounding narrative, to stretch and slow the passage of time but never arrest it entirely. Its buildup can be felt in the prior narrative, and its effects can be felt after its formal conclusion.²⁹⁷ Therefore, in our study of the *ekphrasis*, it will be reasonable to expand the search for meaning-making and image creation beyond the porous boundaries of the *ekphrasis* and into the surrounding panegyric.

Having situated the *ekphrasis* within the surrounding text, we may now move on to a close reading of Orzechowski’s tour of the tapestries, and its impact on an interpretation of *Genesis* in terms of Sigismund’s kingship.

²⁹² W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory : Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 179.

²⁹³ Murray Krieger, *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 7.

²⁹⁴ Elsner, “Introduction,” 3-4, 6.

²⁹⁵ Webb, “Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern,” 12.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁹⁷ Liliane Louvel, “Types of Ekphrasis: An Attempt at Classification,” *Poetics Today* 39, no. 2 (2018): 258-260. See also James Heffernan, “Ekphrasis and Representation,” *New Literary History* 22, no. 2 (1991): 301.

3.4. Rhetoric and Image-Creation

By centering himself, the narrator and rhetor, as a crucial player in the events, Orzechowski introduces an interesting tension between his text and his alleged inspiration from the *Tabula*. In the latter text, the anonymity of the author (as it was written pseudonymously) allows the moral messages of the *ekphrasis* to take centre stage, rather than the author's engagement in the scenes. In Orzechowski's case, the author begins by announcing himself as the author and narrator, an eyewitness and participant in the wedding, while then focusing much of the core text on the moral messages. On the other hand, the reference to Cebes works to establish Orzechowski's familiarity with the ekphrastic genre to the reader (even though he borrows little from Cebes himself), and this combined with his presence at the wedding festivities constitutes an appeal to authority. In a sense, then, Orzechowski chooses both to subvert the approach of his inspiration and to actively lean into it. He is able to present himself as a worthy and skilled narrator via *ethos*, and then step away to give space for the main focus of the text: the king, by proxy of the tapestries.

Indeed, Orzechowski's self-positioning as a "tour guide" is another direct link to the *ekphrastic* playbook. Alternative translations of the *Progymnasmata* define *ekphrasis* as "a speech which leads one around (*periegematikos*), bringing the subject matter vividly before the eyes."²⁹⁸ Here, the first part of the definition is crucial, as it centres the role of the author/orator in interpretation and meaning-making. The word *periegematikos* refers to an *ekphrasis* in which the author acts as a guide, taking the listener on a tour of the ekphrastic subject. This approach, along with the references to speech throughout the text, presents the *ekphrasis* as a conversation between rhetor and listener. Some of

²⁹⁸ Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern," 11.

Orzechowski's linguistic choices reflect this: the entire text is addressed to the second person ("you"), and he repeats certain phrases that constantly remind the reader that he is next to them, walking through the chambers and pointing out each tapestry. For example, he opens the *ekphrasis* with the declaration that he "will present them [the tapestries] to you," then starts his tour of the *Noah* set by stating, "First I will show you God, enraged at the progeny of Cain." The phrases that repeat the most are related to sight, recurring in nearly every description of a tapestry. While Orzechowski sometimes writes in the passive voice (e.g. *cernebatur*) to convey that a tapestry itself conveyed something, he also refers to the viewer's perception (e.g. *videres*). In both ways, Orzechowski centres the reader's experience on the act of viewing, of imagining themselves present, not merely of reading his text. For the *Moses* subset, he explicates this fact: he states that he "want[s] to serve those with this work who were not there," and narrates the entire walk through the antechamber as a guide speaking to his guest:

For this end, I will lead you for a moment out of the bedroom, wherein I will shortly return, and into an antechamber, richly decorated, with tapestries woven with gold showing Moses's embassy to Egypt and his meeting with Pharaoh, then the passage of the Israelites, the passing down of the law, and the war with the Amalekites. Then I will take you to a great hall next to the antechamber of the bedchamber.²⁹⁹

The fact that he refers to the viewer in the second person singular stresses the personal nature of the text: he is addressing one person specifically, "you," essentially giving a private tour. His occasional tangential comments on the unveiling also mimic the flow of a conversation, as if he is relating the events to a friend. Perhaps the most notable is his aside on *Paradise Bliss*:

²⁹⁹ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 54.

And the nudity of both had such an effect on the viewers that the men smiled at Eve, and the girls who had come in smiled playfully at Adam. For his unclothed nature revealed his masculinity, and hers her femininity.³⁰⁰

In these moments, Orzechowski constantly reminds the reader that he is speaking directly to them and narrating a conversation around the tapestry collection.

As a tour guide, Orzechowski is able to use his authorial power to add context, order, and meaning to the subject, and to canonise an interpretation of it for readers. He accomplishes this in part by using *periegesis* (the root word of *periegematikos*). In contrast to *diegesis*, which literally translates to “leading through,” *periegesis* is a more elaborate and detailed tour which draws the reader’s attention to certain elements along the way.³⁰¹ For Orzechowski, these details mostly focus on the association of Sigismund with his magnificent tapestries and with the biblical patriarchs they depict, as well as the pertinence of the moral messages from the Genesis stories for contemporary audiences. In the most obvious examples of moral glosses, he describes *Cain Flees the Wrath of God* as an “image that teaches us that that the end of godless brethren is always sad,” while *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* gives us “proof that the evil crow lays evil eggs”, and that Cain’s offspring, the godless and sinners, are “most worthy of such a father.” His final word on the tapestries is directed toward the king himself, as he reminds Sigismund of their message to him,

he who in such and sundry examples in the wedding chamber and in each of his rooms placed himself beneath the eyes of a wrathful God, so that, whether waking or sleeping, by night or by day, he and his wife would contemplate the King of Kings above them, in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin.³⁰²

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 51.

³⁰¹ Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion*, 75.

³⁰² Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53, 55.

As mentioned in the previous section, *ekphrasis* is able to seep into the rest of the panegyric, with its buildup and denouement palpable beyond what we may consider to be the beginning and ending of the ekphrastic passage. However, not only does *ekphrasis* impact the surrounding text, but the ekphrastic subject as well. According to Tamar Yacobi, by reading *ekphrasis* not as a self-contained whole but as part of a different textual whole (as Webb posits), it opens the door for new meanings, and for new narrative and didactic purposes.³⁰³ If *ekphrasis* is a rhetorical technique that creates images in the mind's eye of the reader/listener, then the rhetor is a painter and the *ekphrasis* is his painting.³⁰⁴ In fact, the subject within the *ekphrasis* can be seen as a separate entity from the "real subject," due to the two degrees of removal between it and the reader. The "real subject" (for example, a tapestry) is once removed by the ekphrastic author in their verbal interpretation of it, and again as it is imagined by the reader of the *ekphrasis*. This triadic reading event creates what Liliane Louvel terms "the pictorial third."³⁰⁵ In short, therefore, *ekphrasis* cannot be seen as a mimetic exercise. This also sheds new light on Orzechowski's apparent "errors" in his eyewitness account. Indeed, *ekphrasis* does not presume to replicate its subjects with fidelity, but to incorporate them within the narrative, and to exact a degree of transformative authorial power over them.

In Orzechowski's case, this authorial power is exacted to bolster the image of the patron of the ekphrastic subject: namely, Sigismund Augustus. The beginnings of this agenda can be felt as early as the panegyric's introduction, in which Orzechowski states that he will avoid a "high style of speech, for it muddles the senses," but also a common style, so that all the details of the proceedings are preserved. He will therefore adopt a "mid-

³⁰³ Tamar Yacobi, "Verbal Frames and Ekphrastic Figuration, in *Interart Poetics. Essays on the Interrelations of the Arts and Media*, ed. Ulla-Britta Lagerroth, Hans Lund, and Erik Hedling (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 37.

³⁰⁴ Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion*, 27.

³⁰⁵ Louvel, "Types of Ekphrasis," 260.

brow” tone that will bring joy to readers.³⁰⁶ This reflects Aristotle’s distinctions between low, middle, and high style of rhetoric, later revised by Cicero, Quintillian, and others. For Cicero, the middle style is aimed at providing pleasure to the audience, whereas for Quintillian, it is aimed to “charm.” In other words, the middle style is related to one of the three goals of Ciceronian rhetoric: *delectare*.³⁰⁷ By adopting the middle style, Orzechowski uses his tone to place himself within a tradition of emotionally-charged speech and writing intended to produce an affective response (in this case, “joy”) from the listener/reader. This could be produced by descriptions of the king’s and the tapestries’ magnificence, but also from Orzechowski aforementioned references to contemporary politics, urging his reader to accept their new Habsburg queen, to support their young king, and to unite as his subjects in order to preserve the kingdom from external dangers and domestic discord. In other words, from the first sentences of the text, the scene is set for both an emotionally and politically charged text in service of the monarch. At the same time, Orzechowski’s adoption of the middle style places him in a position of humility relative to the king and his artworks, and his effusive praise of the tapestries’ mastery and artistry also suggests that he is allowing the textiles themselves to speak in a high style. As works of creative genius far surpassing his own, only the tapestries are worthy of the style. Although Orzechowski never explicitly states that he lacks the skill to properly describe the tapestries, this interpretation would suggest that the author can convey some of their grandeur, but that the tapestries can only be fully appreciated in person, without an intermediary speaking for them. Considering that the tapestries function as a kind of metonym for the king in the text, this has implications for the magnificence of the king as well, surpassing that which can be described in words.

³⁰⁶ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Dziela*, 107-108.

³⁰⁷ Brian Vickers, *In Defence of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 80-82.

Interestingly, in this same passage, Orzechowski uses verbs of speech, not writing, to refer to himself and his audience. In his introductory paragraphs, he says that he will “speak” about the wedding, and asks the reader to “listen eagerly” to his account. In fact, the very act of listening will “unite” his readers/listeners, for they all “want to learn as much as possible about the beginning and end of the wedding.”³⁰⁸ These allusions to speech and listening may be another meta-reference to the genre (in this case, a homage to the oratorical tradition of classical panegyrics and *ekphrasis*) even though Orzechowski’s text was composed for print. However, the phrase “unite” is perhaps even more important, especially considering the aforementioned appeals to political affect. Orzechowski’s self-stated aim is to use this wedding to bring his divided countrymen together through their common support of Sigismund’s kingship, for which he argues by enumerating Sigismund’s numerous virtues and achievements. This aim is echoed in Orzechowski’s conclusion, in which he mentions “the particular contentment that you [the reader] have gained from this wedding.”³⁰⁹ We could relate this “contentment” to the “joy” from the introduction, in which case this is more than simply an enjoyment of the text for its literary value, and rather the “contentment” of foreseeing and ushering in a future of concord, peace, and prosperity under Sigismund’s strong and virtuous leadership.

Throughout the rest of the text, Orzechowski paints a picture of a magnificent monarch, the new patriarch of a trans-European dynasty. In this sense, he follows in the tradition of epideictic *ekphrasis*, or what Louvel calls “monumental *ekphrasis*,” as it erects a figurative “monument” for its subject.³¹⁰ According to the *Progymnasmata*, the epideictic exercise *enkomion* required the rhetor to cover the early life, education, and achievements of the subject. In case of any discreditable details from their biography, the rhetor was

³⁰⁸ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Dziela*, 107-108.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

³¹⁰ Louvel, “Types of Ekphrasis,” 252.

advised to circumvent them. Moreover, Menander Rhetor's *On Epideictic Speeches* mentions that "proof" of the claims made about the subject must be given. It is not enough to litanise the achievements; it must be made clear that the subject himself "was the planner, the commander, the discoverer of the moment for battle, a marvellous counsellor, champion, general, orator."³¹¹

Orzechowski takes such an approach in his introduction of Sigismund, his intended patron and the main target of his propitiatory efforts. He presents the king as the

dignified heir of the Jagiellonian dynasty, who became a king as a child, has never failed to fulfil the honour of his forefathers; who not long ago neither by treachery nor by war, but by justice and mercy triumphed in Moldavia, and it was this warlike and Roman nation that often disrupted the Turks, beat Matthias of Hungary, and scared off Jan Albrecht of Poland, that he [Sigismund] joined to his country in a strange twist of fate. So exceptional is the Jagiellonian name, so full of glory and bravery and respect, that wherever you turn, be it to the east of the sun, or to the west, or to the south, or to the north, you will find many examples of the bravery of this illustrious house. Yet it happens that in a world devoid of progeny, everything has fallen on the one Sigismund Augustus in these years of danger, when he has been unsupported by any offspring and unprotected from destruction."³¹²

In other words, Orzechowski appears to follow Menander's advice by giving concrete examples of the king's successes, and highlighting his leading role in them. Orzechowski enforces his claims by comparing the young king to his father, whom Orzechowski eulogised at his funeral. He draws an iconographic parallel between the two Sigismunds through the god Jupiter. Sigismund Augustus is said to "have held sway with Jupiter" over the weather during the wedding, which echoes Orzechowski's epithet of Sigismund I, "the son of Jupiter," from his funeral oration.³¹³ In all of these ways,

³¹¹ Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination, and Persuasion*, 164.

³¹² Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dzieła*, 111-112.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 137.

Orzechowski sets up the image of Sigismund that the reader carries into the *ekphrasis*. In the first paragraph of his *ekphrasis*, he prepares the reader to link the person of the king and both the magnificence and morals of the tapestries in their minds, for by viewing them,

you will come to know not only the works of an outstanding artist, but also the mind and innate majesty of the greatest king, which is most fully expressed through his commissioning of such things.³¹⁴

He then ends the *ekphrasis* with an echo of this sentiment, stating: “such was the admirable art and sequence of the hangings which demonstrate the spirit and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been endowed.”³¹⁵ By bookending the *ekphrasis* with reminders of the patron’s indelible link to his commissions, Orzechowski leaves no room for ambiguity as to who the true protagonist of the text and the tapestries is.

Curiously, however, the morals that Orzechowski extracts from the tapestries are more cautionary than laudatory. The princely virtues that he sets up in the earlier parts of the panegyric are contrasted with the princely vices that may befall a less pious and righteous monarch. Naturally, the implication is not that Sigismund is guilty of these vices, rather that the temptation of sin, especially for those in positions of power, is great, and that all people must guard themselves against it. Here, we may find one other link to Cebes’s *Tabula*: the notion that living well requires more moral and intellectual effort than living badly, which can be achieved through sloth and weakness. These morals could apply to any reader, but the conclusion of the *ekphrasis* suggests that they are particularly pertinent for a king who “placed himself beneath the eyes of a wrathful God...in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin.” In fact, the sins and calamities that *Genesis* depicts, in Orzechowski’s account, can be read as foils for the many attributes of Sigismund

³¹⁴ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” Arrasy., 51.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 55.

mentioned earlier in the panegyric. For example, unlike the cursed sons of *Genesis*, Cain and Ham, Sigismund is a worthy member of a great lineage who “has never failed to fulfil the honour of his forefathers.” Unlike the warmongering descendants of Cain, Sigismund’s victories are won “neither by treachery nor by war, but by justice and mercy.”

The possible instances of comparative (positive) allusions between Sigismund and the patriarchs seem to focus on Noah. The brief mention that Sigismund “held sway with Jupiter” over the weather at the wedding can be compared to Noah’s cooperation with God in surviving the Flood. This could also be a reference to the righteousness of those present at the wedding, especially the royal couple, who were rewarded with beautiful summer weather, in contrast to the faithless “progeny of Cain” who were punished with a storm. Similarly, Orzechowski’s comment that “everything has fallen on the one Sigismund Augustus in these years of danger” could be compared to the tale of Noah, who stood alone against the sinful nations and the subsequent flood in protection of his family.

Crucially, these subtexts relating Sigismund to his tapestries are not out of place within the ekphrastic genre, as it was common for ancient *ekphrases* of art associated with or owned by a character (real or fictional) to serve as a stage for exploring and asserting the character’s identity. Classical examples include the shield of Heracles, the treasure chest and goblet of Achilles, and the tapestry collection of Ion at Delphi.³¹⁶ Ancient *ekphrases* could also use artworks to explore a patron’s or addressee’s attributes. For example, Virgil’s *ekphrasis* of the Shield of Aeneas can be read as propaganda for the Emperor Augustus, as the historical events and virtues that he highlights among the shield’s images are those that are most relevant to the imperial-dynastic project and the projected future of Rome.³¹⁷ In general, by immortalising the artwork in the *ekphrasis* and his

³¹⁶ Elsner, “Introduction,” 7.

³¹⁷ R.D. Williams, “The Shield of Aeneas,” *Vergilius*, no. 27 (1981): 8–11.

epideictic interpretation of it, the author simultaneously immortalises the image of its owner. The artwork and its meaning become a constant, protected from alternative or divergent interpretations, and the owner's identity is thus made stable by proxy.³¹⁸

Moreover, by stretching time and space through an ekphrastic moment, the author creates a “cosmological setting”³¹⁹ for these explorations of identity, making the communication of power and majesty all the more potent. Homer makes a clear reference to *ekphrasis* as a stage for image-creation in “The Shield of Achilles,” on whose “vast expanse with all his craft and cunning the god [Hephaestus] creates a world of gorgeous immortal work.”³²⁰ A similarly literal example can be found in Orzechowski's evocation of the Jagiellonian world: “wherever you turn, be it to the east of the sun, or to the west, or to the south, or to the north, you will find many examples of the bravery of this illustrious house.”³²¹ Later, he highlights the “great hall” where the Noah series hangs, and ends by praising the “sundry examples in the wedding chamber and in each of his [Sigismund's] rooms” which hang “above” the king and his wife. The combination of the massive tapestries that dwarf even the king, the larger-than-life characters, and the grand rooms is not only imposing for Orzechowski and his readers. It will also affect the king himself as he conducts his daily business surrounded by these tapestries: “whether waking or sleeping, by night or by day, he and his wife would contemplate the King of Kings above them.”³²² In other words, in Orzechowski's interpretation, the chambers function as a projection of dynastic universalism, but simultaneously maintain a hierarchy of divine power over earthly power.

³¹⁸ Krieger, *Ekphrasis*, 8.

³¹⁹ Elsner, “Introduction,” 6.

³²⁰ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1998), 483.

³²¹ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Dzieła*, 112.

³²² Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 54, 55.

Certain details of the physical tapestries themselves also reflect Sigismund's attributes, especially his magnificence. For example, his opening sentences introduces the "magnificent tapestries, rare and not otherwise seen among kings" which express "the mind and innate majesty of the greatest king."³²³ Later, he concludes his tour of the bedchamber by stating, "Such were the decorations of the wedding chamber, worthy of such a great king."³²⁴ Orzechowski also repeatedly mentions the tapestries' use of opulent gold thread, a clear nod to the cost and luxuriousness of the textiles.

Furthermore, Orzechowski uses the very act of commissioning the tapestries as an example of Sigismund's grandeur and wisdom: his tapestry collection "proves the spirit and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been endowed."³²⁵ In fact, while Orzechowski directly mentions the artist several times, the king is presented as a co-author, whose input is just as important to the finished commission.³²⁶ Orzechowski starts and ends the *ekphrasis* by stating how *Genesis* reflects Sigismund's "mind," and places the text within a panegyric written primarily for Sigismund's glory. In this way, Orzechowski deviates from a common theme in many classical *ekphrases*, which Louvel refers to as "pragmatic" or "technical" *ekphrasis*.³²⁷ As Jaś Elsner notes, a focus on "making," whether by human or divine craftsmen, can be found in the *ur-ekphrasis*, the Shield of Achilles in the *Iliad*, and is echoed by Theocritus, Virgil, and Lucian, among others.³²⁸ In

³²³ Ibid., 51.

³²⁴ Ibid., 54.

³²⁵ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dziela*, 135.

³²⁶ He mentions the artist in the introduction: "the remarkable nature of the materials and artistry" and "the work of an outstanding artist." On *Abel's Sacrifice*: "You could see how mad Cain bites his own hand in anger, which the skilled hand of the artist personified in the tapestry behind Cain's back in the form of a woman." On *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*: "The wrathful God looking down at the earth is presented with unbelievable artistry." On *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*: "For the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain's progeny were." On *God Converses with Noah*: "This tapestry of excellent handiwork hung at the head of the room." On *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*: "With illustrious artistry it presented the killing of animals as an offering." Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 51, 53, 54, 55. For more on Orzechowski's discussion of the role of the artist, see Chapter 4.2.

³²⁷ Louvel, "Types of Ekphrasis," 254.

³²⁸ Elsner, "Introduction," 5.

Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*, the patron shares the spotlight with the artist and even eclipses him. Thus, Orzechowski solidifies the tie between the king and his art. This gives Sigismund the claim to authorship as well as patronage and ownership, and presents the tapestries as extensions and reflections of his princely persona.

One could even argue that Orzechowski's focus on the tapestries' realism may have implications for his message to Sigismund, especially if one considers a crucial passage in his *Fidelis subditus*, addressed to the king. In it, Orzechowski urges Sigismund to use mimetic art as a mirror for his own kingship. Drawing on the examples of Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach, he argues that those who can accurately paint themselves (in self-portrait) accomplish the highest feat of painting, and are "considered supreme in art." The king should use them as an example, so that every aspect of his wisdom will be visible in his deeds.³²⁹ Hence, his praise of the lifelike scenes may not be simply praise of the artistic talent on display, but also a hidden moral lesson for the king. If one considers the tapestries, as Orzechowski seems to do, to be an extension of the king's image, then, in light of this passage, his claim that the tapestries reveal the "mind and innate majesty of the greatest king" takes on particular significance.³³⁰ Not only is their subject matter and magnificence linked to his persona, but their mimetic qualities may be interpreted as a reflection of the visibility of his own wisdom and virtue.

The rich and descriptive language Orzechowski uses also befits the splendour of the artworks and the grandeur of the stories they present. Here, he appears to be following the advice of several *Progymnasmata* authors: in the third edition of the textbook (c. 350-400

³²⁹ "Qua in re idem facies, quod pictores solent, qui cum specimen artis edunt, ad speculum ipsi se pingunt, quod quidem in pictura est summum. Quod si ii vultus suos ex speculo penicillo assequi non possunt, tanto minus creduntur posse aliorum. Illi vero qui hoc possunt, summi in arte habentur. Quales in Germania vidimus olim Durerium Norimbergae, & Lucam Vitembergae. Ad horum exemplum tibi quoque efficiendum est, ut omnis ratio tuae sapientiae, in tua vita mihi appareat." Orzechowski, *Fidelis subditus* (Kraków: Łazarz Andrysowicz, 1580), 50-51.

³³⁰ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 51.

AD), Aphthonios writes that the language should reflect or imitate (*sunexomoioiousthai*) the subject matter: “if the subject is florid,” says Hermogenes in his second edition (2nd cent. AD), “let the style be florid, too.”³³¹ Orzechowski’s text is brimming with such florid descriptions, but those that especially stand out are the moments in which he slows his own rhythm to elaborate on noteworthy details. For example, in *Cain Kills Abel*, he takes time to describe “the face of the fierce tyrant, wonderfully presented: the taut neck, the crazed eyes, the tormented face, the bristled hair, and finally the blow itself, dictated by anger and directed at his brother.” In the next tapestry, *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, he pauses to contemplate the remains of Abel, “covered with gore, disfigured by pallour, terrifying to behold.”³³² His enumeration of the atrocities of Cain’s progeny in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* also paint a sordid picture:

There you could see the rape of the noble virgins for the purpose of adultery, the violation of the matrons, the pillaging of cities, the theft of private property, the bloodshed and blatant violence, such that this progeny was most worthy of such a father.³³³

The most vivid description is reserved for *The Flood*: aptly, perhaps, as it is one of the largest and certainly the most dynamic and stylistically complex tapestry. In Orzechowski’s words:

On the fourth you could see the heavens split with a downpour, the open abyss, and the skies pouring out a storm with thunder and lightning. Struck with fear, the godless progeny fell to the ground. Here, you could see the shameful flight of Cain’s progeny, a sign of their guilty consciences, some climbing trees in the overflowing waters, others climbing exposed rocks, and others seeking the high mountains. This tapestry was so full of confusion and so terrified the viewer that he himself, struck

³³¹ Cited in Elsner, “Introduction,” 1.

³³² Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 54.

dumb at such a horrible sight, feared for himself in the flood and longed for the Ark.³³⁴

From these descriptions, it would appear to the reader that Orzechowski is more interested in the tapestries' depictions of violence, death, destruction, and fear than the scenes of comparative calm and peace. *God Converses with Noah* and the central scene of *Paradise Bliss*, for example, receive much less attention than the more dramatic episodes. Even his interpretation of the rainbow in the rather joyful scene of *God Blesses Noah's Family*, a symbol of salvation and divine protection, is somewhat ominous in tone:

...one colour, like water, maintain[s] our memory of the terrible flood. The second pale-coloured, promising that the Church will never be without its cross. The third like fire, which never ends, showing us the eternal punishment awaiting the godless.³³⁵

Considering the *ekphrasis* from start to finish, there is a noticeable tone shift from the first paragraph, in which Orzechowski exalts the king and his marvellous commissions, and the majority of the tapestry descriptions. This carries through to the final paragraph, which does initially return to the laudatory tone of the description ("Such was the admirable art and sequence of the hangings which demonstrate the spirit and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been endowed") but ends with the solemn reminder that Sigismund is beholden to "the King of Kings above [him], in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin." Considering the tenor of Orzechowski's past treatises to the king mentioned in section 3.1, this is perhaps unsurprising, but it is an unusual choice for a piece that is included within an otherwise celebratory wedding panegyric. Part of the reason for this may simply be Orzechowski's personal experience with the tapestries: if this was indeed his mood upon viewing them, he may have wanted to convey this most faithfully to

³³⁴ Ibid., 54-55.

³³⁵ Ibid., 55.

the viewer. Given Orzechowski's obvious aims with the text and rhetorical talents, however, it is unlikely that any part of the panegyric is not self-conscious. One possibility is that Orzechowski knew that a surface-level description of the tapestries that focused solely on their visual and material magnificence did not do justice to their didactic depth, nor to the depth of the "spirit and mind" which had led Sigismund to commission them (nor indeed to Orzechowski's own literary flair, which he hoped to showcase to the king). The story of *Genesis* is, for the most part, a story of turmoil and adversity, punctuated by moments of prosperity and bliss. Besides the obvious artistic value of the tapestries, which Orzechowski highlights multiple times, the series is not just to be admired but to be contemplated. Orzechowski's text suggests that their moral richness, not just their material richness, is why the tapestries represent "the mind and innate majesty" of their patron.

Even beyond the actual narrative content of the tapestries, this perspective is in accordance with the presentation of Sigismund in the rest of the panegyric. In the aforementioned passage in which Orzechowski praises Sigismund's various attributes and accomplishments, he places his illustrious kingship on a backdrop of tumultuous times. Sigismund, in Orzechowski's estimation, is not simply a mighty ruler, but one who has essentially triumphed against the odds. By the archetypes of the *Tabula*, he has "lived well." He has faced adversity since his coronation as a child, "years of danger...unsupported by any offspring and unprotected from destruction," yet he prevails and rules in splendour.³³⁶ In this sense, the tapestries are an ideal mirror for Sigismund's kingship. Their magnificence runs in tandem with the dark and dramatic stories they depict, in which the patriarchs emerge prosperous and victorious despite everything.

³³⁶ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dzieła*, 111.

3.5. Conclusion

Unfortunately for the author, Orzechowski's panegyric did not have its desired effect. Sigismund was indifferent to it and never responded to it, seemingly recalling Orzechowski's public attacks on his late wife, and did not offer him the position of court historian. The panegyric was published in 1553, with the aforementioned addition of the preface to the younger Jan Tarnowski, but quickly disappeared from the public eye and from circulation. It was only unearthed and republished before the wedding of Sigismund III Vasa to Constance of Austria in 1605, for which the *Genesis* tapestries were repurposed.

The immediate fate of the panegyric was likely spurred on by Orzechowski's next publication, which he was writing at the same time as the panegyric: his *Annales* of Sigismund I's later years and Sigismund Augustus's early reign, to be presented to the king as a gift in 1554. According to Orzechowski's biographer Jerzy Starnawski, this was another attempt to win the vacant position of royal chronicler. Unfortunately, while Orzechowski tried to tread diplomatically through some of the controversial events, such as the Chicken War, his candid discussions of Sigismund Augustus's personal matters, especially the dramas surrounding his spurned first wife and scandalous second, would lead to the king's icy reception of the finished text. The *Annales* would only be published in 1611 in a censored version.

Orzechowski himself was finally cleared of all charges of heresy in 1561 by Paul IV. The issue of his marriage was never resolved, having been referred to the Council of Trent but never discussed, even though Orzechowski campaigned for its resolution until his death. In the remaining years of his life, Orzechowski published another wedding panegyric, this one for the younger Jan Tarnowski in 1558, and a biography of the elder Tarnowski in 1561. His most important remaining works included *Chimaera* (1560), a

treatise on the Reformation, *Quincunx* (1563), a Ciceronian political/religious dialogue between a papist, a reformer, and Orzechowski, and *Dyalog albo rozmowa około egzekucji Polskiej Korony* (“Dialogue, or a Conversation about the Execution of the Polish Crown,” 1563) regarding the executionist movement and religious politics. Orzechowski died in 1566 at the age of fifty-three, survived by five children. To the end of his life, even in his last will, he steadfastly proclaimed his Catholic faith.³³⁷

Returning to the 1553 *ekphrasis*, Orzechowski’s text cannot be divorced from his personal circumstances and motivations, nor from its genealogy of the Second Sophistic rhetorical textbooks, the most prominent ancient *ekphrases*, and the continuing Renaissance humanist tradition of the genre. However, while Orzechowski’s descriptions of the splendour and artistry of the tapestries may have been influenced and enhanced by this context, this is not a reason to disregard the value of his account. We ourselves can look at the same tapestries that Orzechowski saw that night at Wawel, and understand that his was an understandable and expected reaction to the unveiling, one that was likely shared by many of his fellow guests.

As a self-fashioned “tour guide” during the unveiling, Orzechowski is once again operating within ekphrastic norms. The *ekphrasis* is essentially a conversation addressed to a singular “you,” a personal musing between two people on the tapestries and the king, which uses the language of sight to recreate an individual viewing experience. The creative liberties and personal glosses he peppers throughout are, therefore, expected, shedding a different light on the aforementioned “errors” in his “eyewitness account” of the unveiling. If one considers *ekphrasis* to be, first and foremost, an affective rather than mimetic exercise, then the issue of verisimilitude between the “real” subject and its ekphrastic

³³⁷ Starnawski, “Wstep,” 43, 46-47, 53-54, 61-62.

counterpart becomes less salient. By its nature, *ekphrasis* must always be at a twofold remove from its subject, mediated by author and reader. The aim of the genre (in its classical understanding) is not to achieve the most accurate replication of the subject, but to bring it to life, perhaps even amplify its splendour for literary or ideological impact, and then to use it as a tool for other rhetorical aims (*epideixis*, *pathos*, etc.). As Tamar Yacobi notes, the unreliability of the author should not be understood as a failure. Unreliability, understood here as incongruencies between subject and description, assumes “reliability” as a norm of the genre, and assigns a value judgement to deviations from it, instead of considering them either as stylistic devices or means to a rhetorical end. The ekphrastic author is essentially subjective, and the text is a subjective experience immortalised in writing.³³⁸

Consequently, the discrepancies between Orzechowski’s list of the tapestries and their actual subject matter does not necessarily detract from the quality of the *ekphrasis* as an “accurate” representation of the artworks. They detract from the “reliability” of the ekphrasis as an inventory of the tapestries, but that is not the aim of the text. The ekphrastic text is an independent entity, which relies only on its relationship to a reader’s mind imagining the subject, and not to the real subject itself. The main power of the ekphrastic author is the transformation of the subject by canonising a description and interpretation of it—one that may not fully correspond to reality.

This should be understood as Orzechowski’s primary goal with the text: to canonise a description and interpretation of *Genesis*, and of Sigismund’s persona by proxy. By examining the *ekphrasis* and the surrounding panegyric in tandem, we discover the author’s strategy of crafting an image of the king’s magnificence and princely attributes. While a

³³⁸ Tamar Yacobi, “Interart Narrative: (Un)Reliability and Ekphrasis.” *Poetics Today* 21, vol. 4 (2000): 713-714.

proportionally small part of the entire text, the *ekphrasis* rhymes with the whole. The enlightenment and inspiration that Orzechowski hopes to bestow on the reader in his introduction is encapsulated and epitomised in the affective power of the “magnificent tapestries, rare and not otherwise seen among kings.” The virtues that Orzechowski lists in his introduction to Sigismund are presented in the negative in the sinful deeds of Cain, and echoed through the heroism of Noah. The hardships and triumphs that Sigismund has faced as king are a reflection of the *Genesis* narrative. Sigismund’s mastery of politics is matched by the depth of his cultural and theological erudition, “which is most fully expressed through his commissioning of such things.” All in all, Orzechowski uses these comparisons and contrasts to present a detailed image of Sigismund: a magnificent, righteous, pious, and learned monarch, one who has overcome adversity in glory, and who is well-positioned to lead his kingdom through “years of danger.”

The tapestries, in fact, are more of a means to an end than an ekphrastic subject in themselves. By immortalising the artworks in his text, Orzechowski is inevitably immortalising the person and image of the king, and using the ekphrastic moment as a cosmic stage for the exploration and exaltation of his identity. The tapestries serve as this cosmic stage, as an extension and reflection of his persona. In this reading, Sigismund emerges as the true subject of the *ekphrasis*, with the tapestries and their themes as his mirror. Thus, we are finally left with the question: what does this mirror reflect?

In order to answer this question, we must begin our reading of the tapestries themselves. The first level of analysis is that of their materials and style. Both of these elements play a role in the didactic and affective impact of the series, and are therefore a key factor in the overall project of Sigismund’s image and agenda through *Genesis*.

Chapter Four: The Politics of Materials and Style

According to the seven-step method proposed in the Introduction, the first layer of reading the content of a tapestry series is its materiality and style, both of which were among the stand-out elements of *Genesis* to Orzechowski in his *ekphrasis*. In the case of *Genesis*, this style is mannerism in the figural scenes, and Netherlandish grotesque in the borders. The material and stylistic properties of *Genesis* certainly had a profound impact on the audience, awing them with richness, intricacy, and splendour. While this served the obvious function of furthering the patron's magnificence, it is possible to delve deeper into how materials and style interfaced with the series' project of image-creation and political/religious agenda. Among the mannerist facets at play, the *enargeic* and immersive potential in particular (that was so fundamental for Orzechowski) raises questions about the didactic power of the tapestries. Were these, indeed, "images that teach," in the ekphrasist's words, or images that astounded—or both?³³⁹ Can there be any reciprocity between *enargeia* and didactic function?

Finally, the issue of the tapestries' immersiveness raises questions about the borders, which seem, at least at first glance, to shatter the illusion. However, we must take a closer look at both the function and style of the borders to ascertain whether they are, indeed, separate from the main narrative. To what extent do they truly hinder *enargeia*? On the other hand, to what extent does their Netherlandish grotesque style complement or complicate the style and narrative of the centrepieces?

³³⁹ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.

4.1. The Materiality of Magnificence

Beyond the broad associations of tapestry as a medium of princes, as outlined in Chapter One, the material specificities of the medium made it a powerful vehicle for image-creation, as the eyewitness account of the unveiling reveals.

As deftly crafted and technically innovative works of art, heavily influenced by the painterly techniques used in Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* cartoons, Coxcie's designs would have immediately commanded the attention of the wedding guests.³⁴⁰ However, their impact would have been tremendously amplified by their manipulation of space, light, and sound in the king's chambers during the wedding reception. By far the best source on the affective potential of the tapestries upon their unveiling is Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*. By viewing the tapestries as composed of what Susanna Burghartz et al call "agentive materials," it is possible to consider the agency of the tapestries on the onlooker based solely on their material elements.³⁴¹

To begin with the size of the tapestries, it is first important to note their range of dimensions.³⁴² The size of the tapestries' varies minimally by height but considerably by width, and can be divided into four sub-categories. The largest are the panoramas (*Paradise Bliss* (4.8 x 8.5 m), *The Building of the Ark* (4.8 x 7.9 m), *The Animals Enter the Ark* (4.8 x 7.9 m), *The Flood* (4.8 x 8.4 m), *The Animals Exit the Ark* (4.8 x 8.8 m), and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice* (4.8 x 7.1 m), The most common size are nearly-square rectangles, all of which have a height around 4.3-4.7 m and a width between 4.3 and 5.8 m (*Adam Cultivates the Earth*, *Abel's Sacrifice*, *Cain Kills Abel*, *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, *The*

³⁴⁰ Piwocka, "Nie Tylko Rafael," 231.

³⁴¹ Burgharz et al, "Introduction," 36.

³⁴² It is necessary to give the caveat that these are the dimensions of the restored tapestries in their current state at Wawel, after being reconstructed from the re-cut versions and other smaller fragments found in Russia. While every effort was allegedly made to preserve the exact design of the tapestries and their borders, it is possible that the original pieces may have differed by a few centimetres.

Moral Downfall of Mankind, God Converses with Noah). Two tapestries are slightly more rectangular than the second group, but appear much more square than their measurements, as they are surrounded by the rest of the Noah panoramas: these are *God Blesses Noah's Family* and *Noah's Drunkenness*, both at 4.8 x 6.1 m. The only outlier is *Fratricide Conceived*, which is a narrow, portrait-oriented rectangle (4.7 x 2.5 m). Unfortunately, none of the dimensions of the Moses tapestries are known.

There does not appear to be a clear political or theological reason for highlighting certain scenes with larger tapestries, nor do the panoramas necessarily feature the moments of Sigismund's strongest identification with the protagonists. (In fact, Noah does not even appear in *The Flood*.) The tapestries do decrease in size between the exile from Eden and *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, but then increase for the Noah set. The biblical narrative does not suggest any such relationship between the "importance" of the stories. In general, it seems likely that the panoramas were chosen because they were the most dramatic, dynamic, and aesthetically rich episodes that would make the greatest impact in woven form. The Garden of Eden and the Flood happen to have the most potential in this regard compared, for example, to the Cain and Abel story. However, it is relevant that the panoramas were at least initially displayed in places most directly connected with Sigismund's magnificence: the bedchamber and the Senator's Hall (see Appendix 3 for maps). In this sense, the panoramas do the most work in furthering the image-creation project.

Despite their size, it is also necessary to consider just how much of the tapestries would have been visible to the wedding guests, and how the existing architecture and furnishings of the rooms would have enhanced or detracted from the experience. Unveiled in the evening by candlelight, the tapestries would not have been as clearly visible as they would have been in daylight. Depending on the placement of the candles, the low lighting

would have obscured certain elements in shadows, while bringing the lighter elements (especially those woven with golden thread) to the forefront. In addition, based on Orzechowski's text, we know that *Paradise Bliss* was placed behind the marriage bed, which likely would have hidden the lower-central section of the tapestry. It is possible, although not documented, that other furniture and lighting fixtures may have hidden elements of other tapestries in other rooms.

Nevertheless, the tapestries would have dwarfed the viewer. Reaching from floor to ceiling, and hanging next to each other, they completely covered the walls and transformed the room. Upon entering the chambers, the viewer would have been dropped in the middle of the book of Genesis, surrounded by the vastness and richness of the divine theatre of creation, standing amidst the gigantic patriarchs and the Creator Himself.

For the purposes of Sigismund's image-creation, size played a fundamental role. By awing his courtiers and subjects with his wealth, he created an unmistakable material gap between royal magnificence and that of the nobility and episcopate. Prominent bishops and magnate houses did indeed own tapestries, but none could boast the splendour and monetary value of *Genesis*. In the context of the Polish monarchy, constantly engaged in a precarious dance with Church and *szlachta*, and especially considering Sigismund's flirtations with absolutism throughout his reign, this gap was an especially potent signifier of royal supremacy.

The size of the tapestries did not only make a claim about the king's wealth and power, but also of his privileged position in relation to God. By creating an immersive sacred environment within his own palace, Sigismund provided an ideal place for

contemplating scripture and morals, and for imagining proximity to the divine. In this way, the patron offered the means *par excellence* for his subjects to connect with God.³⁴³

The impact of the 360-degree environment would have been enhanced by the swells and ripples of the textiles with the air flow in the room, and the flickering of the candlelight on the golden threads interwoven through them. This would have created the illusion of movement, that the flora, fauna, and biblical figures were truly alive in the room. Certain elements of the tapestries woven with gold thread or with a contrasting weave (e.g. the rain and water in *The Flood*) would have also stood out from the rest of the two-dimensional image due to their texture and visual weight, giving them a three-dimensional effect that would have “jumped out” at the viewer.³⁴⁴

When they entered the king’s chambers, the onlookers entered an insulated artificial environment, sealed from outside noise, light, and cold. Collapsing the border between audience and image, the viewer could become an active participant in the events of Genesis. In Orzechowski’s words, the viewer of *Paradise Bliss* “could be overcome by fear at the sight of Adam’s flight, of Eve’s trembling...so that you would say that you yourself were damned, and that a sentence had been pronounced upon you.” Meanwhile, *The Flood* was “full of chaos and so terrified the viewer that he himself, struck by fear at such a terrible sight, feared for himself amidst the flood and dreamed of the ark.”³⁴⁵

³⁴³ It is possible to take this interpretation one step further and deduce that Sigismund was establishing himself as a kind of intermediary to God or priestly figure, which would naturally have controversial implications regarding the role of the king in ecclesiastical leadership (i.e. as the head of a national church). However, it seems very unlikely that Sigismund would have intended to make any sort of explicitly anticlerical or antipapal statement with these tapestries. At the time of the commission, the creation of a Polish national church was not yet a fully-formed agenda within the Protestant camps, and Sigismund had not shown any inclination toward such a project. Moreover, considering Sigismund’s general policy *via media* religious politics, as well as the lack of other confessional messages in *Genesis*, this does not seem to be a likely interpretation of Sigismund’s intentions.

³⁴⁴ See Richardson and Hamling, “Ways of Seeing Early Modern Decorative Textiles,” 10.

³⁴⁵ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 54-55.

Finally, the location of the tapestries within Wawel Castle is yet another crucial element in understanding their consequent communicative power (see Appendix 3). Beginning in the royal bedchamber, winding through the vestibule, and finally expanding into the Senators' Hall, they were all located in the king's innermost sanctum in the castle, rooms in which only distinguished guests could be admitted.³⁴⁶ *Paradise Bliss* hung right above the marital bed, underscoring the association of the royal couple with the First Parents. Sixteenth-century royal bedchambers were certainly not private or intimate spaces, as they were frequently populated by countless attendants and were often the site of audiences with kings. However, as access was restricted to chosen courtiers and guests, it still cannot be considered a public space within the palace, and was arguably the space most closely associated with the king's physical person among the *Genesis* chambers. Even Orzechowski notes that some of the guests "did not enter the royal bedchamber out of respect," underscoring the private and personal nature of this space.³⁴⁷

On the other hand, the most public of the chambers in which *Genesis* was unveiled was the Senators' Hall, where meetings of the Senate were held. If the bedchamber was most closely aligned with the body natural, the Senator's Hall was the sanctuary of the body politic at Wawel. Consequently, the hall held the most dramatic, large-scale, and complex subset, perhaps the episodes deemed most worthy of display to the widest audience: the story of Noah. Still, the Senators' Hall was not a space with unrestricted access for courtiers and even the kingdom's elites. The Senate comprised only the most powerful bishops and magnates of the realm, as well as the King himself, excluding the majority of the *szlachta*. Therefore, we can consider the Senator's Hall a "public" space only for a very niche

³⁴⁶ We also know that Sigismund specifically instructed his High Treasurer, Jan Lutomirski, where to hang the tapestries within his chambers. Fabiański, "Renaissance Nudes," 257-259.

³⁴⁷ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 54.

audience, perhaps the audience with which Sigismund was most interested in communicating through his tapestries.

In general, these were rooms which would only have been privy to carefully selected men and women. Thus, the tapestries adorning (and transforming) the king's chambers conveyed a combination of intimacy and majesty. Their proximity to his person forged both a figurative and physical link between the subject matter of the tapestries and the body of the king. Moreover, it asserted Sigismund's authorship over the messages they conveyed, and linked them in the most intimate way to his project as king. In short, the images, narratives, and messages conveyed through the tapestries could be seen as inextricable from his kingship.

What, then, is the overall impact of the materiality of the tapestries and their environment on Sigismund Augustus's image? Their effect on viewers vicariously affected the perception of their patron and owner, Sigismund. Their magnificence enhanced his own. Their craftsmanship, size, lavishness, and awe-inspiring immersive potential reflected on his taste, wealth, and cultural capital. Their religious content and devotional potential could only be conveyed to the viewer through him, the patron.

In addition, the quasi-immersion created an environment in which viewers could become fully enveloped in the story Sigismund was presenting to them, like an audience at a play. Therefore, they would be primed to absorb their themes and morals. Their tight association with their patron as the *pièce de résistance* of his wedding feast, hanging in the palace rooms most closely linked to his physical and figurative person, would have helped the viewer to draw connections between their content and the king, as Orzechowski did in his *ekphrasis*.

Moving from the materials of the tapestries to the images they contained, we find that the style of the tapestry cartoons worked in tandem with their physical properties, both to convey magnificence and to draw the viewer closer to their didactic programme.

4.2. Mannerism, a Style of Excess

In describing the style of the Jagiellonian tapestries, the term most frequently used by Polish researchers is “mannerist.” Before considering how Coxcie’s mannerism could have impacted the didactic content of the tapestries, it is important to note that “mannerism” is a highly contested term among art historians, with conflicting definitions, scope, and connotations across time. According to John Shearman, mannerism is a heterogeneous concept rather than a movement with a conscious direction.³⁴⁸ For example, Vasari used *maniera* in a positive sense to indicate a modern style (*la maniera moderna* or *bella maniera*) used by contemporary artists, a kind of virtuoso quality to art that showed complexity without effort. However, Bellori’s *Lives of the Artists* a century later used *maniera* as a derogatory term for the decline of Italian art after Raphael. Later scholars oscillated between positive or negative uses of “mannerism,” and expanded its use to descriptions of poetry, music, literature, and art outside of Italy. The criteria of what qualifies as mannerist, and the implications of such a designation, have been somewhat vague. Moreover, there is debate as to whether the term is essentially presentist, as it was an attempt by nineteenth and twentieth century art historians to categorise mid-sixteenth century Italian art retroactively because of its deviations from the “norm” of High Renaissance art.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁸ John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 16.

³⁴⁹ Lynette M. F. Bosch, *Mannerism, Spirituality, and Cognition: The Art of Enargeia* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 72-85; Shearman, *Mannerism*, 16-18.

However, since the term's re-popularisation in the late 1960s by Shearman and Fritz Grossman, mannerism continues to be an operable term for discussing mid-sixteenth century art (see Fig. 12 for an example). A loosely-bound cluster of common concepts related to mannerism has emerged from the writings of Shearman, Linda Murray, Alastair Smart, Arnold Hauser, and others, including:³⁵⁰

- A focus on physicality, strength, musculature, and movement;
- Elongated bodies in stylised, sometimes unnatural poses;
- Heightened emotion in facial expressions;
- Complexity of composition;
- A lack or subversion of clear perspective;
- A tension between naturalism and artifice/abstraction.



Fig. 14 Agnolo Bronzino, *The Resurrection of Christ*, 1552, oil on canvas. Florence, Santissima Annunziata. An example of early mannerism around the time of the *Genesis* tapestries.

³⁵⁰ See Shearman, *Mannerism*; Linda Murray, *The Late Renaissance and Mannerism* (New York: F.A. Praeger, 1967); Alastair Smart, *The Renaissance and Mannerism in Italy* (New York: Harcourt, 1971); Ibid., *The Renaissance and Mannerism in Northern Europe and Spain* (New York: Harcourt, 1972); Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art, Vol II: Renaissance, Mannerism, Baroque* (London: Routledge, 1999).

One macro-concept that links most of these ideas together is the notion of mannerism as “a style of excess,” in John Shearman’s words.³⁵¹ It is also noteworthy that the rise of mannerism marked the advent of self-awareness among artists, as exemplified in Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists*.³⁵²

By the 1540s, mannerism had become firmly established across Europe as the “court style *par excellence*,” essentially associated with aristocrats and royalty. From Fontainebleau to Florence, many of the premier court painters were mannerists.³⁵³ By this time, mannerist cartoons in the style of Raphael’s *Acts of the Apostles* had also taken hold as the default style for tapestry (see Fig. 13 and 14).³⁵⁴ Thus, by injecting mannerism into the Wawel collection, Sigismund would have fulfilled his expected role as a patron of worldly, princely artworks, in a style that had become a metonym for power.



Fig. 15 Raphael, *The Sacrifice at Lystra*, c. 1516, bodycolour on paper. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

³⁵¹ Shearman, *Mannerism*, 171.

³⁵² Ibid., 44, 162; Hauser, *Mannerism*, 100.

³⁵³ Ibid., 104-105.

³⁵⁴ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 187.



Fig. 16 Raphael, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, c. 1516, bodycolour on paper. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

The foreign and novel character of mannerist art for mid-sixteenth-century Poland also contributed to this. As Helena Kozakiewicz's research has shown, there are very few instances of mannerism in Poland prior to the 1570s, Sigismund's tapestries being the most obvious exception. Among the forerunners of mannerism in Poland, Kozakiewicz notes the work of the sculptor Hieronim Canavesi (1525-1582) and certain altarpieces in Wielkopolska, although the works she cites as specifically mannerist are from the 1570s.³⁵⁵ We may, however, refer to *The Descent from the Cross*, an anonymous work in the Basilica of St. Catherine of Alexandria in Braniewo, likely commissioned by Stanisław Hosius (bishop of the region since 1551) around the middle of the century (Fig. 15).³⁵⁶ The lack of precise dating makes it impossible to state whether this work preceded *Genesis*, but it is certainly a striking example of early mannerism, especially in the hypermuscular and contorted bodies and faces of the figures.

³⁵⁵ Kozakiewicz, *Renesans i manieryzm*, 84-85, 101.

³⁵⁶ Joanna Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al, eds., *Obraz Złotego Wieku: Kultura wizualna w czasach ostatnich Jagiellonów*, vol. 1, (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2023), 59.



Fig. 17 Anonymous painter, *The Descent from the Cross*, after 1550, oil on panel. Braniewo, Kościół św. Katarzyny Aleksandryjskiej.

Regarding tapestry in particular, while none of Bona Sforza and Sigismund the Old's tapestries have survived, we do know from inventories that Bona had acquired a *Story of Abraham* set by the time of her death in 1557.³⁵⁷ This was almost certainly a copy of the 1543 Coecke van Aelst set for Henry VIII, which is designed in a very similar mannerist and Raphaelan style to *Genesis*, although we have no way of knowing whether Bona acquired these tapestries before or after 1553, and whether they were ever displayed at Wawel or only at her private residences in Warsaw or Bari. Otherwise, the closest stylistic antecedents to *Genesis* that were certainly displayed at Wawel were the tapestries that Sigismund's first wife Elizabeth brought as part of her dowry in 1543, and which remained

³⁵⁷ Jedzinskaitė-Kuizininė, *Tapestries*, 18.

in Sigismund's collection after her death in 1545: *The Story of Romulus and Remus* (eleven pieces, see Fig. 16) and *The Story of Nebuchadnezzar* (twelve pieces). The former was a copy of a 1531 set for Catherine and John of Portugal, with cartoons by Van Orley, whose signature style more closely reflects tapestry trends before the mannerist revolution of Raphael's *Acts*.³⁵⁸ The latter is of unknown provenance and authorship, and there are no extant sixteenth-century *Nebuchadnezzar* tapestries. Therefore, unless this unknown *Nebuchadnezzar* set was a design by Coecke van Aelst, Coxcie, or another cartoonist working in the post-*Acts* style, it is extremely likely that *Genesis* was the first tapestry set at Wawel to truly represent the new school of mannerist tapestry.



Fig. 18 Bernaert van Orley (cartoon), unknown Brussels workshop, *Faustulus Meets Romulus and Remus*, 1525-1530, wool, silk, gold and silver thread. Madrid, Patrimonio Nacional.

Despite the fact that mannerism had not yet established a firm foothold in Polish art culture, it is clear from Orzechowski's descriptions that an elite Polish audience was fully capable of understanding and appreciating the style, likely due to their exposure to similar

³⁵⁸ Campbell, *Tapestry in the Renaissance*, 268.

works either in person or through prints. Orzechowski makes multiple references throughout the *ekphrasis* specifically to the artistic merit of the tapestries and the skill of the artist in relation to certain mannerist elements, especially a focus on physicality, physiognomy, and emotional excess: the “remarkable nature of the materials and artistry” in *Paradise Bliss*; “the sin of Adam and the wrath of God [depicted] in all its shades and details” in the same tapestry; “how mad Cain bites his own hand in anger” portrayed by “the skilled hand of the artist” in *Abel’s Offering*; “the face of the fierce tyrant, wonderfully presented: the taut neck, the crazed eyes, the tormented face, the bristled hair, and finally the blow itself” in *Cain Kills Abel*; “the wrathful God looking down at the earth” and “the remains of Abel, covered with gore, disfigured by pallour, terrifying to behold” presented “with unbelievable artistry” in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*; how “the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain’s progeny were” in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*; the “illustrious artistry” of *Noah’s Thanksgiving Sacrifice* and how “the particular ornaments of this tapestry were the flaccid remains of the drowned, rotting in the water and putrid.”³⁵⁹

The references to the artist and his stylistic flair suggest that Orzechowski understood, at least on some level, the self-awareness that was at the core of mannerism, and the importance of style both in creating art of high quality and high emotional impact. The fact that Orzechowski hearkens back to the artist especially in his descriptions of the tapestries’ physicality and drama also suggests that the quintessentially mannerist elements of *Genesis* were striking to the audience and had their intended affective impact.

Considering the twenty extant *Genesis* tapestries as a whole, many elements from the mannerist “cluster” are immediately apparent. One of the most obvious applications of excess in the tapestries is in their scale: not only of the physical pieces, of the vast composition of the woven scenes, and of the heights of the patriarchs (see Fig. 17). Like

³⁵⁹ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53-55.

the minor characters dwarfed by the large protagonists in the scenes, the viewer must crane their head upward to fully appreciate the textiles, effectively creating a point of view of a small figure surrounded by giants. The fact that these “giants” were some of the most important fathers of the Christian religion and God Himself would have made this all the more imposing.



Fig. 19 Detail of *The Building of the Ark*. Note the height of Noah compared to the other figures.

As a result, the viewer of the tapestry would find themselves in a similar situation to a viewer of sacral art in a liturgical setting. As Marc Bayard describes, artwork that demands to be viewed from below reaffirms the humility of the worshipper before a sacred image, and grants them a position of both inferiority and distance from which they are better able to contemplate the theological or moral content.³⁶⁰ Moreover, the excess in the tapestries' scale is reflected in the images within the borders. The scenes are typified by distant horizons, wide vistas, and scenes stretching into the far background (Fig. 18).³⁶¹ In

³⁶⁰ Marc Bayard, “In Front of the Work of Art: The Question of Pictorial Theatricality in Italian Art, 1400-1700,” *Art History* 33, no. 2 (2010): 274.

³⁶¹ Piwocka mentions the “wide scenes” and “distant horizons” in her description of the *Genesis* series. Piwocka, “Art of majesty” 404. See also Fabienne Joubert et al, *Histoire de la tapisserie: En Europe, du Moyen Age à nos jours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 115.

particular, the panoramic tapestries would have required the viewer to walk across the room to view the entire scene, thereby amplifying the impression of the breadth of the world.



Fig. 20 Background vista of *The Animals Enter the Ark*.

Based on scholarship on other concurrent figural series, the literal and perceived scale of the world of *Genesis* mimics the worlds created at other courts by the same medium. For example, Elizabeth Cleland describes Pieter Coecke van Aelst's tapestries as triggering the "feel of an epic narrative," with "huge casts of characters stretching from foreground to distant vistas."³⁶² In this sense, Sigismund's tapestries employ the same visual vocabulary as the court tapestries of his international peers. A viewer awed at the magnificence of the patron's tapestries, and by the figures within them perhaps functioning as his avatars, could be awed by the magnificence of the patron himself.

The theme of excess carries into the figures as well: not only in their size, but in their physicality and dynamism. Each tapestry in the *Genesis* series features huge bodies, many with the elongated proportions typical of mannerism, posed in solid stances with strong physiques (see Fig. 19 and 20). This creates what Piwocka calls a "noble monumentalism," evoking a kind of Herculean masculinity and reminiscent of Greco-

³⁶² Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 237.

Roman statues—unsurprisingly, given that Coxcie primarily relied on classical models for his figures.³⁶³



Fig. 21 Detail of *Abel's Sacrifice*.



Fig. 22 Detail of *Cain Kills Abel*

The terms that Piwocka chooses to describe these effects are very telling, and hint at a more nuanced view of physicality in the tapestries than simply “excess.” While the overpowering, exaggerated stature of the bodies is often “excessive” in comparison to the size and detail of their surroundings (for example, Adam is almost as large as the Tree of Life in *Paradise Bliss*), they never threaten to disrupt the fine equilibrium of the scenes. The movement seems meticulously choreographed, not frenetic, and even the most unnatural poses are designed along the classical S-curve (see Fig. 21 and 22). Elizabeth Cleland describes a very similar effect in Coecke Van Aelst’s *Jacob* and *Abraham* series as a “gentle rhythm” of action.³⁶⁴

³⁶³ Piwocka, “Art of majesty,” 404; Ibid, “Nie tylko Rafael,” 232; Joubert et al, *Histoire*, 115.

³⁶⁴ Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 237.



Fig. 23 Detail of *The Flood*. Note the use of the S-curve in the contorted poses.



Fig. 24 Detail of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

The overall *mise-en-scene* of the tapestries also helps ground the kinetic elements and keep them in balance within the scenes. Here, we are faced with another of the central tenets of mannerism: an interplay between extremes. As Shearman and Hauser mention, mannerist art often blends grace, elegance, and harmony with tension and instability.³⁶⁵ Similarly, for Piwocka, the *Genesis* series combines serenity with drama.³⁶⁶ On a macro-level, the interplay between extremes is visible across the series. Certain tapestries filled

³⁶⁵ Hauser, *Mannerism*, 100-101, 103; Shearman, *Mannerism*, 19, 23.

³⁶⁶ Magdalena Piwocka, "W kręgu mistrzów cinquecenta: Michiel Coxie i temat heroiczny," *Studia Waweliana*, no. 15 (2013): 22

with movement and drama such as *The Flood* and *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* form a sharp contrast to the poised, statuesque tableaux of *God Conversing with Noah* and *Fratricide Conceived*, or to the central and largest scene in *Paradise Bliss* (see Fig. 23).



Fig. 25 Composition of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* versus *God Converses with Noah*.

On an individual level, the tapestries show contrasts between staticity and dynamism, peace and discord, order and chaos. Although each scene features movement, multiple characters, and sometimes even multiple vignettes, everything is anchored by symmetry and either diagonal or semicircular composition. A prime example of this is *Paradise Bliss*, which, following the scriptural chronology, sets the compositional tone as the first episode. It uses a semicircular construction, wherein the episodes of the story are hierarchised according to their proximity to the viewer (Fig. 24).³⁶⁷ This hierarchy has crucial implications: God conversing with Adam and Eve at the Tree of Life is the crux of the story, not the Fall. In other words, the tapestry is centred on the relationship between man and God, not the betrayal of that relationship through sin, and, therefore, on the promise of the continuation and renewal of that relationship.

³⁶⁷ Gębarowicz and Mańkowski, *Arrasy*, 71.



Fig. 26 Semicircular continuous narration in *Paradise Bliss*, centred on the Tree of Life.

The harmony of *Paradise Bliss* introduces the visual motif of the divine “theatre” of nature in the series. According to Ann Blair, the term *theatrum naturale*, originating with Philo of Alexandria, is found in the titles of over one hundred scientific and philosophical texts from 1500-1700. Although the precise meaning of this metaphor morphed over time, its sixteenth century interpretation was of a divinely-created world: vast, intricately ordered, and elaborately designed.³⁶⁸ For example, Guillaume Rondelet opens *Libri de piscibus marinis*, published one year after the tapestries’ unveiling, with the assertion that:

Man has been placed in such a beautiful domicile, or even more, such a magnificent theatre...the whole fashioned with such great artifice, ornamented with such excellent beauty, assembled and composed with such great harmony.³⁶⁹

This ideal of cosmic harmony with God as both creator and commander, evident in *Paradise Bliss*, promotes the notion of an eternal, omnipresent, and omnipotent Divine, a constant and trustworthy overseer of Sigismund’s Poland. In the context of princely image-

³⁶⁸ Ann Blair, *The Theater of Nature: Jean Bodin and Renaissance Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 155.

³⁶⁹ Guillaume Rondelet, *L’Histoire Entière des Poissons* (Lyon: Macé Bonhomme, 1558), 9.

creation, this could be extrapolated to the King himself as a divinely-ordained leader and protector, tasked with maintaining peace and control in the kingdom.

Cosmic order is reflected and reaffirmed throughout the subsequent tapestries, even in more dynamic scenes than the fairly-static opening tapestry. For example, the action of *Abel's Sacrifice* plays out across two clear diagonals, establishing visual symmetry. The best example, however, may be in *God Converses with Noah*. As the overture to the Noah subset, it echoes the circular composition of the first Adam tapestry, *Paradise Bliss*. Noah and God walk together, circling each other, both in contrapposto, both wearing red robes, against a symmetrical woodland background (see Fig. 25). After the increasing violence and drama of the Cain sub-set, there is a promise of harmonious restoration through the new patriarch.



Fig. 27 Compositional order in *Abel's Sacrifice* and *God Converses with Noah*.

Even the most kinetically-charged tapestries such as *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* and *The Flood* do not descend into unbridled chaos. They are indeed full of bodies, yet they never appear overcrowded. The bodies are given enough space to twist and move. There is enough horizontal space in each frame for the actions and emotions of the characters to be legible through their poses, and thus for the narrative and message of the scene to be easily comprehensible. Mark Evans notes a similar effect in the *Acts of the*

Apostles cartoons, which feature “weighty figures acting out a series of momentous encounters” yet with enough room to focus on one “specific dramatic moment for each panel.”³⁷⁰ Moreover, these scenes still maintain compositional order through the use of a clear diagonal (*Moral Downfall*, Fig. 26) or through semicircular organisation of vignettes grounded by a dominant central scene (*The Flood*, *Paradise Bliss*, see Fig. 24).

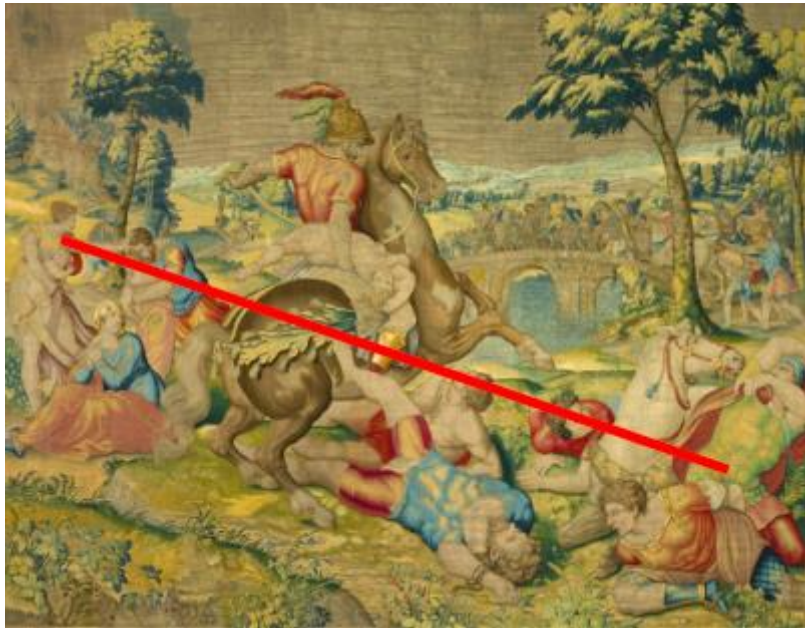


Fig. 28 Diagonal in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

All of these compositional elements contribute to an aesthetically pleasing and harmonious image, indicative of a discerning and cultured patron, yet it is possible to extrapolate another ideological angle from these stylistic choices. On the one hand, the tapestries’ physical and kinetic “excesses” may be read as part of the project of magnificence, both in their awe-inspiring scale and in their promotion of an image of strength, power, and masculinity. On the other hand, just as these elements are kept under control by the grounding features of the image, so too is the patron (using these princely virtues of strong leadership) in control of the potentially destabilising elements in his own

³⁷⁰ Mark Evans et al, *Raphael: Cartoons and Tapestries for the Sistine Chapel* (London: V&A, 2004), 8, 45. Cleland et al also note a similar effect in Van Aelst’s biblical tapestries, full of bodies “vibrating with life” yet anchored by the static architecture. Cleland et al, *Grand Design*, 237.

world. Despite the violence and chaos that the tapestries may portray in their most dramatic moments, equilibrium is restored and the promise of salvation is fulfilled.

With that said, is there also perhaps a theological element to this order/chaos dichotomy? It is possible to read the *Genesis* series' composition as an ode to a powerful yet merciful God, a Creator who holds sway over all, never abandons His children despite their sins, and maintains control even in the midst of cataclysmic destruction. Meanwhile, as the patron, Sigismund is posited as God's messenger, conveying this promise of salvation to his subjects. Even when the themes of princely virtue are not at the forefront of the tapestries' messaging, Sigismund retains a central presence. His reprisal of the role of his patriarchal exemplars *vis a vis* his own people bolsters his magnificence.

Thus, power, both in secular and spiritual terms, emerges as one of the core themes conveyed through the stylistic "excesses" of the tapestries. Still, further questions emerge: just how impactful would these "excesses" have been for the contemporary viewer, and how did style aid or hinder the transmission of the tapestries' messages? An examination of the *Genesis* series's vividness and immersive potential may answer these queries.

4.3. *Enargeia*, Affect, and "Images that Teach"

In *Mannerism, Spirituality, and Cognition: The Art of Enargeia*, Lynette Bosch draws parallels between the classical rhetorical technique of *enargeia* and the vividness of *maniera* in mannerist art as understood by Alberti and Vasari. As mentioned in Chapter Three, *enargeia* is the classical rhetorical trope of bringing images to life by making the invisible visible, the past current, and the absent present. It allows the viewer to feel as though they were physically in the scene, to experience "the emotions of other times and

places” vicariously, and to “awaken the emotions of the spectator in a sympathetic manner that would enhance the participatory aspect.”³⁷¹

Bosch explains that *enargeia* was used as a tool for conversion via sermons in the early Church, as it could stir the imaginations and emotions of the congregation and transport them back to the times of Christ. This technique continued to be used into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance with the popularity of the writings of mystics and books such as Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1418-1427). His contemporary Alberti believed that art and faith went hand in hand: since the beauty of nature arises from God, approximating it through art is praise of God’s glory.³⁷² Like the sermons employing *enargeia*, a painting could ignite a religious experience which brings one closer to God and “fills our minds with sound religious beliefs.”³⁷³ Vasari would later adopt this view into his explanation of *maniera*, God’s gift to the world inspired by creation, bestowed so that humanity might come to know Him better through divinely-inspired artworks.³⁷⁴ In short, *maniera* is a conduit to God for the spectator.

It is important not to confuse *enargeia* with lifelikeness in this sense, as Vasari did not see *maniera* as an attempt to replicate reality as accurately as possible. *Enargeia* is better understood as “vividness” which, in the case of mannerist art, is often achieved through musculature, physiognomy, and gesture.³⁷⁵ In fact, we can find references to this understanding of *enargeia* as early as Plato’s *Timaeus*, which describes the predilection to perceive *enargeia* in art through depictions of motion and energy.³⁷⁶ Later, Alberti

³⁷¹ Bosch, *Mannerism*, 26.

³⁷² Ibid., 38.

³⁷³ Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (1435, reis., London: Penguin, 2004), 60.

³⁷⁴ Bosch, *Mannerism*, 33.

³⁷⁵ On gesture in *ekphrasis*, see also Caroline Van Eck and Stijn Bussels, “Theatricality and the Early Modern Visual Arts,” *Art History* 33, no. 2 (2010): 215.

³⁷⁶ Bosch, *Mannerism*, 28.

famously stated that “a *historia* will move spectators when the men painted in the picture outwardly demonstrate their own feelings as clearly as possible...yet these feelings are known from movements of the body.”³⁷⁷ When applied specifically to dynamism and movement, we may also refer to Aristotle’s concept of the *energeia* (energy or vigour) of a text or artwork. While *enargeia* and *energeia* should not be confused, they may work in tandem to achieve an overall affective experience, especially in cases such as *Genesis* (and much mannerist art in general) where the kinesis of the figures takes centre stage.

If we can locate the *enargeic* (and *energeic*) potential of an artwork in its vividness, then the *Genesis* tapestries emerge as truly powerful conductor. Indeed, Orzechowski seems to have been highly receptive to *enargeia* at the unveiling, as can be deduced from the *ekphrasis*’s many descriptions of the tapestries’ overpowering affective impact on the viewer (Fig. 27). For example, he recounts how Adam and Eve stood in the Garden “as if they were alive,” while the scene of God conversing with Noah “lacked only movement and speech, and the rest was presented as if it were alive.” Similarly, the remains of Abel are described as lying “before the eyes of the viewer, terrifying to behold,” as if they were truly in front of the audience, and not removed from them as an artistic representation in fabric. The emotions expressed by the guests suggest that the tapestries evoked a *trompe l’oeil* effect: according to Orzechowski in reference to *The Animals Exit the Ark*, “no one will ever be able to imagine something closer to reality.”³⁷⁸

³⁷⁷ Cited in Bayard, “In Front of the Work of Art,” 268.

³⁷⁸ Orzechowski, *Panegyricus*, in *Arrasy*, 51-55.

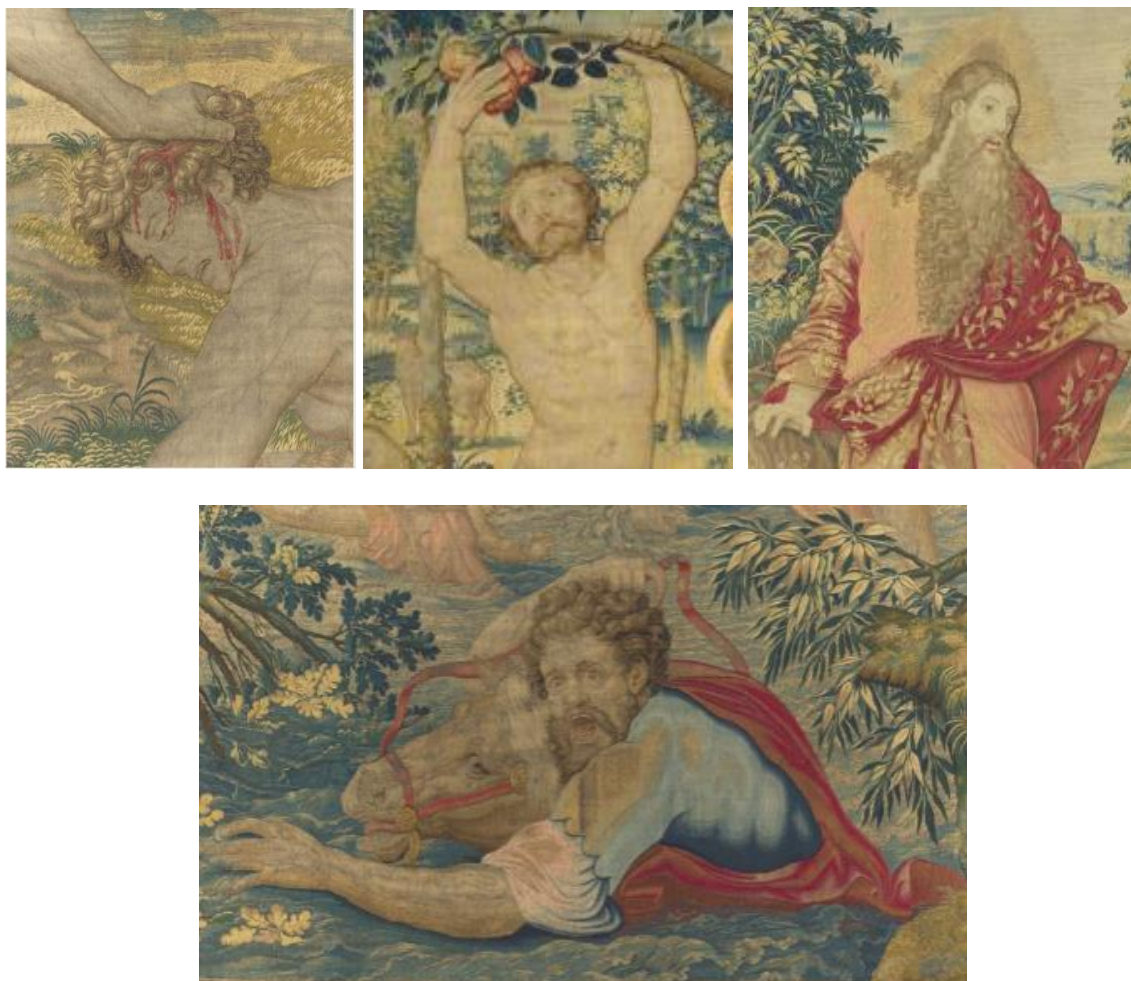


Fig. 29 Some enargeic moments in *Genesis* mentioned by Orzechowski (L to R: *Cain Kills Abel*, *Paradise Bliss*, *God Converses with Noah*, *The Flood*).

Consequently, if we can pinpoint much of the affective potential of the tapestries to their use of *enargeia*, is it possible to draw any links between affect and message in their reception? Perhaps on the most literal level, if one views the tapestries primarily as religious art, they can be read as tools to trigger a religious experience in the viewer, strengthen faith, and encourage moral contemplation, much like the *enargeic* sermons of the early Church. This could have also strengthened Sigismund's image as a Christian prince, as the owner of such sacral art.

However, if one considers the tapestries primarily as court art with didactic functions, not meditational aids, it is possible that their *enargeic* potential may still have helped the audience to absorb their messages more deeply. St. Paul believed that using

enargeia in sermons would help the congregants to internalise the messages, seek out applications in their own lives, and develop a more personal relationship with Christ.³⁷⁹ Could the profound affective experiences of the tapestries' viewers extrapolate to a more personal experience with their patron and owner by proxy? Going on step further, both Longinus and Plato believed that *enargeia* could actually generate belief in audiences through the participatory experiences it created.³⁸⁰ Did the tapestries, through their *enargeia*, have the potential to generate belief in Sigismund's kingship and agenda?

Orzechowski's *ekphrastic* descriptions may be important tools in proposing answers to these questions. His florid depictions of the sensory potential of the tapestries describe the audience personally experiencing the sounds, emotions, and physical sensations of the *Genesis* scenes (Fig. 28). For example, in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, "all sorts of wild birds raised their voices at Eve, recalling her sin and mocking her exile." *The Building of the Ark* "was presented in such a way that one could almost hear the voices of the workers and the clanging of axes at work," while one could almost smell the "putrid" and "flaccid remains of the drowned, rotting from the water" in *The Animals Exit the Ark*.³⁸¹

³⁷⁹ Bosch, *Mannerism*, 38.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁸¹ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 51-55.



Fig. 30 Multisensory moments in *Genesis* based on Orzechowski's account. Top: *The Building of the Ark*. Bottom: *Adam Cultivates the Earth* and *The Animals Exit the Ark*,).

Moreover, Orzechowski collapses the boundaries between audience and object when he describes how the tapestries communicated directly with the viewer: *Paradise Bliss* “itself spoke of the serpent’s temptation and Eve’s sin,” and caused both embarrassment and titillation among the guests at the sight of Adam and Eve’s nudity.³⁸² Regarding the same tapestry (see Fig. 29):

Fear could enrapture you at the sight of Adam’s flight, Eve’s trembling, and God the wrathful judge, so that, looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well.³⁸³

³⁸² Ibid., 51.

³⁸³ Ibid., 53.



Fig. 31 Adam and Eve's exile in *Paradise Bliss*. Fig. 32 Sheltering from the storm in *The Flood*.

However, of all the tapestries, his recollection of *The Flood* is one of the most potent and evocative of *enargeia*: the skies “split with rain and a storm raging in the sky with lightning bolts,” the onlookers “struck with fear,” the “shameful flight” of the faithless a “sign of their guilty consciences,” the tapestry as a whole “so full of confusion and so terrified the viewer, that he himself, struck with fear at such a horrible sight, feared for himself in the flood and longed for the Ark.”³⁸⁴

Along the way, Orzechowski adds his own moral and theological glosses to the narrative, suggesting the didactic power of the tapestries even upon initial viewing. In the description of *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, Orzechowski makes direct reference to a didactic reading, referring to it as “the image that teaches us.”³⁸⁵ Specific examples of “teachings” can be found among Orzechowski’s hermeneutic moments discussed in Chapter Three: the morals of *Cain Flees* (“the end for godless brethren is always sad”), the cautionary tale of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* (“the evil crow lays evil eggs”), or his exhortation to Sigismund (“waking or sleeping, he is beholden to the King of Kings”).

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 54-55.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 53.

Elsewhere, regarding *God Converses with Noah*, Orzechowski describes God as “the avenger of evil and protector of good.” His lengthiest tangent is his exegesis of the rainbow in *God Blesses Noah’s Family* (Fig. 31): blue “retains our memory of the terrible Flood,” white “prophesies that the Church will never be without the Cross [i.e. salvation],” and red, the “unending ray, shows us the eternal punishment awaiting the faithless.”³⁸⁶



Fig. 33 The rainbow in *God Blesses Noah’s Family*.

Furthermore, and perhaps most relevantly for Sigismund’s image-creation, Orzechowski makes several direct connections between the magnificence of the tapestries, their moral content, and their patron. The strongest example of this is the opening to the *ekphrasis*, in which he declares: “I will present [the tapestries]...so that you will come to know not only the works of an outstanding artist, but also the mind and innate majesty of this greatest king, which can best be perceived through his commissions.”³⁸⁷ After completing the tour of the bedchamber, he reiterates that the hangings therein were “worthy of such a noble monarch.” Finally, in his concluding paragraph, he states that the tapestries

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 53-55.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 51.

“demonstrate the character and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been blessed.”³⁸⁸

Therefore, in answer to the questions posed above, we find (based on Orzechowski’s text) that the *enargeia* of the tapestries may indeed have strengthened their didactic potential, and may have primed the audience to absorb Sigismund’s image of magnificence and morality through his artwork.

However, while Orzechowski’s *ekphrasis* puts great emphasis on the immersiveness and lifelikeness of the tapestries, one thing it does not mention (but is quite apparent to the viewer) are the abstractions from reality throughout the series, another typical feature of mannerist art. For example, the aforementioned gigantism of the figures and the viewer’s perspective of looking up at the scenes detract from the illusion of being “inside” the environments, walking among other human beings. In addition, although the tapestries covered the walls of the rooms almost entirely, floor to ceiling, the repetition of the characters throughout the series (and, in the case of *Paradise Bliss*, within the same hanging) would also have disrupted the 360-degree immersion. Taking these elements into consideration, one might object that this detracts from the *enargeic* potential and, consequently, from the didactic potential.

On the other hand, Marcia B. Hall and Marc Bayard both provide evidence suggesting that abstraction in art, especially with religious subject matter, does not necessarily lead to distraction from narrative or morals, or from a weakening of the affective potential. Hall connects mannerism with the idea of “making strange,” a term from poetics which she applies to sixteenth century religious art. She compares it to Wöfflin’s concept of High Renaissance ideality, which morphs the rational and natural to

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 55.

represent the supernatural while never crossing the line into fantasy or irrationality.

According to Hall, mannerist artists

transgressed the limits of the plausible in the ways they organised space, in figure proportions, in their colour...Strangeness...was surely the bait that drew their viewers into further contemplation. In a visual culture that had come to expect to see a mildly modified natural world...these new pictures must have shocked and then enticed the viewer to linger.³⁸⁹

If anything, therefore, these abstract or unnatural elements may have led the viewer to spend more time with the image, encouraging further contemplation. Similarly, Bayard argues that the point-of-view of looking up at religious art did set the viewer at a distance from the scene, but did not exclude them from the immersive viewing experience. In fact, this distance was appropriate and necessary for contemplation of the supernatural and divine.³⁹⁰

In general, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the unnatural elements of the tapestries detracted from their didactic potential. Their use of *enargeia* (in tandem with *energeia*) depended not on their lifelikeness but on their vividity. It was precisely their *enargeic* potential that played a significant role in their effectiveness, both as tributes to Sigismund's magnificence and as vehicles for his messages.

Still, in any discussion of the tapestries' lifelikeness or vividity, there is one more obvious feature that threatens to disrupt the immersion: that of the wide, ornate, fantastical borders. Designed in the fashionable Netherlandish grotesque style, they would have caught the viewers' eyes, fractured the illusion of immersion, and perhaps even distracted from the didactic content of the scenes they framed. Still, while the borders may appear at first

³⁸⁹ Marcia B. Hall, *The Sacred Image in the Age of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 246.

³⁹⁰ Bayard, "In Front of the Work of Art," 271.

glance to ground the tapestries in the realm of artifice and decoration, it is necessary to take a closer look at how they may have interplayed with the narrative, thereby both complicating and supporting the tapestries' didactic content.

4.4. Deciphering the Grotesque

A helpful model for understanding the function of style in *Genesis* may be to look at the “rhetoric” of tapestry. The narrative and affective content of the series (discussed in Chapter Four and previous sections of this chapter) could be mapped on to the *logos* and *pathos* of the series, respectively. What remains, then, is the *ethos*, the establishment of the authority and suitability of the rhetoric. If the tapestry is the rhetor, then style is the *ethos*. For the centrepiece scenes, the *ethos* is mannerism. As we have seen, this was an appropriate style for princely art extolling power, magnificence, monumentalism, and supernatural themes. For the borders, the *ethos* is the grotesque. Just like mannerism, the grotesque is a highly appropriate mode of storytelling, both in terms of the biblical content it frames and the courtly context in which it was displayed. The grotesque simultaneously underlines the magnificence of the Genesis stories and of the ruler.

The grotesque (*grottesche*) itself emerged as a style out of Italy, inspired by the frescoes discovered during excavations of the Domus Aurea in Rome in the late fifteenth century. Generally speaking, the grotesque denoted stylised designs mixing flora and fauna, human figures, geometric elements, and mythological creatures, and featuring an interplay between the realistic and fantastic. The grotesque blended beauty with the monstrous, bizarre, or absurd, and often featured elements of hybridity or metamorphosis.³⁹¹

³⁹¹ Frances Barasch, *The Grotesque: A Study in Meanings* (Berlin: Mouton, 1971), 17-18, 24; Chris Askholt Hammeken and Maria Fabricius Hansen, “Introduction,” in *Ornament and Monstrosity in Early Modern Art*, ed. Chris Askholt Hammeken and Maria Fabricius Hansen, 13-43 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 13; Ethan Matt Kavaler, “Ornament and Systems of Ordering in the Sixteenth-Century Netherlands,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 72, no. 4 (2019): 1300.

The first major use of the grotesque outside of Italy was in the galleries at Fontainebleau, painted by Rosso Fiorentino and Francesco Primaticcio, inspired by classical works such as *The Iliad* and *Metamorphoses*.³⁹² Netherlandish grotesque emerged around 1540, propelled by the works of Cornelis Bos and Cornelis Floris.³⁹³ Stylistically, Netherlandish grotesque tended to be busier than Italian grotesque, while maintaining order and harmony through complex strapwork which seemed to “imprison” the figures.³⁹⁴ Its themes were typically mythological and fantastical, often with a touch of the exotic through allusions to the New World. The depictions of creatures and plants oscillated between meticulous realism and unfettered fantasy.³⁹⁵

The *Genesis* borders are a prime example of Netherlandish grotesque (Fig. 32, 33, 34). The core elements are typical of the style, including satyrs, putti, cornucopiae, exotic birds and fruits, figures imprisoned in strapwork, and mythical deities. Throughout the series, they feature a menagerie of fantastical chimeric creatures, including a beast with two bodies and one head, a small one-horned mammal, a duck-billed sea creature, and a many-legged turtle. The theme of creation and metamorphosis is echoed in the figures being “birthed” from horns within the strapwork. In addition, several of the hallmarks of Cornelius Floris’s designs are present, including feathered headdresses on many of the human figures, and strings with tassels.³⁹⁶

³⁹² Barasch, *Grotesque*, 22

³⁹³ Sune Schele, *Cornelius Bos: A Study of the Origins of Netherlandish Grotesque* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965), 38.

³⁹⁴ Schele, *Cornelius Bos*, 79

³⁹⁵ Paulina Kluz, “From Ornament of Late Antiquity to Netherlandish Grotesque,” *Małopolska Virtual Museums*, <https://muzea.malopolska.pl/en/articles/460> (accessed August 11, 2021).

³⁹⁶ Schele, *Cornelius Bos*, 49, 79.



Fig. 34 The borders in *Paradise Bliss*.



Fig. 35 Some fantastical creatures in the *Genesis* borders (from *Paradise Bliss*).

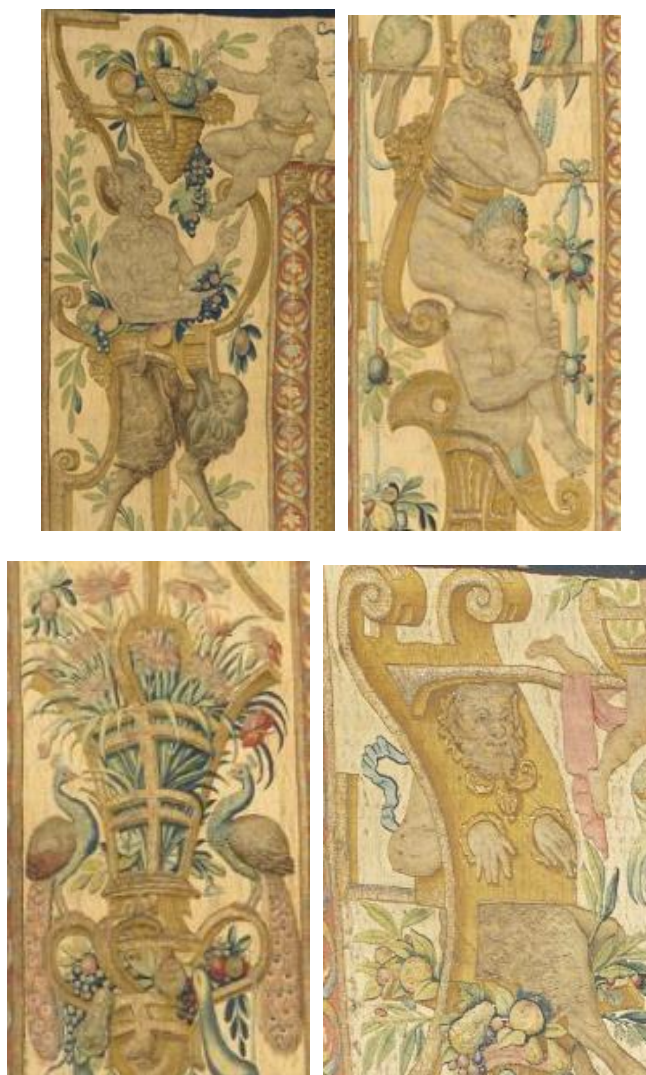


Fig. 36 Cornucopiae, satyrs, putti, exotic birds, and bodies in strapwork from *Paradise Bliss* (first three) and *The Building of the Ark* (last).

In mid-sixteenth century Kraków, Netherlandish grotesque would have been a fairly novel artistic style, strongly associated as a staple of its region of origin. The *Genesis* series was one of the first (and certainly preminent) injections of Netherlandish grotesque into the royal court. It was preceded only by the grotesques (mostly verdure and mythological figures) in the Sigismund Chapel (Fig. 35), although these are an example of Italian grotesque and lack the notable strapwork of the Netherlandish school. There is also the case of the renowned Renaissance palace of Prince Jerzy II in Brzeg, which featured a gate with floral and geometric motifs, real and fantastical animals, and mythological scenes. These grotesques are more closely inspired by the Netherlandish style; however, although

construction on the castle began in 1541, it only finished in 1560, meaning that viewers of *Genesis* would likely not have had a chance to see the Brzeg grotesques by 1553.³⁹⁷



Fig. 37 Grotesque reliefs from the Sigismund Chapel, c. 1531. Kraków, Bazylika Archikatedralna św. Stanisława i św. Wacława.

At the same time, the style was becoming increasingly popular at courts across the continent. Therefore, for contemporary viewers, it simultaneously signified foreignness (specifically, Flemishness), fashionability, wealth, and magnificence. In this way, it was a perfect marriage to the mannerism of the centrepieces: another style representative of foreign artistic prowess, cultural acumen, courtly art, and power.

Before beginning a stylistic analysis of the borders, it is important to note that the function of ornament in the early modern period was different from our current paradigms. Ornament in art was not deemed marginal or superfluous, a mere visual embellishment or addendum, but rather a core piece of the artwork as a whole that was praised and valued by artists and collectors alike.³⁹⁸ One of the most influential voices in this regard was Alberti,

³⁹⁷ Kozakiewicz, *Renesans i manieryzm*, 98.

³⁹⁸ Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 16.

who gives ornament a central role in *De re aedificatoria* (1485). Moving away from the classical aesthetic paradigms of Vitruvius and Horace, who believed that ornament should only serve the “argument” of a design and never overtake the focus, Alberti claimed that ornament is the crown of an architectural design, and that cosmic order can only be achieved through the addition of ornament.³⁹⁹ Therefore, a sixteenth-century patron such as Sigismund would have expected the artist to use grotesque to support, not disrupt, the main artwork, creating a visually and narratively cohesive whole.

This notion of ornament as a part of a whole detracts from the idea that the tapestry borders were obvious impediments to immersion and *enargeia*. Of course, the florid grotesque borders do form a clear demarcation between the narrative scenes. Moreover, unlike the borders of the Sistine Chapel tapestries, which were made to resemble bronze reliefs framing the scenes, the *Genesis* borders do not attempt to blur the line between materials, or between the artworks and the room around them.⁴⁰⁰ Thus, while walking past the tapestries, the viewer would face regular reminders that they were, in fact, viewing separate works of art, and not one continuous mural. The immersion into the world of *Genesis* would have been fractured. This may have been compounded by the presence of furniture in the rooms, blurring the lines between reality and illusion. In this sense, it is perhaps more accurate to refer to the space created by the tapestries at their unveiling as a kind of liminal space between sixteenth-century Kraków and the Old Testament, a semi-immersive experience still grounded in the framework of a display of art.

³⁹⁹ Frances S. Connelly, “Unwinding the Arabesque: Grotesque Ornament and Modern Meaning,” in *Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesques*, ed. Damiano Acciarino, 241-263 (Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2019), 242; Hammeken and Hansen, “Introduction,” 17.

⁴⁰⁰ Lisa Pon, “Raphael's Acts of the Apostles Tapestry for Leo X: Sight, Sound, and Space in the Sistine Chapel,” *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 4 (2015): 392.

On the other hand, the borders continue, and even enhance, many of the stylistic effects and thematic elements of the overall tapestry series. According to Chris Askholt Hammeken (borrowing Kantian and Derridan terms), this posits the relationship between the tapestries and their borders as that of *ergon* (centrepiece) and *parergon* (framework). The references between border and central scene means that there is no definite demarcation between the *parergon* and the *ergon*. Rather, the *parergon* is part of the entire piece which makes it whole and contributes to its overall meaning and affect.⁴⁰¹ Thus, as Hammeken summarises, the physical frame “evaporates inasmuch as ornament partakes of the subject matter...Centre and periphery cannot be separated from one another but are continually entangled in unstable relations.”⁴⁰²

How, then, do the *Genesis* borders interface with the centrepieces? Firstly, the grotesque designs reflect several of the mannerist facets that are so evident in the figural scenes, most notably their play on exaggerated movement and human(oid) physicality, complexity in composition, and uncanny plays on scale and proportion (especially in bodies) combined with structures of statuesque control (especially in the strapwork, see Fig. 36).⁴⁰³ In fact, the grotesque borders can be seen as a reflection of the order versus chaos theme throughout the series. The fantastical, chimeric creatures defy logical comprehension, while the strapwork very literally keeps them in order. As Clare Guest writes of common sixteenth century conceptions of the grotesque, the “symphonic organisation” prevailed over their “chaotic tendencies.”⁴⁰⁴

⁴⁰¹ Kaveler, “Ornament,” 1313, Hammeken and Hansen, “Introduction,” 13.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰³ All of these are common features of the grotesque, per Hammeken and Hansen, *Ornament*, 13, 21.

⁴⁰⁴ Clare Guest, *The Understanding of Ornament in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 553.



Fig. 38 Imprisoned bodies in the *Paradise Bliss* border.

However, while the “chaotic” elements of the borders do tie into this meta-theme, here we are faced with a different version of chaos. Unlike another prominent use of grotesque in princely image-creation, the mantelpiece of the Brugse Vrije (1528-1531) dedicated to Charles V, the grotesques of the *Genesis* borders do not convey a monstrous threat invading the order of the centre. The borders are kept in strict boundaries, and the figures within them are imprisoned within strapwork in the typical style of Floris and Bos. As a result, Sigismund would have been able to tap into the multisensory feast of ornament to project his magnificence, without losing control over the central themes of the commission.

In the case of the *Genesis* borders, chaos is not discord (as in the centrepieces of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* or *The Flood*) but copia, fertility, worldliness. This is chaos in a much more positive and fruitful sense, the kind that can benefit a ruler and enhance his magnificence by projecting an image of control over “wild” elements, especially those which produce bounty and prosperity. This could also be read as a nod toward two of the protagonists of the *Genesis* series, Adam the Gardener and Noah the Vintner, both of whom cultivated and held sway over wild nature.

Furthermore, grotesque ornament is a fertile ground for *enargeia*. This ties into classical rhetorical concepts of ornament by Cicero and Quintillian, who believed that

ornament was necessary to give vividness and power to oratory and art. Rhetorical ornament thus enhanced the subject, brought it to life for the audience, and made it more emotionally persuasive or immediate.⁴⁰⁵ Crucially, among the rhetorical ornaments, Quintillian lists *enargeia*, because illustration “is something more than mere clearness, since the latter merely lets itself be seen, whereas the former thrusts itself upon our notice.”⁴⁰⁶

Secondly, the very nature of the grotesque ties it to one of the main themes of the *Genesis* series: creation. According to Hammeken and Hansen, one of the main tenets of grotesque ornament is a focus on hybridity, metamorphosis, and “wild, unruly displays of continual genesis.”⁴⁰⁷ As Clare Guest argues, Renaissance grotesques’ metamorphic imagery, “prolific capacity for extension,” and sinuous lines conjure a force of continuous generation, depicting “change without end.”⁴⁰⁸ Further support for the links between ornament and genesis can be found in classical Greek rhetoric, especially in the ordering of *kosmos* in decorative yet defined compositions with clear limits and contrasts.⁴⁰⁹ In *Timaeus*, Plato sees ornament as the perfect beauty of the demiurgic creation of the world from the four elements. We find these notions of creation-as-ornament echoed in mediaeval commentaries on Genesis. God created the world *ex nihilo*, progressively adorning it throughout the six “days” by giving matter substantial form. This was commonly referred to by mediaeval exegesis as *ornatus mundi* or *exornatio mundi*, the “adornment” of the world.⁴¹⁰

⁴⁰⁵ Hammeken and Hansen, “Introduction,” 18.

⁴⁰⁶ Cited in *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 13

⁴⁰⁸ Guest, *Understanding of Ornament*, 534, 570.

⁴⁰⁹ As Hammeken, Hansen, and Guest point out, this is reflected in the common etymology between *kosmos* (cosmos) and *kosmetikos* (cosmetic). See e.g. Kavalier, “Ornament,” 1276.

⁴¹⁰ Hammeken and Hansen, “Introduction,” 17, see also Chapter One in Guest, *Understanding of Ornament*.

Thirdly, the grotesque frames of the tapestries help to create a space of metamorphosis and transition, both stylistically and, perhaps, ideologically. As explained by Hammeken and Hansen, Kant established that the *parergon* is not its own separate entity, but an amalgam of what is outside (the frame) and inside (the centrepiece).⁴¹¹ Ornament used as a framing device, such as the *Genesis* borders, functions as a mediator between the viewer's "real" space and the world of the image.⁴¹² Moreover, the grotesque's focus on hybridity and metamorphosis makes it an ideal style for a space of transition such as a frame.⁴¹³ In other words, the *Genesis* borders are loaded with transitional and metamorphic potential. As mentioned previously, the borders' complication of the immersive potential of the tapestries transforms the series into a kind of liminal space between the real world and the figural scenes, and the grotesque images within the borders only further this creation of liminal space. They open up the potential for the tapestries to be a realm of individual meaning-making, which can blur the lines between reality and fantasy, past and present, sacred and profane. Thus, similarly to the *enargeic* content of the tapestries, the transitional and metamorphic nature of the borders may encourage closer interpretive interaction between the viewer and the artwork, thereby supporting the series' primary function as a conduit for Sigismund's messages.

Fourthly, the *Genesis* borders support the series' main content by enhancing the magnificence of the overall tapestry series—and, by proxy, its owner. As Alison Wright argues of framework for Renaissance religious art, the honour of a sacred image is significantly bolstered by an appropriately majestic frame, and this magnificence is then

⁴¹¹ Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 13.

⁴¹² Ibid., 19.

⁴¹³ Luke Morgan, "Dissonant Symphonies: The Villa d'Este in Tivoli and the Grotesque, in *Ornament and Monstrosity*, 74.

reflected back on the patron.⁴¹⁴ Accordingly, the *Genesis* borders literally frame the central scenes in visual signifiers of magnificence: the fashionable elite style of Netherlandish grotesque, the Greco-Roman deities, and an abundance of beauty, all woven in sumptuous detail and interwoven with golden thread. In Ernst Gombrich's words, "the richer the elements of the frame, the more the centre will gain in dignity."⁴¹⁵

However, it is important to note that the grotesque elements of the tapestries are kept in order by the clearly-demarcated borders. In this way, the borders abide by Cicero and Quintillian's instructions on ornament: both warn against an overuse of ornament, as it could exert a sensual allure that might subvert traditions, threaten harmony, disrupt logical argument, and even obscure societal norms.⁴¹⁶ Indeed, the debate over the decadence or moral corruption of borders was potent during the Renaissance, and the catalyst for the defence of ornament by Alberti, among others.⁴¹⁷

At first glance, explicitly confined to the frame with no overlap into the centrepiece, the fantastical and absurd elements of the *Genesis* borders do not threaten to destabilise the harmony of the whole, or overshadow the images and messages of the central iconography. In this sense, the *Genesis* series abides by a fairly conservative relationship between argument (here, the central scenes) and ornament, as outlined by Frances Connelly, in which ornament supports but is subservient to argument.⁴¹⁸ At the same time, it might be an oversimplification to dismiss the power of the tapestries' borders to challenge meanings and messages. As Hammeken posits, ornament by its nature

⁴¹⁴ Alison Wright, *Frame Work: Honour and Ornament in Italian Renaissance Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 32.

⁴¹⁵ E.H. Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 225.

⁴¹⁶ Hammeken and Hansen, "Introduction," 18.

⁴¹⁷ Morgan, "Dissonant Symphonies," 77.

⁴¹⁸ Frances Connelly, "Ornament and Agency: Pico's Poetic Monsters," in *Ornament and Monstrosity*, 223.

endangers argument and casts doubt upon accepted truths and values...The love of complex, labyrinthine, and enigmatic layers of meaning fluctuates continuously in bizarre metamorphoses, emphasising the relativism of vision and the cruciality of paradox in regard to perception.⁴¹⁹

In fact, this is one of the great threats posed by the grotesque in the view of Horace and Vitruvius. According to the former, ornament is a “sick man’s fever dream” that becomes a monster, a category-breaker eliding difference, precisely when it claims the right to speak.⁴²⁰

Arguably, the framing of sacred scenes in profane ornament could open up the door for non-theological interpretation of the tapestries. Secular ornament literally separates the biblical scenes and prevents the religious themes from forming a unified whole and from overtaking the secular chambers of Wawel Castle. The tapestries, therefore, are unable to create a fully and dominantly sacred space, or to fully overshadow the presence of the patron in his own residence. As a result, the political context of the artworks is able to permeate. Naturally, the theological and moral content is given a privileged place by virtue of its visual centrality. However, in a viewing context where the framing device highlights secular magnificence, and thus the person of the prince, politics and image-creation are able to share the stage with exegetical commentary.

The final question that arises regarding the *Genesis* borders is the extent to which we may mine them for iconographic meaning. Here, it is important to note that the idea of symbolically-charged grotesques was not entirely without precedent in the sixteenth century; one of the more notable works on the subject was published in the same years as the tapestries’ unveiling: Pirro Ligorio’s *Libro dell’antichità di Roma* (1553). Ligorio’s

⁴¹⁹ Hammeken and Hansen, “Introduction,” 24.

⁴²⁰ Connelly, “Unwinding the Arabesque,” 243.

theory posits that “the grotesque pictures of the pagans are not without meaning and are contrived with some fine philosophical skill and depicted poetically.”⁴²¹ For Ligorio, grotesque was not just ornament but a pictographic language which begged to be deciphered. Crucially, Ligorio goes beyond identifying more obvious symbols (e.g. personifications of the continents, Greco-Roman deities) to find more arcane references based on hieroglyphs and emblems, from which moral messages could be drawn.⁴²²

Because the primary function of the *Genesis* borders is ornamental, it would be remiss to overstate their symbolic importance. The greatest concern for the artists (and the patron) would have been their overall impact as ornate frames invoking magnificence, and whether they complemented the centrepieces in colour scheme and composition. It is also unlikely that Sigismund would have had much input into the actual content of the borders aside from their general style. As we saw in Philip II’s contract, the overall aesthetics of the borders were certainly a concern for patrons, but this would not have extended to the minutia within them. This would have been the purview of the border artists, who themselves relied on established patterns available on the market. In the case of *Genesis*, these were patterns based on the works of Floris and Bos. In other words, there would not have been much deviation on the part of the artists or the patron from these models. Moreover, because Netherlandish grotesque would have been fairly novel in Poland at the time, their “strangeness” would have been enhanced even more so than in their native Flemish context, thereby making symbolic analysis even more opaque.

Lacking any supporting evidence (including from Orzechowski, who does not mention the borders), it is impossible to state definitively whether or not any viewers of the

⁴²¹ Cited in Morgan, “Dissonant Symphonies,” 76. Among examples of sixteenth-century grotesques with intentional symbolism, Morgan lists Il Sodoma’s *grottesche* for the abbey at Monte Oliveto Maggiore in Asciano (1505-1508). Ibid., 81.

⁴²² Ibid., 82-83.

Genesis tapestries at Wawel would have searched for or found hidden symbols in the borders in the vein of Ligorio, or whether any of these were planted intentionally by the artists (or Sigismund). For our purposes, therefore, it is more expedient to focus on a few instances of explicit symbolism in the borders which comment directly on the centrepieces' stories.⁴²³

Depending on how closely one observed the tapestries (again, whether or not this would have been possible at the unveiling itself is debatable), these figures stand out thanks to their privileged position in respect to the viewer (the bottom centre of the borders) and their size relative to other figures in the bottom border. Moreover, they are the only deviations from a border design that is otherwise fairly uniform across the fifteen extant tapestries.

Some of the symbolic figures are quite transparent commentaries on the main action of the centrepieces. For example, several of the Noah borders feature recurring allusions to water deities, including Neptune and Amphitrite (Fig. 37) and a river god (Fig. 38), potentially the personification of the Tiber (*The Building of the Ark, The Animals Enter the Ark, and Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*).⁴²⁴ *The Flood, The Animals Exit the Ark, and God Blesses Noah's Family* feature women holding parrots, likely based on ubiquitous emblems of the New World. Combined with the abundance of tropical birds (especially parrots), fruits, and flowers throughout, there is a notable motif of exoticism and the wonders of natural history throughout.⁴²⁵ *Noah's Drunkenness* includes Dionysus and Ceres (Fig. 39),

⁴²³ This would, in fact, be in accordance with the work of other tapestry scholars on potential border symbolism. For example, Edith Standen argues that the personifications of virtues, elements, seasons, and hours in the borders of Raphael's Sistine Chapel tapestries were conspicuous enough in their adherence to ubiquitous emblems to be legible to a sixteenth-century viewer. Standen, "Some Sixteenth Century Flemish Tapestries Related to Raphael's Workshop," *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 4 (1971): 120.

⁴²⁴ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 108.

⁴²⁵ The associations between the story of Noah and the frenzy for natural history and New World exploration has been well-documented, including in the case of Philip II, who ordered a copy of the Noah set around 1562. Buchanan, "Contract," 414.

and *Cain Kills Abel* includes male and female figures in repose, presumably personifications of death (Fig. 40).⁴²⁶ Afterward, *Cain Flees the Wrath of God* features several pairs of nude athletes writhing in combat, perhaps an allusion to the violent death of Abel or to Cain's spiritual struggle after his sin. In these instances, we may have examples of the *parergon* challenging the supremacy of the *ergon* by claiming the power to speak, although this power complements rather than contradicts the messages therein.



Fig. 39 Neptune and Amphitrite in *The Building of the Ark's* border.



Fig. 40 The river god in *The Building of the Ark's* border.



Fig. 41 Dionysius and Ceres in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

⁴²⁶ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 148, 92.



Fig. 42 Personifications of death(?) in *Cain Kills Abel*.



Fig. 43 Neptune and Minerva in the corners of *Paradise Bliss*.

One of the clearest personifications in the borders is the recurrence of Minerva and Neptune in the bottom left and right corners of each tapestry (Fig. 41), although their significance is one of the most oblique. These are the two largest figures in any of the borders, and their canonical attributes make them almost immediately recognisable. It is tempting to interpret these as references to Sigismund and his wife, the two intended recipients of the commission. However, we have no extant sources prior to 1553 comparing Sigismund to Neptune or either Barbara or Catherine to Minerva. Otherwise, if the placement of these specific gods is intentional, not purely aesthetic, then Neptune may be

another reference to water imagery from the Noahic Flood. Additionally, according to Luba Freedman, Neptune was often used by Renaissance artists as a metonym of ancient rulers, inspired by the famous “Quos ego” passage from the *Aeneid*. Thus, many depictions of Neptune in static poses carried an “imperative character.” When used in princely imagery such as numismata, “static Neptunes” could be an attempt to tap into a classical imperial visual lexicon.⁴²⁷ The Neptune in the *Genesis* borders is an example of a “static Neptune,” seated in a chariot and blowing a conch shell. It is possible, therefore, that he could have been read as a general personification of royal power.

Minerva is more of a conundrum, although she can be read as a general composite of princely virtues sprinkled throughout the series (wisdom, justice, learning, military acumen, patronage of the arts, etc.). A final option is an allusion to the myth of Athena and Poseidon’s fight over the city of Athens, described in *Metamorphoses*. Poseidon gifted Athens water, which they did not need as they were close to rivers and the sea. Athena gave an olive tree, which gave the people timber, olive oil, and nutritious fruits. One piece of evidence supporting this interpretation is a sketch of the fight between Athena and Poseidon (1540-1545) by Antonio Fantuzzi or Fiorentino Rosso for the grotesques at Fontainebleau, meaning that this may have been a recurring story within the grotesque canon.⁴²⁸

Some of the other deviations from the border patterns could be interpreted either as iconographic or aesthetic choices on the part of the artists. For example, there is a running theme of family throughout the Adam and Eve and Noah tapestries (Fig 42). The border of

⁴²⁷ Luba Freedman, “Neptune in Classical and Renaissance Visual Art,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 2, no. 2 (1995): 231-233.

⁴²⁸ Antonio Fantuzzi or Fiorentino Rosso, “The Dispute Between Neptune and Athena,” print, 26.2 x 41 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, USA, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-dispute-between-neptune-and-athena-antonio-fantuzzi-rosso-fiorentino/fQE3e26REpMjWA?hl=en> (accessed April 17, 2024). Victor Kommerell has argued for the importance of *Metamorphoses* as a foundational text for grotesque iconography in *Metamorphosed Margins: The Case for a Visual Rhetoric of the Renaissance 'Grottesche' under the Influence of Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag AG, 2008).

Paradise Bliss includes a family with two babies, the mother breastfeeding one of them. In the next tapestry, *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, we find an image of the disruption of marriage and family: Cupid arranging an adulterous rendezvous between Venus and Mars.⁴²⁹ This trio reappears in the next tapestry (*Abel's Sacrifice*) as well as *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, both depicting consequences of the First Parents' fall. However, the next scene (*God Converses with Noah*) offers a fresh start to salvation history through Noah, along with a reemergence of a more traditional family motif in the border (a nymph, faun, and child), which also appears in *The Animals Exit the Ark*.



Fig. 44 The progression of the family motif: *Paradise Bliss*, *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, and *God Converses with Noah*.

⁴²⁹ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 78.

It is possible that these familial motifs are entirely coincidental: indeed, personifications of the gods or other mythical creatures were a stylistic staple of the grotesque with no inherent symbolic significance. On the other hand, the specific placement of these families within the series's narrative raises the question of intentionality. It is possible that the borders were meant to evoke themes of marriage, fertility, and family, which would have been appropriate for tapestries intended for a young king with dynastic ambitions and his new bride.⁴³⁰

Again, lacking any discussion of the borders in the primary literature, be it their commissioning, design, or reception, there is no way of definitively arguing for or against their intentionality. We also have no definitive proof that the viewers would have paid close attention to the borders, or even have been able to see them clearly at the veiling. All this, therefore, remains a matter of speculation. In keeping with the liminal nature of their style, the grotesques offer a multiplicity of potential associations, but not necessarily any clear answers or master narrative.⁴³¹

However, there is one minor reference in Orzechowski's panegyric that may indicate that he did notice the borders. After the unveiling of the tapestries, he compares Catherine "not to Venus, infamous for her relations with Mars, but with Minerva herself, highly exalted for her virtue," who "surpassed Venus's beauty in Paris's estimation."⁴³² This is an interesting gloss, perhaps spurred by the fact that Catherine was, according to contemporary reports, unattractive and considerably overweight, and thus Orzechowski tactfully decided to focus on her inner attributes instead. That said, it is suspiciously

⁴³⁰ It is important to restate that these tapestries were likely commissioned with the intention of being used for the coronation or state wedding of Sigismund and Barbara before her unexpected death, not for Sigismund and Catherine's wedding, but the focus on marriage and childbirth still holds.

⁴³¹ Connelly, "Unwinding the Arabesque," 243.

⁴³² Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Dziela*, 115.

coincidental that Orzechowski would reference not one but two instances of fairly explicit symbolism in the borders, both of which repeat throughout the series. If this is indeed “proof” that the guests could and did examine the borders, then this may also suggest that the artists placed these figures in the borders to comment on the centrepieces or on the circumstances of the commission, not only as generic staples of grotesque. Nevertheless, the layers of speculation needed to make this claim, and the lack of evidence to substantiate it, means that any symbolic reading of the *Genesis* borders must be treated as ambiguous both in intentionality and reception. It is perhaps better to view the grotesques as “ornament with flourishes of argument,” in Frances Connelly’s words, rather than usurpers of the centrepieces’ power of speech.⁴³³

4.5. Conclusion

The materiality and style of the *Genesis* tapestries are crucial to understanding the series. Orzechowski suggests as much in his *ekphrasis*, and his insight reflects this thesis’s analysis. The tapestries’ agentive physical materials combined with mannerist elements, especially the dichotomy between order and chaos and the dominant presence of *enargeia*, bolster the themes conveyed by the figural scenes. Even in light of their overwhelming affective power, the didactic potential of the tapestries remains a focal point. In fact, as in the case of *enargeia*, their affect may support their arguments. Orzechowski’s observation that the tapestries are “images that teach” is not muddled by their stylistic complexity or grandeur. Meanwhile, the borders, which initially appear at odds with the didactic and immersive aims of the centrepieces, use Netherlandish grotesque to bolster and comment on the centrepieces, interfacing both stylistically and narratively with the series as a whole.

⁴³³ Connelly, “Unwinding the Arabesque,” 244.

The visuals of *Genesis* may have been the first element to capture the viewer's attention simply due to their splendour, intricacy, and novelty in the context of the Polish court. However, as this chapter has argued, the potential for the images to overwhelm the didactic content are kept at bay through the composition of the artworks. Thus, we must see the style as working in tandem with the series' narrative, as one should expect from mid-sixteenth century art.

With this in mind, we can peel back the next layer of a close reading of the tapestries: that of the biblical stories and characters they present, and the implications of these for Sigismund's image and agenda.

Chapter Five: The Hermeneutics of *Genesis*

This chapter proposes a triadic reading of the *Genesis* tapestries' narrative in terms of its didactic aims, all of which are separate but may work simultaneously on the viewer:

1. The tapestries present avatars for the king in the form of the protagonists, the patriarchs. Crucially, there is no documented example of Sigismund adopting any of the *Genesis* protagonists as a recurring avatar in his overall image-creation programme. Rather, Sigismund can be considered a “floating” presence throughout the series, inhabiting the bodies of the patriarchs to draw on some of their qualities or life episodes, without the burden of adhering to their entire characters or biographies. This is particularly important as the protagonists of *Genesis* are all complex figures with varying degrees of sinfulness, while still functioning as exemplars of virtue and heroism. On the other hand, relying on flawed characters as avatars may have allowed Sigismund to tap into more nuanced ideas of magnificence, perhaps referencing the potential of even the greatest men for moments of human frailty, along with the ever-present promise of redemption and renewal, or by presenting the antitheses of princely virtues.
2. They convey exhortative moral messages for the viewer, which can be extrapolated to moral messages for Sigismund's subjects as a whole.
3. They function as vehicles for Sigismund's religious and political policy through metaphorical episodes.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* does shed light on the image of the king and the morals of the tapestries, and will continue to be a valuable source for the readings of the narratives and characters. However, it does not tell us as much about more explicitly political and theological undertones contained therein. Indeed, while early

modern *ekphrases* such as Orzechowski's commonly referenced the morality and politics of the subject, there is little basis for this in the classical rhetorical tradition, save the moral messages of the *Tabula*. Therefore, we must expand our textual foundation beyond the generic confines of *ekphrasis* to bring in early modern sources on politics and religion in particular.

In order to construct the triadic reading, we may rely on texts that would have been commonplace in the sixteenth century Polish and European intellectual canons, both for Sigismund and his learned courtiers. To deconstruct political allusions in the tapestries (either intentional on Sigismund's part or potentially evident to the viewer), we must consider some treatises specific to the Polish context, most importantly the works of the prolific Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Sigismund's secretary. The theological texts were in heavy circulation throughout the Republic of Letters, making it plausible that the tapestries' artists and foreign viewers as well as Polish audiences operated within a similar exegetical lexicon. These include the works of the Church Fathers such as Augustine and Jerome, and the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. We must also remember the Latin inscriptions of the tapestries, which paraphrase and cite verses from the Vulgate.

Given the popularity of reformed theology among the Polish nobility at the time, and Sigismund's own familiarity with Calvin's writings, it is also valuable to bring in the systematic exegesis of the *Institutes of the Christian Faith* (1536). Calvin provides us with a particularly relevant framework for examining biblical/Christian kingship, which will emerge from the following readings of *Genesis*, but which can be summarised as follows: that Scripture contains all the guiding principles of a holy life (or, in this case, holy rule), that an almighty God holds sway over all, human frailty is succoured by divine grace, and that biblical covenants between God and his chosen people are the guiding lights for salvation. This macro-level understanding of the Old Testament is useful for uncovering a

logic running through the tapestries about kingship and faith. It also leads us to one of the other prominent themes of the series: that of lineage, genealogy, and dynasty.

Not only does this body of sources provide us with an interdisciplinary reading of *Genesis*, but it also frees us from relying on Orzechowski's account too heavily, if one should so choose. I have argued that the *ekphrasis* is an enormously valuable source for understanding *Genesis*, and continue to do so in this chapter. However, if one treats Orzechowski's text with some scepticism for reasons outlined in Chapter Three, one would still arrive at a very similar reading (especially in terms of morals) by relying on the other sources presented here. Naturally, this is because Orzechowski would have been familiar with these texts due to his humanist education, and drew on his knowledge of them in describing the messages of *Genesis*. In this way, reading *Genesis* need not hinge on accepting Orzechowski's interpretations at face value. Additionally, we must remember that we can check the veracity of Orzechowski's descriptions against the actual textiles, which shows that, despite some of his "errors" in portraying the series chronology, his descriptions of the characters and scenes are very accurate to the images themselves.

Finally, it is necessary to reiterate that Sigismund's use of the patriarchs for his image-creation and messages was by no means unusual. As mentioned in Chapter Two, many of his contemporaries employed Old Testament figures in tapestry and other artwork for similar means and with similar messages in mind, such as princely virtue, strong hierarchical leadership, and dynasty. Accordingly, the literature of the time reflected a trans-European understanding of the political and theological relevance of these characters in an early modern context. For example, John G. Geerken has researched the use of Moses in Italian Renaissance political texts, while Don Cameron Allen has traced the characterisation of Noah and both symbolic and literal references to the Flood in art and

writing.⁴³⁴ Therefore, in our analysis, we must remember that, aside from some potential references to Polish politics, the proposed messages about rule and government would not only have been legible to a local audience in Kraków, but to a viewer from anywhere in Europe. By using these Old Testament figures, Sigismund was emulating his peers and engaging in a continental dialogue about the nature of Christian kingship.

5.1. Adam

Adam is not only the first of the characters in the biblical order, but was also granted a particularly privileged place in relation to the king upon the unveiling of the tapestries. *Paradise Bliss* hung over Sigismund's bed, placing Adam in literal proximity to the king. *Adam Cultivates the Earth* hung next to it. Moreover, as one of the largest and grandest tapestries in the set, arguably one of the two centrepieces (along with *The Flood*), *Paradise Bliss* places Adam in an exalted position within the overall narrative. Even Orzechowski spends almost thrice as much time on *Paradise Bliss* than any other tapestry in the *ekphrasis*.



Fig. 45 The creation of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Bliss*.

⁴³⁴ John J. Geerken, "Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 579-595; Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

In many ways, Adam is a natural fit for a princely exemplar: a father, husband, and religious leader, the original natural historian, blessed with wisdom from God Himself and granted authority over all of His creation (see Fig. 43 and 44).⁴³⁵ As the progenitor of all mankind and cultivator of the earth after the Fall, he (like the king) is the first among men, associated with paternal leadership and protection over the land. Additionally, during the Renaissance, Neoplatonists became fixated with the search for the “lost language of Adam,” a perfect prelapsarian knowledge of the world conveyed to Adam directly from God before the Fall, and that might be recovered through grace and rigorous study. As stated by Alberti in *De architectura* and echoed by his Neoplatonic contemporaries, the Adamic language was hieroglyphic, based on natural symbolism written into creation in the Garden of Eden.⁴³⁶ Thus, Adam can be associated not only with fatherhood and leadership but also with the highest form of divine wisdom, to which he was given unique access.



Fig. 46 Adam receives the commandment not to eat the Fruit in *Paradise Bliss*.

⁴³⁵ Piwocka, “Art of majesty,” 402. The recurrence of Minerva on the border of all of the *Genesis* tapestries also highlights the focus on wisdom as a chief princely virtue.

⁴³⁶ See Ludwig Volkmann, “The Hieroglyphics of the Italian Humanists,” in *Hieroglyph, Emblem, and Renaissance Pictography* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 8-83; Sonja Drimmer, “The Hieroglyphs of Kingship: Italy’s Egypt in Early Tudor England and the Manuscript as Monument,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, no. 59/60 (2014/2015): 255-283.

While we do not have a surviving example of Sigismund being compared to Adam directly, these are precisely the kind of princely virtues that Renaissance humanists presented as models in the *specula principum*, and which Polish humanists echoed as models for Sigismund specifically. For example, in his dedication of *Lascius sive de poena homicidii oratio prima* (1543) to Sigismund, Modrzewski refers to him as the “father of the fatherland,” whose highest calling is to protect peace, the greatest virtue of a kingdom.⁴³⁷ In the dedication of *Querela de contemptione legis divinae in homicidas* (1546), he calls for Sigismund to appeal to a “tribunal of reason” to solve disputes in his territory.⁴³⁸ Similarly, in the dedication to the fourth book (“On the Church”) of *De Republica emendanda* (1551), he argues that religious conflict should be quelled through discussion and intellectual argumentation, with the king as mediator.⁴³⁹

On the other hand, Adam is far from an uncomplicated character, as he is the perpetrator of the Fall of Man and the introduction of original sin to the human race. Although *Paradise Bliss* also depicts the creation of Adam and Eve and their life in Eden before the Fall, the inscription mentions only the narrative from the command which precipitated the Fall: “God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life. They, disobedient, were exiled from Paradise.”⁴⁴⁰ Similarly, it is Adam’s sin and not his virtues that Orzechowski mentions in the *ekphrasis*. While only a third of the actual tapestry depicts the sin and fall of Adam and Eve, Orzechowski spends around two-thirds

⁴³⁷ Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, “*Ad Sigismundum Secundum Augustum Regem Poloniae in lascium sive orationem de poena homicidii primam praefatio*,” in *Fricii Modrevii Opera Omnia*, vol. 2 (1543, reis., Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1954), 17.

⁴³⁸ Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, “*Ad Sigismundum Secundum Augustum Regem Poloniae in eandem querelam de contemptione legis divinae in homicidas altera praefatio*,” in *Opera Omnia* (1546, reis.), 121.

⁴³⁹ Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, *De Republica emendanda*, trans. Edwin Jędrkiewicz (1551, reiss., Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1953), 363-364.

⁴⁴⁰ It should be noted that this is not an accurate account of the biblical story, as God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, not the Tree of Life.

of his ekphrastic description of *Paradise Bliss* on this final third. His description of the exile from Eden (see Fig. 32) is particularly vivid:

On the third our exile, miserable and disastrous, was shown. Here, you would recoil in terror at the sight of Adam's flight, Eve's trembling, and God the wrathful judge, so that, looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well. Such did the tapestry depict the sin of Adam and the wrath of God in all its shades and details.⁴⁴¹

Orzechowski does not elaborate on the nature of "the sin of Adam," although he names Eve's as "gluttony," in a metaphorical sense, as gluttony for the divine knowledge and immortality that the forbidden fruit would grant.⁴⁴² However, the sin of Adam is explored in detail by Calvin in the *Institutes*, a text which, as mentioned previously, Sigismund read. One element that particularly stands out in relation to kingship is the sin of pride, as Adam succumbs to the serpent's temptation, "Ye shall be as gods" (Gen 3:5). In this sense, Adam is a cautionary tale against an earthly ruler, granted power by God, who might abuse that power for his own benefit and greed. Interestingly, however, Calvin also notes that Adam committed the sin of "despising the truth" of God's word and losing his faith and trust in his creator. Hence, "infidelity was at the root of the revolt," from which sprang pride and ingratitude.⁴⁴³ Considering the greatest sin to be the loss of faith introduces a theme that will continue throughout the next three subsets of the tapestries.

In general, the presentation of Adam in *Paradise Bliss* as a complex figure, one who is inescapably associated with the sin that precipitated the fall of mankind, has certain implications for Sigismund's association with the patriarch. We should not read any of the *Genesis* protagonists as full avatars for Sigismund in the way that Henry VIII adopted the

⁴⁴¹ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.

⁴⁴² Ibid.

⁴⁴³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1536, reis., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 213, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/c/calvin/institutes/cache/institutes.pdf>.

image of Abraham. This allows some leeway in connecting the qualities of Adam, positive and negative, with Sigismund. It is possible, for example, to read Adam's virtues and dynastic connotations in terms of Sigismund's princely virtue, while applying his sin and associated moral warnings to Sigismund's intended viewer. On the other hand, if we adopt Orzechowski's reading and the inscription, we find that the sin of Adam can and must be tied back to the patron as well. Most blatantly, Orzechowski's description of the exile in *Paradise Bliss* foreshadows the final lines of his *ekphrasis*. The statement "looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well," can be applied not only to the viewer but to Sigismund as well, who "placed himself beneath the eyes of a wrathful God, so that, whether waking or sleeping, by night or by day, he...would contemplate the King of Kings above them, in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin."⁴⁴⁴ In short, therefore, it is possible to read Adam as a moral warning for princes: the patron is mindful of the mistakes of Adam in falling into sin and trying to approximate "the King of Kings above [him]."



Fig. 47 Adam's penance in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

⁴⁴⁴ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53, 55.

The consequences of original sin, both for Adam and Eve and for the rest of humanity, are depicted in the following tapestry, *Adam Cultivates the Earth* (Fig. 45). Orzechowski describes the tapestry as a depiction of “our toil and pain.” In contrast to his lush description of *Paradise Bliss*, here he focuses on the poverty of “miserable Adam” and “reckless Eve’s” clothing and new surroundings, and mentions the wild birds in the background “raising their voices at Eve, recalling her sin and mocking her exile.”⁴⁴⁵ According to Augustine, the pelts that Adam and Eve wore after their exile, as depicted in this tapestry, symbolise the shame and weakness of the soul after sin, which can only be removed through reunion with Christ.⁴⁴⁶

Orzechowski’s twofold mention of Adam’s “exile from his homeland” and cultivation of “foreign land” is also noteworthy. This frames Adam as a leader who has been stripped of a kind of national or ethnic identity through his banishment. Here, again, we may find a moral warning for princes. Earthly rulers who do not abide by the divinely-ordained model of virtue may find themselves dispossessed of their power and, consequently, of their identity as fathers of their homeland, as figureheads of a kingdom. These implications might be particularly potent in a limited, elective monarchy such as Poland-Lithuania, with a legally-enshrined history of a right of resistance.

Still, Adam’s story after Genesis 3, the basis for *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, establishes his penitence for disobeying God. This culminates in Genesis 5, “The Book of the Generations of Adam,” which delineates his progeny through his son Seth to Noah. Thus, Adam is rehabilitated as a reformed sinner who, despite the Fall, reclaimed his

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁴⁶ “...to the end that they might go on no further in self-confidence, but rather should become weak, seeing before their feet the Divinity weak by taking our coats of skins [Gen 3:21], and wearied, might cast themselves down upon It, and It rising, might lift them up.” Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (c. 397, reis., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 92, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0354-0430,_Augustinus,_Confessionum_Libri_Tredecim-Pusey_Transaltion,_EN.pdf (accessed 24 June 2024).

paternal leadership over the Earth. Here, we see the introduction of the motif of husbandry into the *Genesis* series as a metaphor for the spiritual cultivation of the soul and of the earth.⁴⁴⁷ From Sigismund's perspective, there is a natural extension of this metaphor to kingship: like Adam, a king must have husbandry over his own soul and over his kingdom.⁴⁴⁸

Adam's "rehabilitation" also produced an illustrious lineage through the descendants of his son, Seth. Indeed, the entire *Genesis* series can be read as a celebration of dynastic accomplishments, as each of the protagonists is the ancestor of the next in the series (Adam, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses). As Alexandra Walsham argues, sixteenth-century audiences were well-accustomed to a reading of the Book of Genesis as a genealogical chronicle of Adam and his posterity, which was an extended metaphor for the spiritual family of the faithful in the Church, the "chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people" (1 Pet 2:9). As inheritors of the divine covenants made with the patriarchs and fulfilled through Christ, the lineage of believers all shared in the grace, blessings, and protection granted to the "family" of the Church, and the promise of inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁴⁹ For example, in the *Institutes*, Calvin centres his commentary on Adam on genealogy as a means of arguing for an uninterrupted lineage of believers since the beginning of time to the present moment.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ This is the metaphor used by Philo of Alexandria in his commentary on Genesis. A farmer such as Adam had the responsibility of planting seeds, pruning branches, nursing sick plants, and separating the productive plants from the weeds. Accordingly, humans should be "farmers" for their own souls and over the earth, so that it might approximate heaven. Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo Judaeus*, Book 7, trans. Charles Duke Jonge (London: H.G. Bohn, 1854-1890), <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book7.html> (accessed 29 January 2024).

⁴⁴⁸ In fact, in his commentary on Noah the Vintner, Philo revisits this metaphor and directly links it to the work of a king over his kingdom. Philo of Alexandria, *Works*, Book 11, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book11.html> (accessed 29 January 2024).

⁴⁴⁹ Alexandra Walsham, *Generations: Age, Ancestry, and Memory in the English Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 42.

⁴⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 71, 215, 217, 388, 404, 405.

The narrative of Genesis is, Walsham observes, “enveloped in an enumeration of the offspring of Adam and the patriarchs.” It shows the birth of humanity from a single root (a prefiguration of the Tree of Jesse, Christ’s genealogy, in Isaiah 11:1). Beginning with the exhortation to Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply,” it shows the origins of the Christian faith as “a function of reproduction and succession of blood.” In its several genealogical tangents listing the offspring of the patriarchs, it becomes “a recital of ‘begats,’” a text that “forges an intimate link between demography and theology, between generational change and the transmission of grace” (see Fig. 46).⁴⁵¹



Fig. 48 Young Cain (L) and Abel (R), the start of Adam’s lineage, in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

For Sigismund, this interpretation of Adam’s story may have been particularly pertinent, considering his anxieties about continuing his dying dynasty. It is reasonable to assume that he and his learned courtiers would have been familiar with the genealogical reading of Genesis. Specifically, the decision to break from established models of tapestry commissioning for an episodic, multigenerational narrative (rather than a focus on one of the protagonists) makes a reading of *Genesis* as a dynastic chronicle more plausible. This

⁴⁵¹ Walsham, *Generations*, 173.

theme of lineage and paternity extends beyond the Adam and Eve subset into the rest of the series, while taking on somewhat different dimensions and complexities.

5.2. Cain and Abel

Unlike Adam, the precedent for using Adam's sons Cain and Abel in court art is more nebulous. Apart from their appearance among the figures in *Infamia* (part of Charles V's *Los Honores* set), there are no other known Cain and Abel tapestries in the first half of the sixteenth century. Although the story did feature in paintings by Bachiacca (1520), Titian (1542-1544), and Frans Floris (mid-1550s), none of these were known to have been commissioned by royal patrons. Sigismund's decision to order four Cain and Abel tapestries is, therefore, fairly novel.

While there is no obvious candidate for an exemplar in the Cain and Abel story, the morals of the narrative are quite easily applicable to princely virtue. In its essence, it is a parable against violence, particularly unrighteous violence fueled by wrath and hatred: as Orzechowski describes, the act of a "godless brother" and "fierce tyrant," whose actions are "dictated by anger."⁴⁵² The inscription of *Cain Kills Abel* states that Cain commits murder "prompted by wrath," indicating that this is the ultimate sin of Cain. Orzechowski notes that Wrath is personified in the tapestry "behind Cain's back in the form of a woman" (Fig. 47). Moreover, based on the inscription of *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, Orzechowski identifies the two female figures chasing Cain as personifications of the sins "Despair" and "Vengeance" (Fig. 48).⁴⁵³ In the context of the outbreak of religious wars across the continent and internal threats of civil war, this message would have been very relevant to Sigismund's early reign, especially considering his tendency toward nonviolence,

⁴⁵² Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*

appeasement, and toleration. In *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, the tapestry directly following the Cain and Abel sequence, we see the consequences of Cain's fall: his progeny, holders of the "mark of Cain," descend into bloody discord and war.



Fig. 49 Cain and "Wrath" in *Abel's Sacrifice*.



Fig. 50 "Despair" and "Vengeance" in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*.

In fact, based on the portrayal of the story in the tapestries, Cain can be read as twice-damned: once by his sin of murder, and again by his cowardice in fleeing God's punishment. Orzechowski focuses on Cain's cowardice in his description of *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, summarising that "the end for godless brethren is always sad."⁴⁵⁴ There may, therefore, be a nod in the tapestry's story toward the need for proper penitence and atonement, which would form a narrative rhyme with the moral of *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

In Book Two ("On the Law") of *De Republica*, Modrzewski sees another allegory in the Cain story for just punishment of murder. In his chapter on laws against injuries, he bemoans the nobles who routinely pay their way out of responsibility for their crimes,

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

including murdering their serfs. Modrzewski believes that every life taken should be avenged in order to deter future offenders and protect the sanctity of life. Here, he invokes Cain, whom God protected after his exile by promising that “whosoever shall kill Cain shall be punished sevenfold” (Gen 4:15). Thus, Modrzewski argues that God intended every murder to be repaid: not just the murder of an innocent man, but even that of the first murderer himself.⁴⁵⁵ While Orzechowski and Modrzewski draw on different elements of the story to reach their conclusions, they converge in understanding Cain and Abel as a metaphor for God’s vision of justice and criminal punishment in a kingdom.

Interestingly, though, the inscription does not only centre the parable on its most common moral lesson regarding anger and vengeance. Returning to the female figures in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, it is striking that one of them is “Despair.” Here, the inscription draws on Cain’s lament in Genesis 4:13-14:

My iniquity is greater than that I may deserve pardon. Behold thou dost cast me out this day from the face of the earth, and I shall be hidden from thy face, and I shall be a vagabond and a fugitive on the earth: every one, therefore, that findeth me, shall kill me.

However, God counters Cain’s despair at the impossibility of forgiveness and atonement for his crime: “No, it shall not be so: but whosoever shall kill Cain, shall be punished sevenfold” (Gen 4:15). This covenant is formalised in the mark of Cain: both a sign of his sin and exile, and a warden of protection for any who might try to harm him. Thus, the presence of “Despair” (here, a loss of faith in God’s forgiveness) alongside “Vengeance” in the tapestry elevates it to another, perhaps equally grave sin that should be combated by faith and trust in God. We find hints toward this interpretation in the *ekphrasis*, as Orzechowski describes Cain as “godless” or “impious” (*impius*) in the descriptions of all

⁴⁵⁵ Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 255.

three tapestries in this subset. This interpretation is also supported by mediaeval and early modern discourse on the seven deadly sins. While despair is not explicitly listed among them, it can be linked to *acedia* or sloth. While *acedia* could connote laziness, apathy, or ennui, it could also describe, as in Aquinas's *Summa*, "sorrow about spiritual good," or a cessation of spiritual growth and progress toward eternal life.⁴⁵⁶ Thus, according to Gregory the Great, "from sloth there arise malice, rancour, cowardice, despair."⁴⁵⁷ The fall of Cain, therefore, is a parable against not one but two deadly sins (See Fig. 49).



Fig. 51 Cain's despair in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*.

The tragedy of Cain can also be read as a cautionary tale against succumbing to unfettered passions. In Genesis 4:7, God warns Cain: "If thou do well, shalt thou not receive? But if ill, shall not sin forthwith be present at the door? But the lust thereof shall be under thee, and thou shalt have dominion over it" (Gen 4:7). Orzechowski's descriptions support this interpretation. As mentioned previously, he highlights Cain's impiety and

⁴⁵⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1274, reis.), q. 35, a. 2, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Theologiae_%5B1%5D,_EN.pdf (accessed 29 January 2024).

⁴⁵⁷ Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob*, trans. John Henry Parker (c. 580, reis., London: Rivington, 1844), 31.45.87-88.

passions, especially in his description of the murder itself: “the taut neck, the crazed eyes, the tormented face, the bristled hair, and finally the blow itself, dictated by anger.” In contrast, Abel is described as “righteous,” while his death is presented as a martyrdom, as he is “ready for the strike and prepared for death” (see Fig. 50).⁴⁵⁸

The dichotomy between Cain and Abel was well-established in theological literature by the time of the unveiling of *Genesis*. Most notably, in *City of God*, St. Augustine sees Cain and Abel as the founders of the “City of Men” and the “City of God” respectively. Their conflict “illustrated the hatred that subsists between the two cities...and in each individual ‘the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.’”⁴⁵⁹ Cain’s City of Men “worships God or gods who may aid it in reigning victoriously and peacefully on earth not through love of doing good, but through lust of rule.”⁴⁶⁰ In the context of princely virtue, then, the story instructs a ruler to “have dominion” over the moral health of his kingdom as well as his own lust for power and earthly pleasures, so that his entire nation might emulate the City of God.



Fig. 52 Impious Cain versus pious Abel in *Cain Kills Abel*.

⁴⁵⁸ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53.

⁴⁵⁹ Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (5th c. AD, reis., Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2015), 392

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 394.

Here, we return to the theme of paternity and genealogy from the Adam subset. Cain and Abel can be understood as an admonition against familial discord: Adam failed as a leader of his household to ensure that his sons were both virtuous, and Cain failed to live in harmony with his brother. This may be read literally in terms of intrafamilial strife, but it may also function as a metaphor for concord in a kingdom. In terms of kingship, then, there is perhaps a twofold message: for the king to maintain order and peace in his own family as the patriarch of a dynasty, and in his kingdom as the “father” of his people, and for his subjects to accept his leadership and not rebel. This links back to the interpretation of the Book of Genesis as a saga of lineage and family, as well as to the Aristotelian notion so common in the early modern period of the patriarchal family as the building block of society.⁴⁶¹

Finally, the issue of Cain’s offering may provide another hint at the didactic content of these tapestries. As Orzechowski describes, in *Abel’s Sacrifice*, “Abel’s pleasing offering to God is shown and, conversely, the unpleasing offering of Cain, the cause of the godless brother’s wrath.”⁴⁶² It is not clear from Genesis (or the tapestry) why Cain’s offering was displeasing to God, but it may be deduced that Abel offered, as the biblical text states, “the firstlings of his flock,” a more valuable and selfless sacrifice than Cain’s “fruits of the earth.”⁴⁶³ The tapestry inscription also states that “by his faith Abel made a better offering to God than Cain,” suggesting that it was Abel’s piety that led him to make a more pleasing offering. This is underlined by the second citation in the inscription, Hebrews 11:1-4, especially the final verse: “By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice

⁴⁶¹ Walsham, *Generations*, 13.

⁴⁶² Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53.

⁴⁶³ Gen 4:3-4. Procopius of Gaza, Josephus, and Augustine also theorise that Abel’s offering was pleasing because he was virtuous and gave all that he had, whereas Cain was selfish and divided his bounty between God and himself. Abel is a lover of God, whereas Cain is a lover of himself (*philautos*). Madlyn Kahr, “Titian’s Old Testament Cycle,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 198; Augustine, *City of God*, 141.

exceeding that of Cain, by which he obtained a testimony that he was just, God giving testimony to his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh.” This echoes back to the dichotomy between the faithful priest-figure and proto-martyr Abel and the “godless” Cain, and one of the great sins of Cain being loss of faith, as discussed previously.

On the other hand, St. Jerome posits that Cain’s offering shows us the hypocrisy of giving up one’s material goods while not offering one’s internal and spiritual life to God. The apostles, he notes, did not take vows of poverty, but rather gave up their lives to spread the gospel. Therefore, “if we offer to Christ our souls as well as our riches, he will gladly receive our offering. But if we give to God only those things which are without while we give to the devil those things which are within, the division is not fair, and the divine voice says: “Hast thou not sinned in offering aright, and yet not dividing aright?”⁴⁶⁴ The parable, then, is not necessarily an exhortation to give up all valuable or personal goods for a faithful life; rather, it is a general reminder of devotion to God over earthly matters and material desires.

In general, while the Cain and Abel story is a departure from the epic tales of the patriarchs that comprise the rest of the series, the potential messages about nonviolence, restraint, piety, temperance, and moral leadership can be easily mapped onto Sigismund’s princely persona and agenda. These virtues, as well as the theme of faith triumphing over despair, also carry over into the Noah sequence, which arguably forms the political apotheosis of the *Genesis* series.

⁴⁶⁴ Jerome, “Letter to Pammachius,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Volume 6: The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 139, <https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206/npnf206.i.html>.

5.3. *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*

The bridge between the Cain and Abel and Noah sequences is *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*. Serving as the first major peak in action in the *Genesis* series, and a prelude to the apocalyptic imagery of the *Flood*, *Moral Downfall* illustrates the same themes of violence and its horrific repercussions that were rampant in contemporary Polish political and religious literature. At the 1548 *sejm* session, for example, Piotr Boratyński warned that the country was consumed by turmoil and on the brink of civil war.⁴⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the Catholic episcopacy in the *sejm* also referenced the end times: Marcin Kromer, Stanisław Górski, and Cardinal Hosius all believed that they were living in “apocalyptic days,” and predicted the imminent downfall of their country amidst cataclysmic heresy.⁴⁶⁶

Andrzej Krzycki preceded this wave by nearly thirty years with his treatise in verse on the early Reformation, *Religionis et Reipublicae quaerimonia* (1522), yet his vivid descriptions of civil unrest, especially those with domestic roots, are just as accurate at reflecting the anxieties of the early 1550s:

Such has the power of the enemy secretly risen,
Who destroys everything around and threatens imminent downfall.
And the suffering from outside is not all, for much of it
Is internal conflict and our own domestic pillaging...
They eagerly toss all that is holy to the restless crowd,
And what evil men do, the rabble spreads far and wide.
Thence the scream and clamour of the people, thus unrest and revolt is born.

He urges the people to value and promote the qualities of good leadership, and to beware of tyrants who use domestic unrest to rise to power. Under such circumstances, “the king’s gentleness, such heavenly goodness, is despised, and a cursed thing appears, the

⁴⁶⁵ Maciuszko, *Konfederacja*, 62.

⁴⁶⁶ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 99.

ruthless will of a tyrant.” Furthermore, Krzycki specifically identifies heresy as a main ingredient in the poison of enmity, as “almost no one values piety and honesty” anymore, “the sublime cult of God is tossed aside,” and “holy traditions are dead.” He continues:

Nowadays madness confuses what is of God and what is of man...everything has
been led
Into the abyss, to death and destruction...
And when this plague amidst my good Christians
Grows deeper roots and so inflames the wrath of God...
We will all be lost through error and helplessness.⁴⁶⁷

Krzycki’s contemporary, Johannes Dantiscus, also frequently drew upon violent apocalyptic imagery in his panegyrics lamenting the religious divisions threatening to seep into Poland from the West. In *Hymni aliquot ecclesiastici* (1548), he directly blames the Reformation for the outbreak of bloody wars across Europe. In *Carmen paraeneticum iuvenibus huius temporis non inutile* (1539), Dantiscus refers to moral downfall, the abandonment of tradition and ethics, and the corruption of the clergy. He also warns of a repetition of the Peasants’ War if the reading of heretical literature and translations of Scripture were to continue uninhibited in Poland.⁴⁶⁸

Like Krzycki and Dantiscus, Modrzewski is more concerned in *De Republica* with internal threats than external ones, for although “great dangers have surrounded us from all sides,” if they are “expanded domestically, who then will save us from the wrath of God?”⁴⁶⁹ Revisiting the metaphor of the king as “father of the fatherland,” he states that “he who plants or cultivates discord among his sons, or who does not try to uproot it, is no

⁴⁶⁷ Andrzej Krzycki, *Religionis et reipublicae quaerimonia*, trans. Jan Michał Harhala, in *Przegląd Klasyczny* 2, no. 4 (1936): 39-42.

⁴⁶⁸ Zbigniew Nowak, “Antyreformacyjna elegia Dantyszka o Zagładzie Gdańska,” *Odrodzenie Reformacja w Polsce*, no. 17 (1971): 14, 24.

⁴⁶⁹ Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 318.

true father.”⁴⁷⁰ He also highlights the danger of leaders falling prey to wrath and violence:

We experience this [discord] with wrathful men, who spew the poison of their anger before them...Countless men are sick with these infirmities...even those who would be seen as the conquerors of nations.”⁴⁷¹

According to Modrzewski, this solution lies in the hands of the monarch. In his dedication of *Lascius sive de poena homicidio*, he encourages Sigismund to pursue the protection of peace as the highest calling of the crown. He draws on Sigismund’s own words at the 1538 *sejm*: during a debate about punishments for murder, the young heir declared that spilling brotherly blood should be avoided at all costs, and that this was the only way to ensure domestic peace.⁴⁷² He relates this more specifically to the religious situation in his dedication to *De ecclesia*, wherein he writes that the increasing factionalisation of reformed groups can lead only to unrest. He urges the king to focus on bringing peace and unity to Christendom, to put all his efforts into Church affairs (by organising a universal synod and sending a Polish delegation to Trent), and to solve confessional disputes through open discussion and debate, not violence.⁴⁷³ In *De Republica*, he stresses that “all measures should be taken to ensure that war is kept away,” and that “it is necessary to strive for peace with all people.”⁴⁷⁴ A “truly exalted lord” must be “the reason for and guardian of peace and harmony among his subjects.”⁴⁷⁵ In fact, two of his foremost counsels to Sigismund in *De Republica* are peacekeeping and forgiveness as the marks of a great monarch. He summarises his stance, appealing to Christ’s teachings:

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 133-134.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁷² Modrzewski, *In lascium sive*, 17-18.

⁴⁷³ Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 361-362.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 304-305.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., 134.

Every day we pray that the Kingdom of God would come to us, but what is the Kingdom if not justice, peace, harmony, and brotherly love?... [Christ] gave us the testament of peace and love in a clear voice: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you...By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.⁴⁷⁶

Returning to the paternal motif, Modrzewski states that “it is a fatherly thing to be gracious and forgive one’s sons.” In dealing with dissenters, a king should do “only that which doctors prescribe: that we should treat opposites with opposites, that we should not be quick to anger toward anyone, harm no one, bear ill will to no one, and treat everyone with grace.”⁴⁷⁷ In an interesting parallel to the burning buildings in *Moral Downfall* (Fig. 51), he also alludes to the metaphor of smoke, “which rises from the burning of blood” and “makes everything seem greater than it is;” thus, “all counsel and issues must be set aside until the burning of blood is extinguished.”⁴⁷⁸ Again, he uses the commandment of Christ as justification: “love your enemies: do good to those who hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you: that you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven.”⁴⁷⁹



Fig. 53 Burning buildings in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid, 131, 226.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 107.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 230.

A recurring theme in these aforementioned political writings is the admonition against tyranny which, interestingly, we find reflected in the tapestry's inscription: "Because of the evil deeds and violences of godless giants and tyrants [*impiorum gigantum et tiiranorum*], God threatens the world with its ruin." Notably, "*impiorum gigantum et tyrannorum*" is not a direct quote from the Vulgate; the corresponding verse (Gen 6:4) mentions only "*gigantes*" and "*potentes a saeculo viri famosi*." The word likely originates from an alternate translation of the original Hebrew "*nphil*," meaning a "bully," "tyrant," or "giant."⁴⁸⁰ The popularity of the "tyrant" translation in the sixteenth century may stem in part from both Luther and Calvin. As Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch point out, Luther wrote in his *Lectures on Genesis*: "*Nephilim non dictos a magnitudine corporum, sicut Rabbini putant, sed a tyrannide et oppressione quod vi grassati sint, nulla habita ratione legum aut honestatis, sed simpliciter indulgentes suis voluptatibus et cupiditatibus*."⁴⁸¹ In his own *Commentaries on Genesis*, Calvin also describes the giants as practitioners of "great violence and tyranny," as "certain individuals, who, being stronger than the rest, and relying on their own might and power, exalted themselves unlawfully, and without measure" and "brought destruction and desolation into the world." These men "first exercised tyranny or power in the world, together with an excessive licentiousness and an unbridled lust of dominion."⁴⁸² Calvin continues:

The sum of the whole, however, is that they were ferocious tyrants... Their first fault was pride; because, relying on their own strength, they arrogated to themselves more than was due. Pride produced contempt of God...At the same time, they were

⁴⁸⁰ James Strong, "5303," in *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham 1890), <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5303.htm> (accessed 24 June 2024).

⁴⁸¹ Cited in Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1900), 137.

⁴⁸² Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1996), 264-265, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/genesis/6.htm> (accessed 24 June 2024).

also disdainful and cruel towards men...Moses adds they were "men of renown;" by which he intimates that they boasted of their wickedness, and were what are called, honourable robbers...They cruelly exercised dominion, and acquired power and fame for themselves, by injuring and oppressing their brethren...As ambition is always vicious and more especially so when joined with a tyrannical ferocity, which causes the more powerful to insult the weak, the evil becomes intolerable.⁴⁸³

It is necessary to mention that the word “*tyrannus*” in Renaissance Latin did not always translate to “tyrant” in all contexts. In Jan Maczyński’s *Lexicon Latino Polonicum* (1564), “*tyrannus*” has two definitions: as a synonym for “king,” and as “one who rules not according to the law but according to his own will, whether that be lawful or unlawful.” Here, there is a distinct echo of Calvin’s definition of “tyranny,” that of lawless and unbridled rule. Notably, in the *Lexico Latino Polonicum*, all other derivatives of “*tyrannus*” (“*tyrannis*,” “*tyrannicus*”) are based on this second definition.⁴⁸⁴ This second definition was by far the dominant of the two, both in Poland and in Europe in general. In fact, the concept of “tyrant” had gained negative connotations as early as the late Classical period in Greece, when Plato denounced rule by tyranny in *The Republic*.⁴⁸⁵

In the context of this tapestry and common hermeneutic understandings of the “giants” of Genesis 6, a Polish viewer would almost certainly interpret the inscription according to the negative and dominant definition of “*tyrannus*,” as a tyrant rather than simply a ruler.

The political implications of this are quite important for a series centred on kingship, especially considering the explicit discussions of tyranny in Polish political literature at the time. We find this especially in Modrzewski’s *De Republica*, which

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 267-268.

⁴⁸⁴ Jan Maczyński, *Lexicon Latino Polonicum ex optimis Latinae linguae Scriptoribus concinnatum*, Ioanne Maczinsky Equite Polono interprete (Königsberg: Jan Daubman, 1564), 471.

⁴⁸⁵ See Book VIII of Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Christopher Rowe (London: Penguin, 2012).

frequently references the evils of tyranny (using this exact word) in its discussions of kingship and government. In the opening pages of the treatise, Modrzewski writes that “when one rules according to one's whims and will, then this is called a tyranny.”⁴⁸⁶ A tyrant is one who “sows the seeds of enmity among lords, so that they may more easily enact what strife allows.”⁴⁸⁷ Indeed, violence and discord are crucial to the portrayal of tyranny in *De Republica*. Later, Modrzewski elaborates:

What could be a crueller rule, what tyranny more fierce, than that of anger, strife, unrest, unchecked avarice, a desire to lead, and dishonourable wishes, which eclipse the light of goodness, take away free will, and tear apart the man who is subject to it [a tyrant]?⁴⁸⁸

In a subsequent passage, Modrzewski even draws a comparison between tyrants and Cain. He writes:

Who, then, are the bears, the leopards, the fierce and terrifying beasts...if not they who rule with such great tyranny and defend it? And who else if the progeny of Cain...if not they who give so many justifications for murder?⁴⁸⁹

Modrzewski exhorts the king to rule “according to the concordance of all of the estates and by upholding the laws,” and not, as in some other kingdoms, in which kings “introduce taxes at will, and start wars with their opponents...and even if they often act for the sake and good of the Republic, but do not uphold the law, they easily slip into the aforementioned tyranny, in which everything may be done according to the ruler’s wishes.”⁴⁹⁰ For Modrzewski, lawful kingship is the cornerstone of good government, and the best bulwark against tyranny, for “the Republic is to be ruled not according to the will

⁴⁸⁶ Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 98.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 133.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 122.

of the king, but according to the written laws. It is a tyrant's view that a king could act against the law."⁴⁹¹ Another antidote to tyranny is virtue and selflessness of the ruler. God ordained that "royal power easily slips into tyranny, if it is not bestowed upon a man of incredible virtue," and the king should "do all things not for his own benefit, for this a tyrannical thing, but for the good of those he rules."⁴⁹² In this context, the "giants and tyrants" of *Moral Downfall* are a bold and ominous warning for a ruler such as Sigismund.

In approving a tapestry depicting such an episode with such a politically charged inscription, in a series so directly linked to his kingship project, Sigismund must have known that a viewer would have picked up on the use of this loaded word, "*tyrannorum*," especially since it is not found in the familiar Vulgate verses. Therefore, any reading of *Moral Downfall* should take this word under careful consideration. From Sigismund's perspective, the tapestry conveys the results of incompetent, immoral, and faithless kingship, the "tyranny" that results from despots taking control in times of chaos and lawlessness. In order to avoid such a situation, the king must lead with virtue and strength, while his subjects must accept his leadership and live in peace with one another. *Moral Downfall* shows the consequences of tyranny, while the subsequent Noah tapestries provide a model for the latter scenario.

For his part, Orzechowski does not mention either giants or tyrants in his description of *Moral Downfall*. He describes the tapestry thusly:

On the eighth we have proof that the evil crow lays evil eggs. For the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain's progeny were. There you could see the rape of the noble virgins for the purpose of adultery, the violation of the matrons, the pillaging of cities, the theft of private property, the bloodshed and blatant violence, such that

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 301.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 247, 128.

this progeny was certainly worthy of such a father.⁴⁹³

While Orzechowski may not use the tapestry for a political gloss, his litany of violence heightens the reader's understanding of the scale and severity of the tyrannical actions that *Moral Downfall* depicts. Interestingly, his mention of "the theft of private property" also touches on the lawless aspect of tyranny which Modrzewski discusses. What is more noteworthy about Orzechowski's description is his focus on sexual violence. This may be because Orzechowski saw parallels between the tapestry's central scene of the nude women abducted by a mounted rider (Fig. 52) and classical myths of rape such as that of Europa, of Lucretia, and of the Sabine women. However, one phrase that Orzechowski uses may indicate that this is another attempt at a moral gloss: "*virgines ad stuprum rapi.*" When it comes to the rape in *Moral Downfall*, Orzechowski does not highlight its violence, rather that it was "for the purpose of adultery/illicit sex (*ad stuprum*)."⁴⁹⁴ In other words, Orzechowski's choice of words frames the rape as a result of unfettered passions, similarly to his descriptions of the passions of Cain.



Fig. 54 The rape of virgins by "giants and tyrants" in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

⁴⁹³ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53-54.

In the end, however, *Moral Downfall*'s vision of cataclysmic corruption does not necessarily precipitate a message of despair for the human race, indelibly tainted by Original Sin, abandoned by its Creator. As mentioned earlier, *Downfall*'s position within the sequence of the *Genesis* tapestries reassures the viewer of the divine plan for salvation. It is directly succeeded by *God Converses with Noah*, one of the most hopeful and optimistic images in the series, and the one which most closely replicates the cosmic harmony of *Paradise Bliss*. At the 1553 unveiling, it ended the "bedchamber" series, but was immediately followed by the Moses set in the adjoining antechamber, which (as we will see in section 5.5) had many moments of hope and triumph. Consequently, taking the content of the tapestries directly following *Moral Downfall* under consideration leaves us with a significantly less bleak reading of its scenes of violence.

In sum, *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* can be read as a reflection of Sigismund's strategy for unrest in his kingdom. The tapestry warns the viewer of the consequences of bloodshed (especially domestic), corruption, wrath, and stoking the fires of discord. It may be a commentary on the apocalyptic rhetoric dominating Polish political and religious culture, and the increasing tension between and polarisation of factions. Ultimately, however, both the biblical and display chronologies leave the viewer with an undercurrent of hope in an ultimately benevolent Creator who has not abandoned His divine theatre or His children. There is a promise of a way out of catastrophe. The solution proposed by Modrzewski, adopted by Sigismund, and showcased in the outcome of the Noah series, is actively promoting peace and forgiveness, in imitation of Christ.

5.4. Noah

The choice to use the story of Noah for a politically and theologically charged tapestry series is no accident: it ties directly into the contemporary trend of providential

theology and associated cataclysmic imagery in both sixteenth century Catholicism and Protestantism. According to providential thinking, God actively intervened in human affairs, whether to reward or punish, and communicated with mankind through signs and warnings, such as astronomical omens, crop yields, or natural disasters. For example, there was a pervasive belief across Europe that contemporary floods were God's punishments for sin, known in German as *Sündenflüssen*. According to Luther's commentaries on Genesis (1540-1545), the Fall had not only corrupted mankind but nature as well, creating a kind of ticking time bomb of natural disasters and cataclysms. The Flood had sped up this process of destruction and decay.⁴⁹⁴ Alexandra Walsham has analysed how Reformed theology was also prone to providentialism, in which all such events, catastrophic or trivial, were signs for the elect, and should be interpreted seriously as messages from the Lord. There was a common conception among providential thinkers that prayer and penance could hold back assuage these disasters. English sermons routinely used natural disasters as warnings for congregations to return to the path of righteousness. Alongside the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, one of the most common biblical examples cited was the Genesis Flood.⁴⁹⁵

Likewise, natural and social disasters were rampant in sixteenth century Polish religious and political treatises, and even in the farmer's almanack: the 1555 edition predicted intense plagues, fires in cities, military unrest, conflicts between citizens, earthquakes, the introduction of new laws, the growth of religious sects, and, enigmatically, "changes in the kingdom."⁴⁹⁶ One of the most literal examples of Flood imagery in Polish literature is Johannes Dantiscus's *The Prophet Jonah*, which compares the "fall" of the city

⁴⁹⁴ Michael Kempe, "Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story and Natural Disasters in Early Modern Times," *Environment and History* 9, no. 2 (2003): 152, 154.

⁴⁹⁵ Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16, 118, 125, 128, 150, 299, 330.

⁴⁹⁶ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 99.

of Gdańsk to the Lutheran Reformation to Jonah's prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh. Specifically, Dantiscus mentions the flood, "impossible to forget," as a plague sent by God to punish the city for its impiety, pride, excess, and separatist and anarchist ambitions.⁴⁹⁷ In 1551, the Protestant poet Jacob Kuchler wrote *Historia Ionaē Prophetae carmine elegiaco* in response, comparing Kraków to Nineveh, and urging the city to accept Lutheranism in the footsteps of Gdańsk.⁴⁹⁸ Similarly, in *Religionis et reipublicae quaerimonia*, Krzycki laments the state of a kingdom torn apart by the storms and floods of religious and political division:

It is no secret that the ark of the Church is still beaten by winds,
They may lead the captain into sin as he sleeps deeply...
You will have the opportunity, I hope, to steer your ship away from such great
waves,
And from such mighty tempests. As the light after a storm shines,
Christ reveals Himself, and never abandons His own.⁴⁹⁹

Here, Krzycki introduces the notion of the Polish Church as the Ark (see Fig. 53), a shelter for weathering the storms of dissent. This is in accordance with the New Testament understanding of the Flood narrative: In 1 Peter 3:18-22, the apostle likens the Flood to salvation through Christ's resurrection, and describes baptism as "being of the like form" of the Flood which purified and renewed the Earth. Just as the Ark was the one refuge from the Flood, baptism into the Church is the one path to eternal salvation.⁵⁰⁰ Calvin echoes this interpretation in the *Institutes*, again drawing directly on flood imagery:

⁴⁹⁷ Johannes Dantiscus, *Jonas Propheta de interitu civitatis Gedanensis* (Kraków: Wietor, 1535), <https://www.czytanka.pl/jonasz-prorok-o-zniszczeniu-gdanska> (accessed 22 August 2021). This is likely a reference to the real-life floods in Gdańsk in August 1528 and March 1529. Nowak, "Elegia," 18.

⁴⁹⁸ Angelika Modlińska-Piekarz, "Doktryna i polityka w łacińskiej poezji biblijnej śląskich uczniów Filipa Melanchtona," *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* 61 (2017): 198.

⁴⁹⁹ Krzycki, *Religionis*, 42.

⁵⁰⁰ According to Don Cameron Allen, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, "endless comparisons were made between the waters of the flood and those of baptism." Allen, *The Legend of Noah*, 139.

When the sky is overcast with dense clouds, and a violent tempest arises, the darkness which is presented to our eye, and the thunder which strikes our ears, and stupefies all our senses with terror, make us imagine that everything is thrown into confusion, though in the firmament itself all continues quiet and serene. In the same way, when the tumultuous aspect of human affairs unfits us for judging, we should still hold, that God, in the pure light of his justice and wisdom, keeps all these commotions in due subordination, and conducts them to their proper end.⁵⁰¹



Fig. 55 The Ark in *The Flood*.

In his dedication letter to Sigismund in *De Republica*, Modrzewski uses the image of the king helming a ship, “*tanti imperii in maximis fluctibus.*”⁵⁰² In fact, *De Republica* makes frequent use of the Flood and Ark allegory. In his extended metaphor, as with Dantiscus, Krzycki, and Kuchler, the Flood is the tempest of religious conflict, the Ark is the Polish Church (or the Christian kingdom more generally), and the captain is the king. Paraphrasing Cicero, he states that, “like a captain,” a king “should maintain smooth sailing” for his Ark.⁵⁰³ As such, he should promote “the honour of eternal God” above all, “for God will give great rewards to those who believe in Him; and will punish those who molest His followers...with flood and war.” The captain and his “sailors” must, therefore,

⁵⁰¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 187.

⁵⁰² Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 83.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 130.

hold fast to faith and guard themselves against evil influences; otherwise, when they are “drowning in the waters of the sea,” they “will not be rescued” (see Fig. 54).⁵⁰⁴ Orzechowski’s descriptions of the Noah subset echo this moral warning. His characterisation of God in *God Converses with Noah* focuses on divine anger: “the avenger of evil...enraged at the progeny of Cain” who wanted to “bury the aforementioned criminals.”⁵⁰⁵



Fig. 56 Some of the drowning progeny of Cain in *The Flood*.

The “captain,” as exemplified by Noah, should have unconditional faith in God, even in the darkest hour. In the tapestry inscriptions, Noah’s faith is directly referenced in *The Building of the Ark* (“By his faith Noah builds an Ark for the salvation of his house”), and is contrasted to the *impius* progeny of Cain (in *The Building of the Ark*, “the godless mock him,” and again in *The Animals Enter the Ark*, “the godless laugh at him”). As with Abel, the secondary citation of Hebrews 11 (here, Heb 11:6-7) in the inscription of *The Building of the Ark* highlights unwavering faith as Noah’s dominant virtue:

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 100.

⁵⁰⁵ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 54.

But without faith it is impossible to please God. For he that cometh to God, must believe that he is, and is a rewarder to them that seek him. By faith Noe, having received an answer concerning those things which as yet were not seen, moved with fear, framed the ark for the saving of his house, by the which he condemned the world; and was instituted heir of justice which is by faith.

This echoes the dichotomy between pious Abel and godless Cain in the previous subset.

When applied to Sigismund, this repeating theme of “faith” in *Genesis* should be understood in two ways: as faith in the spiritual sense, and faith in the secular sense (i.e. trust and loyalty). In fact, the Latin *fides* which appears throughout the tapestry inscriptions can be translated in both of these ways. As a leader of men, like the patriarchs, a king should have faith, recognising his subservient position to God and the need for divine guidance in earthly matters. As a result, a king will be blessed with spiritual wisdom and gifts, which will allow him to keep his kingdom united and on a righteous and prosperous path. However, this must be reciprocal: a king following this example is deserving of the loyalty (secular “faith”) of his subjects, who themselves accept their subservient position to him and the need for his strong leadership. Thus, for both the king and his subjects, the key is to have faith in one’s natural superiors, without whom there can be no hope of earthly or spiritual flourishing.

For Modrzewski, as in most models of sixteenth-century European kingship, faith is indeed a predominant princely virtue, especially in the spiritual sense. In any matter of church or state, he believes that “it best to refer it to God, without whose help any human effort, no matter how great, cannot bring anything to fruition.”⁵⁰⁶ Accordingly, he advises Sigismund that “an exalted lord must know that...the strength of man can do little compared

⁵⁰⁶ Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 96.

to the grace of God,” and he “must humbly ask God to fill him with His grace in all matters of rule” for:

If he will not follow the road of God’s commandments...he will be cast away from God, and the kingdom...will be severed from him and given to another; and he will also be separated by the Holy Spirit, and given to the spirit of evil, and he will see all his sons slain in battle, and he himself will be wounded.⁵⁰⁷

In the end, the reward for adept and steadfast “captaining” is the welfare of the kingdom, as Noah’s story proves. Indeed, the inscription of *The Building of the Ark* states that “Noah builds an Ark for the salvation of his house.” After successfully protecting and guiding his people through disaster, Noah received lordship over fertile land and times of peace and prosperity, as is illustrated in the *The Animals Exit the Ark* and *Noah’s Thanksgiving Sacrifice*. Notably, here, Orzechowski’s description of God changes from a wrathful God to a “merciful God,” whose “love for us” he notes in *God Blesses Noah’s Family*.⁵⁰⁸ Thus, one can deduce from the Noah series that a king who follows the example of Noah will be blessed, as will his kingdom.

However, Orzechowski’s account of the Flood and its aftermath focuses more on the cautionary elements than the triumph of Noah’s faith and virtue. For example, the “particular ornament” that he picks out of *The Animals Exit the Ark* is not the scene of Noah’s family making a joyful offering to a merciful God, but “the flaccid remains of the drowned, rotting in the water and putrid.” His longest and most vivid description is of *The Flood* tapestry, which evokes the terror and torment of the drowning:

On the fourth you could see the heavens split with a downpour, the open abyss, and the skies pouring out a storm with thunder and lightning. Struck with fear, the

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁵⁰⁸ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 55.

godless progeny fell to the ground. Here, you could see the shameful flight of Cain's progeny, a sign of their guilty consciences, some climbing trees in the overflowing waters, others climbing exposed rocks, and others seeking the high mountains. This tapestry was so full of confusion and so terrified the viewer that he himself, struck dumb at such a horrible sight, feared for himself in the flood and longed for the Ark.⁵⁰⁹

The end of this description, which directly references the affective response of the viewer, echoes the emotions of the exile scene in *Paradise Bliss*, in which "looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well."⁵¹⁰ In *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, he returns to the theme of punishment for sin in his interpretation of the colours of the rainbow:

One [colour], like water, maintaining our memory of the terrible flood, the second pale-coloured, foretelling that the Church will never be without its cross, and the third like fire, which never ends, showing us the eternal punishment awaiting the godless.⁵¹¹

In the next paragraph, we find the aforementioned conclusion of Sigismund placing himself below "the King of Kings...in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin." In this way, Orzechowski draws on the theme of punishment and retribution throughout the series as a moral exhortation both to the viewer and the patron. The description of the rainbow in particular, with the everlasting "memory of the terrible flood," the "fire which never ends" and the Church that "will never be without its cross," presents the Flood not as a horror of the past but as an example of the consequences of sin and faithlessness, just as relevant to the moral and spiritual plights of sixteenth-century Poland as to diluvian Mesopotamia.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., 54-55.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

⁵¹¹ Ibid., 55.



Fig. 57 Noah overseeing *The Building of the Ark*.



Fig. 58 Noah watching as *The Animals Enter the Ark*.

In addition to his faith and trust in God, Noah had many attributes that aligned well with princely virtue. As both the biological and spiritual successor of Adam, Noah was similarly typified by his wisdom, paternal leadership, and closeness to God. He was an architect, a captain, a navigator, and the protector of life on earth during an unfathomable catastrophe (see Fig. 55 and 56). His dynastic successes, delineated in Genesis 10, make him another father of nations. Returning again to the genealogical metaphor, Noah's salvation of his family through building the Ark is an example of the fruits of strong patriarchal leadership and the blessings bestowed on godly "households," be it a family (or a dynasty) or a kingdom.⁵¹²

Like Adam, Noah is a fallible protagonist susceptible to sin, as depicted in the final tapestry, *Noah's Drunkenness* (Fig. 57). Unlike Adam, whose atonement is shown in the *Genesis* series, Noah's story ends with this episode of weakness. In the biblical text, though, the focus of the story of Noah's drunkenness is the sin of his son Ham, who reveals his father's nakedness to his brothers, after which Noah curses Ham and his land of Canaan. Here, we encounter another narrative rhyme to previous tapestries, this time with the curse

⁵¹² Walsham, *Generations*, 60.

and exile of Cain. Nevertheless, Noah's fallibility likens him to the other patriarchs of the *Genesis* series, whose great deeds and virtues do not exempt them from human failure. This provides the viewer with a remarkably humbled and nuanced view of the characters that would be exemplars for a king, as well as a negative mirror for the princely virtues that *Genesis* promotes.



Fig. 59 Noah's sin in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

As the final entry of the *Noah* sequence (and, therefore, of *Genesis*), *Noah's Drunkenness* is a somewhat unexpected coda, not only because of the greater scale and grandeur of the preceding tapestries, but because of the apparent narrative disconnect between it and the rest of the Noah series. The previous tapestry, *God Blesses Noah's Family*, seemingly wraps up the Flood narrative, whereas *Noah's Drunkenness* takes us to a completely different location (a forest instead of the floodplain), and focuses on characters who previously had only been in the background (Noah's sons). Moreover, unlike the optimism and joy of *God Blesses Noah's Family* (in the actual tapestry, although

Orzechowski's description takes a more ominous tone), *Noah's Drunkenness* ends the series at perhaps the lowest moment for its protagonist.⁵¹³

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are thematic links between this final tapestry and those preceding. For example, it reprises the motif of husbandry from the previous two subsets, as Noah, the first vintner is the successor of Adam, the first farmer and Abel, the first shepherd. The image of Noah tending his vines in the background (Fig. 58) recalls the message of patriarchal cultivation of virtue and morality in a family and in a kingdom, as conveyed by the previous protagonists of the series.



Fig. 60 Noah the Vintner in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

The repeated theme of the humility and fallibility of the *Genesis* protagonists provides the clearest moral and theological motif. Strikingly, the largest-scale and most magnificent subset of the tapestries with the most drama and action ends up bringing the

⁵¹³ As noted previously, Orzechowski's ekphrasis does not mention *Noah's Drunkenness*; his account ends with *God Blesses Noah's Family*. It is possible that this tapestry was not completed in time for the wedding, although this is somewhat dubious considering that the commissioning process began at least seven years earlier, and it was made by the same workshops and at the same time as the preceding tapestries. It is also possible that Orzechowski, who was not a courtier and would therefore have only been able to view the tapestries once, during the wedding, simply forgot it in his account. Alternatively, he may have taken a creative liberty, perhaps finding it awkward or puzzling to end a laudatory *ekphrasis* centred on the person of the king on a comparatively "low note."

viewer, very literally, back down to earth in its denouement. We are reminded of the frailty of even the greatest of men, even those elected by God, as all men are inheritors of original sin from Adam. Every story in *Genesis*, therefore, shows yet another episode of the consequences of the Fall, and the need for repentance and constant spiritual improvement.

On the other hand, anyone familiar with the basics of the Genesis story (that is, anyone present at the unveiling) would have been aware that this episode is not the canonical end of Noah's tale. The wrongdoer, Ham, is punished, and this incident does not tarnish Noah's reputation or mar his legacy. Immediately after this account, the next chapter of Genesis is the "Table of Nations," outlining the descendants of Noah's other two sons, Shem and Japeth. The episode is also a call-back to the familial motif of the series. Like Cain, Ham is a sower of familial strife: in this case, by breaking the commandment to honour one's parents (see Fig. 59).⁵¹⁴ On a literal level, this is an affront to Noah's authority as the father of a household, but it may also be a metaphor for a challenge to appropriate authority over a kingdom, based on the patriarchal family model.

It is also worthy of note that, in the tapestry, the unconscious Noah is portrayed as a pitiful and almost helpless character, dwarfed by his sons. The aggressor in the situation is clearly Ham, caught in the process of absconding with Noah's robe, as Shem and Japeth try to intervene. Moreover, in the background, we see another version of Noah hard at work, tilling his crops. Thus, Noah is not depicted as bearing the moral brunt of the situation or being punished, unlike Adam in *Paradise Bliss*. Rather than a grave sin, this is a moment of human weakness that is contrasted even within the same frame with a much more positive and characteristic portrayal of Noah.

⁵¹⁴ Walsham, *Generations*, 175.



Fig. 61 The sons of Noah (Ham in armour on the right) in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

In short, the initial impression that *Noah's Drunkenness* ends the series on a somewhat disconnected or pessimistic note is misleading. It can be seen as an important footnote to the rest of the story: Noah is finally shown to be truly human, susceptible to the same flaws as any other leader, but it is made clear that this does not define him nor detract from the other great qualities established through his deeds throughout the series. Here, then, we find a reiteration of one of the underlying themes of *Genesis*: the ability for leaders to achieve great things as God's elect, falter as men tainted by original sin, and yet repent and continue to lead in faith and virtue as fathers and cultivators of their kingdom.

5.5. Moses

Lacking any images or descriptions of the *Moses* tapestries (even Orzechowski is perfunct, only listing the titles), it is still possible to interrogate the choice of Moses for Sigismund's final patriarchal exemplar.

Of all of the protagonists of the *Genesis* series, Moses is perhaps the most illustrious: a prophet, the leader of the freed Israelites, the Lawgiver, and the legendary

author of the Pentateuch. As the recipient of the Mosaic Law, he was the representative of God's covenant with His chosen people and the earthly governor of morality. For his role in leading the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery and into the Promised Land, he is a proto-Christ saviour. In fact, he is a breaker-of-chains twice over, having freed his people from both literal and figurative bondage (slavery to worldliness, idolatry, faithlessness, and sin).⁵¹⁵ Like Christ, he also had the power of prophecy, acted as a conduit for miracles (e.g. the gift of manna), and was granted healing powers through Nehushtan, the bronze serpent (see Fig. 60). Additionally, he was a successful military commander, including in his victory over the Amalekites (depicted in the final *Moses* tapestry).



Fig. 62 Michiel Coxcie, *The Israelites afflicted by a plague of serpents; two men worshipping the brazen serpent erected by Moses*, c. 1550-1600, ink on paper. London, Wellcome Collection.

⁵¹⁵ Michael J. B. Allen, "Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses," in *Et Amicorum: Essays on Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Ossa-Richardson and Margaret Meserve (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 312.

Moses's standing as one of the historical paragons of human achievement was well-established by Augustine, Aquinas, and the humanists that followed them. He was the inventor of political theory, law, theology, and history, and a true "Renaissance man:" a mystic, a warrior, a lawyer, an artist, a poet, a philosopher.⁵¹⁶ For Italian Neoplatonists and artists such as Michelangelo, Moses was the original philosopher-king, one who, according to Michael J.B. Allen, "unites wisdom with power, *virtus* with *virtu*."⁵¹⁷ He represented a perfect synthesis between "vision and action," in Erwin Panofsky's words, a man who had achieved "spiritual immortality" during his life and "saw with an inner eye."⁵¹⁸

Similarly to Adam, Moses also had a particular reputation among the Neoplatonists as a recipient of esoteric knowledge. For Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Moses's ascent to Mt. Sinai and conversation with God, after which he was bestowed with the divine light of knowledge and *agape*, was the model for the Platonic ascent to communion with the supranatural One.⁵¹⁹ According to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), in order to write the Pentateuch, Moses had to pass through forty-nine Gates of Understanding, each related to an element of creation, in order to reach a fiftieth, leading to union with God. When Moses received the oral Torah on Mt. Sinai, he also received secret laws that he could only pass on to a lineage of select high priests. These would become the *kabbalah*. Thus, just as Adam was bestowed with the sacred language of creation, Moses was "but little removed from the living well-spring of the most holy and ineffable understanding."

⁵¹⁶ Geerken, "Moses," 587.

⁵¹⁷ Allen, "Ficino," 312.

⁵¹⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 92-93

⁵¹⁹ Allen, "Ficino," 309-311.

Consequently, Mirandola exhorts his readers to follow Moses's example to gain a deeper understanding of creation and cosmology beyond the physical realm.⁵²⁰

In Book One ("On Tradition") of *De Republica*, Modrzewski uses Moses as the ur-example of a divinely-appointed king. In the "times of Moses," he argues, one man ruled over his subjects, and was responsible for solving disputes and troubles in the nation and for keeping peace. This was established by God's command in Deuteronomy 1:12: "Let me have from among you wise and understanding men, and such whose conversation is approved among your tribes, that I may appoint them your rulers."⁵²¹ However, he also uses Moses to make an argument for the necessity of the *sejm* for the proper functioning of the kingdom: later in the same book, he posits that Moses, the "greatest ruler of God's chosen people," surrounded himself with the wisest and noblest of his followers and heeded their counsel.⁵²²

Arguably, the Moses story also features a repetition of the themes from the Noah story of the purification of a kingdom through the stewardship of a godly leader. Augustine considers some of Moses's most laudatory qualities to be his patience and perseverance in leading his errant people. He was vigilant and reproofing of his people when necessary, but always ruled with love and justice. His unshakeable faith was especially evident, Augustine claims, in interceding for his followers, no matter how many times they broke God's commandments or strayed from his guidance.⁵²³ In his sermons on Exodus, Girolamo Savonarola explains that Moses is a representation of believers, Pharaoh is the devil, Egypt

⁵²⁰ Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis et al (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 68-69.

⁵²¹ Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 99.

⁵²² *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵²³ Augustine of Hippo, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), Book 22.69, 298. See also Hall, "Moses," 88.

is the land of darkness and sin, and the Red Sea through which Moses led the Israelites is the purifying waters of baptism.⁵²⁴

Extrapolating from all this, a king relying on the example of Moses could draw on many of the patriarch's qualities. Sigismund's set included an example of his military leadership (*The Battle with the Amalekites*), his proximity to God, access to divine knowledge, and moral stewardship (*Moses Sent to Egypt*, i.e. the encounter with the burning bush, and *The Ten Commandments*), and his miraculous powers as leader and saviour of the Israelites (*The Crossing of the Red Sea*). The scene *Moses Speaks with Pharaoh* may also hint at Moses's reliance on wise counsel, as he asked his brother Aaron to speak for him during the meeting with Pharaoh, knowing his own oratorical limitations. Similarly, the episode on Mt. Sinai may refer to Moses's diplomatic skills, as well as his understanding of justice. Upon seeing the Israelites worshipping the golden calf at the foot of the mountain, Moses negotiated with God to spare the people from total destruction, although he himself commanded the death of three thousand men as retribution for the sin. Here, therefore, we see a theme similar to the story of Cain: that of righteous punishment and divine justice.⁵²⁵

In short, we find in Moses a princely exemplar with steadfast faith, strong leadership, military and political acumen, fearlessness in the face of persecution, and a profound personal connection to the divine. The Neoplatonic angle that was so popular at the Polish court would have added another layer: that of Moses as the second example in the *Genesis* series of a divinely-appointed philosopher with access to arcane wisdom.

⁵²⁴ Geerken, "Moses," 587.

⁵²⁵ Geerken, "Moses," 581, 589. Notably, the only other known set of Flemish *Moses* tapestries from this period, commissioned by Ferrante Gonzaga, includes the golden calf episode in the *Ten Commandments* tapestry, so it is possible that Sigismund's piece may have also featured this vignette.

Like Noah, Moses's successes as a leader stemmed from his courage and unshakeable trust in God, even in the direst circumstances. This exegesis was canonised by many of the early Church Fathers, who presented Moses as a humble recipient of God's call and a courageous leader of his chosen people. As Christopher A. Hall writes, Moses "illustrated the hardships and hopes of the pilgrim believer in God, journeying through the wilderness toward home," and presented a "roadmap" for the spiritual ascent of a Christian.⁵²⁶

However, like Adam, Moses's story is punctuated by a watershed moment of sin, from which he must free himself in order to fulfil God's plan. In Moses's case, it is the murder of an Egyptian soldier attacking an Israelite that leads to his flight from Pharaoh's punishment and his eventual confrontation with God in the desert, who commands him to return to Egypt and free the Israelites from slavery. Interestingly, the *Moses* tapestry sequence begins with this very episode of Moses's first encounter with God after the murder and self-imposed exile. We are dropped into the story of Moses at his lowest point, with the protagonist reckoning with his past and accepting a divine command to change his path. Again, therefore, we find that the protagonist of the sequence, while a paragon of princely virtue in many respects, is not immune to sin, weakness, and failure. Rather, he proves that even great men can overcome original sin and weakness in the service of goodness and justice.⁵²⁷

Beyond these general reflections on the subject matter of the tapestries, it is not possible to go further with an analysis of the Moses series without any visual records or

⁵²⁶ Christopher A. Hall, "Moses and the Church Fathers," in *Illuminating Moses: A History of Reception from Exodus to the Renaissance*, ed. Jane Beal (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 81, 100.

⁵²⁷ One noteworthy interpretation of Moses's sin comes from Augustine, who reframes the murder as an example of religious zeal gone awry. Comparing Moses to St. Paul, who also possessed "fierce energy" and "unwise zeal," Augustine claims that Moses's love of God combined with a lack of restraint led to a moral failing. Augustine, *Reply to Faustus*, 88-89.

more detailed descriptions than Orzechowski's list of topics. However, it is possible to examine the impacts of including a Moses series on the metanarrative of the *Genesis* series.

5.6. A *Genesis* Cycle?

One of the issues that arise from Orzechowski's account of the wedding tapestries is the strange chronology: the Moses set is placed in an antechamber between the bedchamber (Adam and Eve/Cain and Abel set) and the Senator's Hall (Noah set). This is not to say that this was the series' "intended" order; undoubtedly, Sigismund and the tapestry artists were well aware of the basic pentateuchal chronology. However, this is the chronology for at least the initial unveiling, and is the only sequence of display recorded in writing. (We have no records of the order of display of *Genesis* in other settings.) Therefore, initial viewers would have walked through the events out of order, ending with *Noah's Drunkenness*, although this may have changed in different display arrangements at different locations.

A main part of the reasoning for this arrangement may have been the dimensions and magnificence of the Noah set in comparison to the rest, and therefore the desire to display them in the most public of the chambers. In addition, due to the size of the Noah set, the floorplan of Wawel simply may have necessitated such an arrangement. On the other hand, this may have been a very intentional choice for the purposes of the 1553 unveiling: it is reasonable to assume that Sigismund would have wanted his tour of the tapestries to crescendo with the Noah set, the most magnificent pieces in the most magnificent chamber, rather than the shorter (and perhaps less dramatic) Moses set.

However, when considering the messages of the *Genesis* series as a whole, the bookend of *Noah's Drunkenness* rather than *The Battle with the Amalekites* may have served an important narrative goal: it allows us to read *Genesis* as a cycle rather than a

series. Had the series ended with a battle, it may have been a rather unexpected and even disjointed denouement. The only prior battle scene is the destruction of Cain's cursed progeny in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, in which armed conflict is shown as obviously evil, and themes of "righteous" military leadership and victory are notably absent from the rest of the series. However, *Noah's Drunkenness* returns us to a garden-like setting, with a prominently-placed tree that is markedly similar to the Tree of Life in *Paradise Bliss*, albeit without fruit. The eagle atop the Tree of Life is replaced with an all-seeing owl (Fig. 61). Furthermore, both tapestries feature the "fall" of a protagonist (both involving shame from nakedness), and leave the viewer with an open-ended narrative.⁵²⁸ In the isolated context of the tapestries, the fate of the characters and their descendants is left unresolved. The inscriptions also hint toward a cyclical narrative in their repetitive phrasing. For example, both Abel and Noah act according to God's will "*per fidem*" (*Abel's Sacrifice* and *The Building of the Ark*), and the series's antagonists, Cain and his descendants, are presented as a continuously evil presence through the descriptor "*impius*" ("impious" or "godless"). These linguistic similarities invoke the recurring dichotomy between faith and faithlessness in the series, exemplified by Abel versus Cain and Noah versus Cain's descendants.



Fig. 63 The trees in *Noah's Drunkenness* and *Paradise Bliss*.

⁵²⁸ It is also noteworthy that both *Paradise Bliss* and *Noah's Drunkenness* feature continuous narration, portraying their story in episodes rather than in one scene. These are the only two extant tapestries to use this mode of narration.

Hermeneutically speaking, there are many established precedents for cyclical intertextuality across Genesis and Exodus. For example, as biblical scholar Keith Bodner notes, the Hebrew *tebah* is used both for Noah's Ark and for the basket from which the baby Moses was saved in the river. This infers a parallel between two saviour figures, saved from water by God and chosen to lead His chosen people out of chaos and violence.⁵²⁹ While the *Genesis* tapestries do not include a visual reference between the Ark and the basket, as there is no episode of Moses being found among the bulrushes, there are many other intertextual nods among the episodes that are shown.

In the creation narrative, God separates the "waters above" from the "waters below" the earth, creating dry land which will be used for the creation of life. During the Flood, this division is removed as water once again claims dry land, destroying most life and returning earth to the pre-Genesis watery chaos. Then, life on earth is effectively "re-created" through Noah's Ark. Later, the Flood is again reversed through the parting of the Red Sea, which provides safe passage through the waters (like the Ark) for the Israelites. In his letter to Oceanus, St. Jerome elucidates this very same progression of the symbol of water from the third day of creation to the waters of Eden, to the purifying Flood, to the "rebirth" of the freed Israelites after crossing the Red Sea.⁵³⁰

To use another example, Adam and Eve hiding from God in shame in *Paradise Bliss* is reprised by Cain's shameful flight in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God* (Fig. 62), and later by Moses's escape into the deserts of Midian after murdering the Egyptian, where we begin his story in the first Moses tapestry.⁵³¹ Parallels can also be drawn between Adam,

⁵²⁹ Keith Bodner, *An Ark on the Nile: The Beginning of the Book of Exodus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 95-96.

⁵³⁰ Jerome, *Principal Works*, 145.

⁵³¹ In fact, Philo of Alexandria notes the motif of escaping the eye and justice of God throughout Genesis: "The bad man thinks that God is in a certain place, not surrounding it, but being surrounded by it. On which account also he thinks that he can conceal himself from him, as if God were without any prevailing reason

Abel, and Noah, all cultivators of the land (Fig. 63). We find the mirrored filial betrayals, curses, and exiles of Cain and Ham, and the recurrence of the satanic serpent in the staff of Moses when appearing before Pharaoh, now refigured as a symbol of God's might.



Fig. 64 The exiles of Adam and Eve (*Paradise Bliss*) and Cain (*Cain Flees the Wrath of God*).



Fig. 65 Adam (*Adam Cultivates the Earth*) and Noah (*Noah's Drunkenness*) tilling the land.

at a distance from that part of the world in which he has determined to lurk." Philo of Alexandria, *Works*, Book 4, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book4.html> (accessed 29 January 2024).

As previously mentioned, all three major protagonists have moments of succumbing to sin, two of which end in an exile (Adam and Moses), and two of which are shown in the tapestries to go through atonement (again, Adam and Moses, with Noah's being implied in *Noah's Drunkenness*). Some of the many other similarities include Adam and Noah's connection to animals as the ur-naturalists (also echoed through Abel, the first shepherd), Abel and Noah's worthy sacrifices, Moses and Cain's flights from punishment for murder, and the "righteous" versus "unrighteous" violence of *The Battle with the Amalekites* and *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

Furthermore, referring back to the underlying theme of princely virtues, all three patriarchs exhibit strong leadership, resolute faith, courage, resilience in the face of catastrophe, and humility before God as righteous yet flawed men. All three have episodes of direct contact with and commands from God, indicating their piety, proximity to God, and status as his chosen representatives on earth (much like a divine-right monarch). Both Adam and Noah are remembered as progenitors of nations, but Moses can also be considered a founder of a dynasty: he was the first leader of the Israelites out of Egypt, established the lineage of Judges, and designated an illustrious successor, Joshua. Further support for similarities in characterisation among the *Genesis* protagonists can be found in Calvin's *Institutes*. First, "Adam, Abel, and Noah, when tried with various temptations, neglecting the present, aspired with living faith and invincible hope to a better life." Second, "Adam, Abel, Noah...and others under the Law looked for the fulfilment of the divine promises not on the earth, but in heaven. Hence they termed this life an earthly pilgrimage, and desired to be buried in the land of Canaan, which was a figure of eternal happiness."⁵³² Third, "Adam, Abel, Noah...and the other patriarchs" had pious minds "enlightened in the

⁵³² Calvin, *Institutes*, 363.

knowledge of God, and, in a manner, linked to him...united to God by this illumination of the word.”⁵³³

We also find suggestions of a cyclical reading of *Genesis* in Orzechowski’s *ekphrasis*. For example, there is the aforementioned recurrence of the warning of punishment for sin at the hands of a “wrathful God” in the description of *Paradise Bliss* and the conclusion. As previously mentioned, Orzechowski bookends the *ekphrasis* with similar exhortations to the king, such that the entire text (and tapestry series) “rhymes.” Both the introductory and concluding paragraphs recall the artistic quality of the tapestries (“the remarkable nature of the materials and artistry” and “the admirable art and sequence”), and both paragraphs refer to the creative vision of the patron (“the mind and innate majesty of the greatest king” and “the spirit and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been endowed”).

The most notable example in the *ekphrasis*, however, is the recurrence of Cain in his descriptions of the Noah subset. Regarding *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, he writes that “the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain’s progeny were.” For the next tapestry, *God Converses with Noah*, he refers back to this description: “The avenger of evil and protector of good appeared in His divine form, walking with Noah and telling him of the Flood, in the depths of which He wanted to bury the aforementioned criminals.” Next, for *The Building of the Ark*, Orzechowski writes, “I will show you God, enraged at the progeny of Cain, as he gives the patriarch Noah instructions for the Ark.” We return to Cain for *The Flood*, in which “you could see the shameful flight of Cain’s progeny, a sign of their guilty consciences.” In this same tapestry, he refers to the “godless progeny,” using the same descriptor that Orzechowski used so frequently for Cain. Finally, even amidst the joy of

⁵³³ Ibid., 368.

God Blesses Noah's Family, the red in the rainbow is compared to “fire, which never ends, showing us the eternal punishment awaiting the godless.”⁵³⁴ Thus, Orzechowski frames *Genesis* as a kind of ongoing battle between good and evil across the ages, between the “criminal” descendants of Cain, the cursed line, and the godly patriarchal line of Adam, Abel, Noah, and Moses.

On a very literal level, the *Genesis* tapestries can be read as a cycle simply by nature of their initial placement in the chambers. While they were separated into subsets by the divisions between rooms, they hung all around the rooms with no clear start or end point within those subsets. While it is reasonable to assume that the wedding night tour would have taken guests through the scriptural order (albeit with the Moses story out of sequence), one could just have easily started viewing the tapestries at any point during the narrative, depending on where one started in the room. Alternatively, viewers could contemplate the first and last tapestry in each sub-set together, as they would have hung next to each other. Finally, although the symbolic references between the tapestries will be considered during close readings in later chapters, the most obvious nod toward a cyclical narrative in the designs of the tapestries is in the semicircular composition of *Paradise Bliss*. As the overture to the entire story and one of the centrepieces, it is interesting that it presents the story of creation and the Fall in such a half-cyclical way, perhaps setting the scene for the series' cyclical mode of narration.

There are other examples of cyclical Old Testament storytelling in sixteenth-century art, although (as discussed in Chapter Two), it appears to have been the only example of its kind in tapestry in the first half of the century. For similar examples, we need only look to Raphael's Vatican frescoes (which include the same Old Testament

⁵³⁴ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53-55.

stories as *Genesis*) or the Sistine Chapel. Moreover, in her study of Titian's Old Testament paintings for the Church of Santo Spirito in Isola (1542-1544), Madlyn Kahr interprets the artist's project in cyclical terms based on meta-thematic links between the paintings (in this case, the theme of sacrifice), iconographic rhymes, and exegetical evidence.⁵³⁵

Beyond the clues in the content and placement of the tapestries pointing toward a cyclical reading, there is considerable support for such an approach to the Genesis stories in hermeneutic literature. Since the writings of the Early Church Fathers, the Pentateuch had been understood as the first act in the cycle of covenant history, comprising the Noahic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic Covenants. The cycle continued through the stories of the later prophets (the Davidic and New Covenants) and culminated with Christ, the ultimate fulfiller of the covenant of mankind's salvation and redemption. In order to draw a direct line from Genesis to the gospels, the Fathers adopted a "doctrine of correction and fulfilment," in Jaroslav Pelikan's words. They argued that the promises made by God to the patriarchs (from Adam to David and subsequent prophets) prefigured the new covenant made through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, and that each Old Testament covenant continued and modified its predecessor in teleological progression to the New Testament. As Christopher Hall explains:

The fathers' understanding of the Scripture's overarching narrative of salvation can be understood as a symphonic approach. They were convinced that the music contained in the first movement—themes involving Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Hannah, David, Solomon, and so on—was also filled with precursors of the themes and rhythms heard in the second movement of the new covenant centred in Christ; both movements combined to form a symphony the fathers believed was composed by the Holy Spirit.⁵³⁶

⁵³⁵ Kahr, "Titian," 193-205.

⁵³⁶ Hall, "Moses," 383-386.

The *Genesis* series depicts two of the three pentateuchal covenants (Fig. 64): the Noahic (“I will establish my covenant with you, and all flesh shall be no more destroyed with the waters of a flood, neither shall there be from henceforth a flood to waste the earth,” Gen 9:11) and Mosaic (If therefore you will hear my voice, and keep my covenant, you shall be my peculiar possession above all people: for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation. Those are the words thou shalt speak to the children of Israel,” Ex 19:5-6). The former (Noahic) covenant is even referenced in the inscription of *God Blesses Noah’s Family*: “God blesses Noah and his sons and shows them a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the eternal covenant with them.”

However, through the story of Adam, the series presents another covenant, wherein God promises Adam life if he obeys his commands, and death if he disobeys and eats from the Tree. Calvin termed this event the “Covenant of Works,” one of the three foundational covenants for his covenant theology as outlined in the *Institutes*. According to Calvin, the breaking of this covenant by Adam led to the five aforementioned biblical covenants, collectively termed the “Covenant of Grace.”⁵³⁷ Going on step further, it is possible to read the Cain and Abel tapestries through a covenantal lens, as God makes a covenant with Cain and his descendants upon assuring him that he will not be killed for his sin: “Whosoever shall kill Cain, shall be punished sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, that whosoever found him should not kill him” (Gen 4:15).

Given the absence of Abraham, the other “official” recipient of a covenant in the Pentateuch based on exegetical consensus, it is unlikely that the *Genesis* series was intended to be a direct representation of covenant history or of Calvin’s covenant theology. However, as the recurrence, amendment, and reestablishment of covenants are one of the

⁵³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 362-364.

linchpins of the patristic interpretation of the Old Testament as a cycle, it is noteworthy that moments of covenant-making feature heavily in the tapestries: in the command not to eat the fruit in *Paradise Bliss*, in God's appearance to Cain in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, in *God Blesses Noah's Family*, and in the tapestry depicting the conveyance of the Ten Commandments. In the latter two cases, entire tapestries are dedicated to depicting a "covenant moment."

Lacking primary evidence from the side of the patron and the artists, there is no way of definitively proving that the tapestries were intended to evoke a cyclical pattern. This interpretation necessarily remains speculative, but the tapestries could easily have been interpreted thusly by a contemporary audience, based both on hermeneutic knowledge and the hangings' placements in the chambers. This reading does open up some important implications for the series' ideological claims. Specifically, it may suggest that the princely virtues repeated among the protagonists, with which Sigismund wanted to associate his own image, are immutable. Earthly conditions may wax and wane, but God's design for His chosen leaders remains the same throughout history. Mankind will continue to face calamities and chaos ad infinitum, and so leaders must learn from the example of godly men of the past to know how to weather the storm.



Fig. 66 Three “covenant moments” in *Genesis*: With Adam (*Paradise Bliss*), Cain (*Cain Flees the Wrath of God*), and Noah (*God Blesses Noah’s Family*).

Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, one can read the covenants of *Genesis* through a more secular lens, as a metaphor for the covenants made between kings and nobles. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the limited Polish monarchy, and

especially for Sigismund, whose *vivente rege* coronation was only accepted by the *szlachta* on the condition that he swear additional oaths to uphold the rights and privileges of the other Estates. Modrzewski does use the term “covenant” multiple times throughout *De Republica* in reference to princely oaths and alliances. Using historical examples, he warns the king never to break a domestic or international covenant, as the consequences may be a matter of life and death:

He who sows discord among his sons or chooses favourites among them is not a true father....He, too, who harms his people, and pits one against the other for his own gains is not worthy to be called a lord or king...It is necessary to keep the faith [promises] with everyone in fairness, for otherwise the unity of the Republic cannot be maintained, although one must keep the faith not only among citizens, but with friends and enemies alike [i.e. outside the kingdom]...We hold in eternal memory the miserable example of Władysław [III], the king of Hungary, your uncle, o king! Who made a covenant with Murad [II], the Turkish king, and at the behest of Pope Eugene IV, broke it, bringing great harm upon himself and his kingdom. For while he had enjoyed successes in his battles with the Turks until that point, he was punished accordingly afterward. For although his army was sufficiently large and = powerful and was used to winning battles before, the king Himself died, for God, the architect of the covenant, wished to punish him.⁵³⁸

Later, Modrzewski refers to covenants in Book Three (“On War”), in the first section entitled, “All efforts should be made that war might be avoided.” He discusses how “neighbouring countries and their rulers typically make covenants with each other” to keep the peace and form alliances.” Interestingly, Modrzewski illustrates his point with pentateuchal examples:

Such covenants are made not only between people of one religion or one faith, but with those of different faiths. The example of the holy fathers can show us this

⁵³⁸ Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 134-135.

when first Abraham and then Isaac made covenants with Abimelech [the Philistine king] and sealed them with an oath.⁵³⁹

Following Modrzewski's argumentation, we find that covenants, based on biblical examples, are a foundational part of righteous Christian kingship. This strengthens the interpretation of covenants in *Genesis* as a reminder of the unchanging model for kingship established with the patriarchs and continuing to Sigismund's day. In particular, covenants may represent the necessity for a ruler to keep his promises and seek peace, both with his own subjects and with foreign polities, with allies and adversaries, even across confessional lines.

5.7. Conclusion

When we consider the *Genesis* series as a whole, the primary themes that emerge are strong leadership, dynastic proliferation, the necessity of faith, divinely-bestowed wisdom, sound judgement, profound piety, justice, repentance for sin, trust in God against all odds, peace and stability amidst disaster, and a promise of salvation, purification, and renewal for the kingdom. Most of these can be found in the other existing biblical tapestries around the time of the commission, as described in Chapter Two. This suggests that Sigismund was drawing on similar formulae for princely virtues as rulers across Europe in an attempt to present himself as their peer, both in power and in morality. Like Charles V, Henry VIII, and other major patrons, Sigismund used Old Testament patriarchs to project an ideal of kingship in a turbulent and unstable time.

However, the patriarchs in the *Genesis* series and the motifs that the episodes draw out do seem to be cogent vehicles to reflect Sigismund's specific persona and ideological programme to a courtly audience. The characters represent the virtues that would have been

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 304-305.

most expedient and logical for him to highlight. The potential references to political and religious issues facing Poland were covert enough not to cause controversy, yet comprehensible enough based on common hermeneutic knowledge for a learned audience to grasp.

Most crucially, the tapestries appear to be in close dialogue with established models of kingship in sixteenth-century Poland, perhaps best elucidated by Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski. In his chapter “On Kingship” in Book One of *De Republica*, Modrzewski lists the following as the core princely virtues: prudence in choosing one’s company and didactic materials, temperance in matters of the flesh, justice in judgement over crimes, selflessness in putting the needs of the kingdom and its subjects over one’s own, equality in dealing with all subjects and all regions of the kingdom, steadfastness in resolving conflicts and not sowing seeds of discord, piety in keeping and promoting the faith, generosity and fairness in giving each man what he is owed, and courage in willingness to die for one’s country.⁵⁴⁰ Reflections of most of these virtues can be found in the woven stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses. Moreover, as discussed in this chapter and Chapter Three, Orzechowski centres much of his interpretation on princely virtues (and warnings of their inverses), especially piety, righteousness, peace, temperance, humility, courage, and wisdom. The cyclical nature of the narrative presentation of *Genesis* (and Orzechowski’s account of it) serves to highlight these virtues and reinforce their immutability for rulers across the ages.

Arguably, one of the most important facets for a reading of *Genesis* through a princely lens is the meta-theme of lineage, paternity, and dynasty. Alongside the recurring virtues of the main characters, moral lessons of the episodes, and metaphorical motifs such

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 139.

as husbandry, this emerges as one of the strongest threads tying the series together. On one hand, this allowed Sigismund to wield dynastic imagery, perhaps as an attempt to assuage concern about his own lack of progeny. On the other hand, by proxy of his patriarchal exemplars in the tapestries he commissioned, Sigismund could place himself within a truly illustrious lineage. Through them, he was able to present himself as a “most Christian prince,” typified by proximity to God, divinely-ordained leadership, and the manifold virtues exhibited by the *Genesis* protagonists. Considering the tempestuous circumstances of his accession and early reign, the faith and courage of the patriarchs in their respective trials, as well as their successes in guiding their people to safety and salvation, would have been particularly pertinent.

In addition, the motif of faith traverses the stories of all of the *Genesis* protagonists. First and foremost, this should be understood in the spiritual sense as unwavering faith in God, both for the king and his people. Secondly, though, this can be read in the secular sense as the people’s unwavering faith in the monarch, whose position over them has been divinely ordained and reflects the supremacy of God over the king himself. If this hierarchy of God, king, and subjects is maintained, and both the king and his people have faith in their rightful superiors, only then can an earthly kingdom flourish.

It is also important to note that several of the major themes found in the narrative echo those that emerged from our stylistic reading of *Genesis*, especially the order/chaos dichotomy and the role of the king in facilitating the spiritual growth of his subjects. Because of these parallels between style and narrative, we see an increasingly cohesive programme forming, one that reinforces itself on different levels of reading the artworks. From a reception perspective, the implication of this is vital: whether focusing on the visuals or story of *Genesis*, many of the most important messages for Sigismund’s image-

creation and agenda would have been evident to the viewer. Neither style nor narrative contradict each other; rather, they support and underline the didactic content at each level.

However, there is one final layer of the close reading proposed in the Introduction that would have contributed to the overall *Genesis* project, and which had the potential to either bolster or destabilise the programme discussed thus far: the iconography, especially in the bodies and animals of the tapestries.

Chapter Six: The Iconography of *Genesis*

Writing on symbolism in northern European Renaissance art, James H. Marrow states that “symbolic and metaphorical expression were the established vehicles of sacred discourse and artistic expression, recognized, indeed expected, in treatments of sacred subjects by authors and artists, readers, listeners and viewers.”⁵⁴¹ This thesis posits that the *Genesis* series is no exception. For the creators and viewers of *Genesis*, steeped in the early modern predilection toward visual thinking, it is reasonable to assume that at least some of the images contained in the tapestries, be it in the animals and plants or in the meanings of stance and gesture, would have provoked interpretive readings.⁵⁴²

Nevertheless, it is necessary to be selective in hypothesising about symbolism, as we have no documents regarding the design of the tapestries. Therefore, as with the grotesque borders, any theories regarding the intentional or received meaning of the images they contain are necessarily speculative. It is unlikely (although not impossible) that Sigismund himself would have been involved in such minutiae of the design. Regardless, returning to the methodology of situational authorship employed previously in this thesis, the “intentionality” of the symbolism need not necessarily be prioritised over the viewer’s reception of them. If we centre the discussion on the audience’s point-of-view, based on the profile of the imagined viewer in the Introduction, we can still assess whether and how the iconography of *Genesis* impact the didactic content of the series. Do the bodies, plants, and animals of *Genesis* complement or complicate the themes and messages uncovered in

⁵⁴¹ James H. Marrow, “Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance,” *Simolius* 16, no. 2/3 (1986): 51.

⁵⁴² For seminal texts on iconographic (and iconological) readings of Renaissance art, see Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. David Britt (1932, reis., Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999); Gombrich, “Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neoplatonic Thought,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, no. 11 (1948): 163-192; Ibid., *Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon, 1972); Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*; Rudolph Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977); Ibid., *Idea and Image: Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978); Mitchel, *Picture Theory*.

the previous chapters? What are the implications of this for Sigismund's overall programme with the tapestries, as discussed using the triadic model of image-creation, moral messages, and political/religious agenda?

Obviously, this chapter will not argue that certain images had definitive, unambiguous, inarguable meanings, whether through the intention of the artist or patron, or in the European symbolic canon. Indeed, both in terms of bodies and natural symbols, these images had different connotations accumulated over time, and could signify different concepts in different contexts. Therefore, we will treat the tapestries, as our guest would have, as conversation pieces with a multitude of loaded signifiers in the form of bodies, animals, and plants. Each individual viewer's readings of these images may have differed because of the array of moral meanings assigned to individual signifiers within the European symbolic canon. Consequently, we will examine multiple possible interpretations of these symbols, beginning with the bodies of *Genesis*: the physical forms of the protagonists, their gestures and stances, and their placement within the scenes.

6.1. The Bodies of *Genesis* and Classical Models

For mediaeval rhetoricians, the dualist relationship between body and soul in the human being was reflected in gesture, which was an outward expression of the interior movements of the soul.⁵⁴³ For Renaissance authors of *specula principum* (most famously Baldassaro Castiglione), gesture was to be used in moderation to reflect nobility, moral restraint, and *gravitas*.⁵⁴⁴ Naturally, applications of these concepts can be found in artworks of the period as well. Like the mediaeval scholars, Renaissance theorists such as Alberti

⁵⁴³ Jean-Claude Schmitt, "The Rationale of Gestures in the West: Third to Thirteenth Centuries," in *A Cultural History of Gesture*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, 59-70 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 60.

⁵⁴⁴ Peter Burke, "The Language of Gesture in Early Modern Italy," in *A Cultural History of Gesture*, 76.

believed that posture, gesture, and physiognomy could reveal a subject's soul, not only temporary emotions. According to Joseph Manca, Italian artists of the quattrocento and cinquecento used the weight and stability of their figures to convey goodness, virtue, and beauty. In this sense, they employed *gravitas* in both definitions of the Latin term: not only physical gravity, but spiritual gravity as well. Conversely, weak or unstable stances connoted moral weakness. Strong stances, especially using *contrapposto*, also added an *all'antica* element to the image, invoking images of strong rulers of the ancient world.⁵⁴⁵ Due to the impact of Raphael's cartoons for the *Acts of the Apostles* tapestries, weighty and monumental bodies inspired by Greco-Roman statues became the standard for figural tapestries (Fig. 65).⁵⁴⁶ Considering the association of tapestry as a medium of princes, the proper gesture and stance of these figures could serve as a mirror of princely virtue and power for the patron, or as moral exemplars for the viewer. This is highly relevant for the *Genesis* series, in which the figures most strongly associated with *gravitas*, the patriarchs, serve as quasi-avatars for the king.



Fig. 67 Detail of muscular bodies in Raphael, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, c. 1516, bodycolour on paper. London, Victoria and Albert Museum.

⁵⁴⁵ Joseph Manca, "Moral Stance in Italian Renaissance Art: Image, Text, and Meaning," *Artibus et Historiae* 22, no. 44 (2001): 51-54.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

Up until the mid-1550s, there were more Flemish and Germanic influences in Polish art culture than Italian. These included both foreign artists working at court, such as the painters Hans Dürer (brother of Albrecht) and Hans Sueß, as well as Poles working in these traditions, such as the prolific illuminator and miniaturist Stanisław Samostrzelnik.⁵⁴⁷ Nevertheless, while these works may not have employed the physicality of the *cinquecento*, they made expert use of expressive physiognomy, much like that of the *Genesis* protagonists. One early example is the marble sarcophagus of Władysław II Jagiełło at Wawel Cathedral. The face on the king's body in repose is not a blank model, but a highly-detailed portrait of his features. This same style would be copied in the sarcophagi of his successors. Perhaps the best-known example of physiognomy in Polish Renaissance art are the "Wawel Heads" (1535-1540), a collection of (at the time) nearly two hundred miniature wooden busts lining the ceiling of the Delegates' Hall at Wawel (Fig. 66). In art historian Mieczysław Złot's estimation, the Heads are the best example of a study of physiognomy in Polish art until that point.⁵⁴⁸ Sculpted by Sebastian Tauerbach and Hans Snycerz, the heads depict people from various strata of society, some based on mythological or historical figures, and exhibit what Joanna Pałka refers to as "expressionistic realism" with a German/Flemish style.⁵⁴⁹ In addition to these visual references for physiognomy, our viewer may have been familiar with one of the many texts on physiognomy circulating in print at the time, including those by Jan of Głogów (1518) and Szymon of Łowicz (1532).⁵⁵⁰

⁵⁴⁷ Alfred Ligocki, *Sztuka renesansu* (Warsaw: Wiedza Powszechna, 1973), 236-237.

⁵⁴⁸ Mieczysław Złot, *Sztuka Polska: Renesans i manieryzm*, (Warsaw: Arkady, 2004), 33.

⁵⁴⁹ Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al., *Obraz Złotego Wieku*, vol. 1, 395-401.

⁵⁵⁰ Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al, eds., *Obraz Złotego Wieku*, vol. 2 (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu, 2023), 39.



Fig. 68 Sebastian Tauerbach and Hans Snycerz, *The Wawel Heads* (nr. 263, 255, 256), c. 1535-1540, wood. Kraków, Zamek Królewski na Wawelu.

Nevertheless, in addition to the local context, the imagined viewer of the tapestries would have almost certainly drawn a parallel between the bodies in *Genesis* and the ancient statues that inspired them. Around Poland, there were already scattered examples of Greco-Roman-inspired physicality in art, such as the gilded wooden statue of St. Sebastian (1st q. of 16th c.) at the Basilica of the Assumption in Kraków. In royal iconography, we also find the engravings of a muscular Hercules grappling with the hydra on one of Sigismund Augustus's ceremonial swords (a gift from Paul IV in 1540), which itself resembles a Hercules engraving on the hilt of one of Sigismund the Old's swords (1521).⁵⁵¹ Moreover, while not necessarily based on classical models, we may also point to the pronounced musculature of *Penitent St. Jerome in the Desert* (1507) by Sigismund the Old's court painter, Michael Lancz von Kitzingen, or the dynamic physicality in the paintings in the Artus House in Gdańsk, including *The History of Jephthah* and *The Death of Lucretia*. However, the best classical point of reference for the viewer of the *Genesis* bodies is the Sigismund Chapel at Wawel Cathedral, both because of its renown (and the likelihood of our viewer having visited it) as well as its frequent use of ancient models throughout. For example, the relief of Cleopatra (Fig. 67) is based on the ubiquitous *Aphrodite of Knidos*

⁵⁵¹ Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al., *Obraz Złotego Wieku*, vol. 1, 279-280.

(4th c. BC), and certain figures from the reliefs of sea *thiasos* and battles (Fig. 68) are based on *Hercules invictus* from the Arch of Constantine (315 AD), the Vatican *Gigantomachy* sculpture (2nd c. AD), and the *Laocoon*.⁵⁵² Overall, the muscular tritons and nereids and their serpentine poses are an obvious echo of the Greco-Roman statues that inspired the chapel's designer, Bartolomeo Berecci.⁵⁵³



Fig. 69 Cleopatra/Aphrodite in the Sigismund Chapel, c. 1531. Kraków, Bazylika Archikatedralna św. Stanisława i św. Wacława.



Fig. 70 *Thiasos* reliefs in the Sigismund Chapel, c. 1531. Kraków, Bazylika Archikatedralna św. Stanisława i św. Wacława.

⁵⁵² Lech Kalinowski, *Speculum Artis* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1989), 541, 562, 584-585.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, 505.

While the numerous courtiers and nobles who had studied at Italian universities (as was the contemporary Polish fashion) may have seen the most famous ancient statues in person, the majority of elite viewers would have encountered the print books of sketches of these statues which circulated across Europe.⁵⁵⁴ One such artist was even a member of the court: the aforementioned Gian Jacopa Caraglia, Sigismund's medallist and goldsmith since 1545, to whom the king had granted an honorary noble title in 1552. In the 1520s, Caraglia had produced a great number of prints of works by Raphael, Romano, Del Vaga, Fiorentino, and others, which all used ancient models for scenes of Greco-Roman myths, the life of Christ, and ancient histories.⁵⁵⁵ Considering the artist's employment at Wawel, it is quite possible that his prints also circulated at court. In fact, certain scenes in *Genesis* may have evoked specific figures from Caraglia's work for the tapestries' audience. For example, his Alexander the Great in *Alexander the Great and Roxana* (1525-1526) strikes a very similar pose and gesture to Noah in *The Building of the Ark* (Fig. 69), his *Hercules Fighting Cerberus* (1524) with a corpse in the foreground resembles the scene in *Cain Kills Abel*, and his *Battle of Thermopylae* (1526) may have echoed in the viewer's mind when viewing a similar battle scene in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* (Fig. 70).

⁵⁵⁴ Jan Pirożyński, "Royal Book Collections in Poland during the Renaissance,," *Libraries & Culture* 24, no. 1 (1989): 21. Some examples of elites (almost certainly among the wedding guests) who had studied in Italy include Stanisław Orzechowski, Jan Firlej (Grand Marshall of the Crown, the highest office at court), Mikołaj Dzierżgowski (Primate of Poland and Archbishop of Gniezno), Piotr Myszkowski (Grand Secretary and Crown Chancellor, bishop), Jan Przerebski (Grand Secretary and Crown Chancellor, later Archbishop of Gniezno and Primate of Poland), Filip Padniewski (Crown Chancellor, later Grand Secretary and Bishop of Przemyśl and Kraków), Stanisław Fogelweder (Sigismund's private secretary), Francisco Lismanino (Sigismund's theological advisor), Stanisław Hosius (Prince-Bishop of Warmia-Mazuria and later Primate of Poland and Cardinal), Marcin Kromer (Sigismund the Old's personal secretary, head of the Warmian canonry, bishop), Jan Dziaduski (Bishop of Przemyśl), Jan Drohojowski (Bishop of Chełm, Kujawy, and Kamieniec), and Hieronim Ossoliński (magnate and sejm delegate, later Castellan of Kraków and Sandomierz).

⁵⁵⁵ Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al, eds., *Obraz Złotego Wieku*, vol. 1, 310-333.



Fig. 71 Detail of Gian Giacomo Caraglia, *Alexander the Great and Roxana*, 1525-1526, ink on paper (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu), versus Noah in *The Animals Enter the Ark*.



Fig. 72 Gian Giacomo Caraglia, *The Battle of Thermopylae*, 1526, ink on paper (Kraków: Zamek Królewski na Wawelu) versus *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

Our viewer may have also encountered the popular circulating prints by Flemish artists of the “Romanist” school, including Coxcie, who spent many years studying classical art *in situ*. As Magdalena Piwocka remarks, “Coxcie’s fascination with ancient statues can be seen first and foremost in his presentation of scenes and in his incredible skill in drawing the human body. Anatomically accurate and remarkably constructed characters...reveal practical studies from models and, almost certainly, from ancient marble and bronze.”⁵⁵⁶ In fact, it was Coxcie’s masterful and self-aware use of *imitatio et assimilatio*, particularly of classical sculpture, that contributed to his renown. As Koenraad Jonckheere elaborates, Coxcie

shrewdly manipulated the idioms of the Renaissance and antiquity, and most of his borrowings are very ingenious...They are aptly chosen quotations whose content has been greatly enhanced...In addition, it is remarkable that not a single author has been surprised by Coxcie’s extraordinarily detailed knowledge of classical sculpture...He succeeded in incorporating the monumentality of Roman art without adversely affecting the detailed realism that had characterised the art of the Flemish masters since the days of the Van Eyck brothers. Unlike his Italian contemporaries, he broke up the large areas of colour by introducing subtle nuances and working the faces up in minute detail. So although he opted for an *all’antica* idiom he also demonstrated that he had a perfect command of the technical refinement that was typically Flemish.⁵⁵⁷

In her work on the models for *Genesis*, Magdalena Piwocka has drawn many parallels between the tapestries’ characters and ancient sculpture, some more convincing than others, but the overall point remains that Coxcie makes many explicit references to Greco-Roman sculpture in the bodies of the protagonists and the supporting characters. For example, the head of Adam in *Paradise Bliss* seems to imitate the models for faces of

⁵⁵⁶ Magdalena Piwocka, ““Echa antyku w arrasach króla Zygmunta Augusta: Rodowód jednego gestu,” *Studia Waweliana*, no. 15 (2013): 42.

⁵⁵⁷ Jonckheere, *Michiel Coxcie*. 81-82.

emperors, such as that of the Emperor Hadrian as sketched by Maarten van Heemskerck (c. 1532-1536, Fig. 71).⁵⁵⁸ Thus, as was the trend for contemporaneous monarchs such as Charles V, Philip II, and Henry VIII, Sigismund could use images of or recalling ancient emperors to emulate their power and magnificence as a latter-day ruler.⁵⁵⁹



Fig. 73 Maarten van Heemskerck, *Head of the Emperor*, 1532-1536, ink on paper (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) versus Adam in *Paradise Bliss*.

Later in the series, we find instances of both Cain and Abel based on classical sculpture models, copies of which Coxcie may have seen in Rome: Cain in *Abel's Sacrifice* is based on Heemskerck's sketch of the *Crouching Venus* (Fig. 72),⁵⁶⁰ and the young Abel in *Adam Cultivates the Earth* is based on the statue *Young Satyr Playing the Flute* (Fig. 73).⁵⁶¹

⁵⁵⁸ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 74.

⁵⁵⁹ For more on this topic, see the Frances Yates's seminal *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); Thomas Campbell, "New Light on a Set of History of Julius Caesar Tapestries in Henry VIII's Collection," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 5, no. 2 (1998): 2-39; most recently, Anastazja Grudnicka, "Game of Scipios: Habsburg Interpretations, Adaptations, and Uses of Scipio Africanus in Early Modern Europe," *Austrian History Yearbook* 54 (2023): 89-116.

⁵⁶⁰ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 87.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

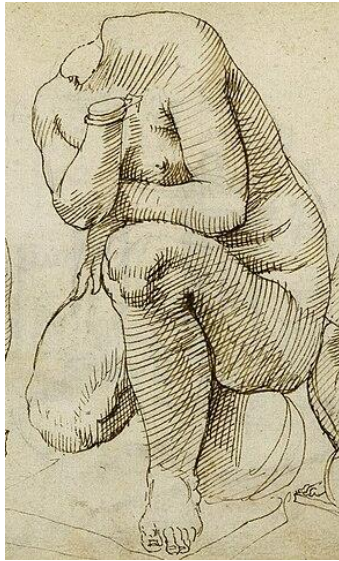


Fig. 74 Maarten van Heemskerck, *Crouching Venus*, 1532-1536, ink on paper (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) vs. Cain in *Abel's Sacrifice*.
Fig. 75 *Young Satyr Playing the Flute*, 2nd c. AD, marble (Rome, Galleria Borghese) vs. Abel in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

Like Adam, the patriarch Noah is granted a moment of identification with ancient models. In *The Animals Enter the Ark*, his face bears a close resemblance to Heemskerck's sketch of the *God of the River Arno* (c. 1532-1536), and his face borrows from this model throughout the tapestries (Fig. 74).⁵⁶² In *The Flood*, two of the drowning heads borrow from Heemskerck's sketch of the *Head of Laocoon* (c. 1532-1536) and from the *Ludovisi Medusa* sculpture, respectively (Fig. 75 and 76).⁵⁶³ Perhaps the most overt use of ancient Greek models in the *Noah* set is in the final scene, *Noah's Drunkenness*. In this way, Coxcie book-ends the entire *Genesis* series with a clear Greco-Roman overtone. Perhaps unexpectedly, however, it is not Noah who is based on this model but his villainous son, Ham. As Magdalena Piwocka has argued in her article on this one figure, Ham is an amalgamation of two of the most common ancient models for Renaissance artists: the *Apollo Belvedere* (perhaps via Heemskerck's 1530s sketch) and *Opus Praxitelis* from the *Dioscuri* (Fig. 77).⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶² Ibid., 117.

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 124, 126.

⁵⁶⁴ Piwocka, "Echa antyku," 47.



Fig. 76 Maarten van Heemskerck, *Head of the River God Arno*, 1532-1536, ink on paper (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) versus Noah in *The Animals Enter the Ark*



Fig. 77 Maarten van Heemskerck, *Head of the Laocöon*, 1532-1536, ink on paper (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) versus a drowning man in *The Flood*



Fig. 78 Ludovisi Medusa, 2nd cent BC, marble (Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano) versus a drowned woman in *The Flood*.



Fig. 79 Ham in *Noah's Drunkenness* and his inspirations: L to R: Maarten van Heemskerck, detail of *Apollo Belvedere*, 1532-1536, ink on paper. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Detail of *Two Studies of the Head of the Apollo Belvedere*, 1532-1536, ink on paper. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Detail of *The Dioscuri on Monte Cavallo*, 1532-1536, ink on paper. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For our viewer, it is also likely that these influences would have been fairly noticeable. Those who had been to Italy may have seen these works in person, as many of them were displayed in the Vatican, but the majority of viewers who were not art experts

would have picked up on the innate Italianness and modernity of the images. Even those who hadn't seen similar artworks abroad may have encountered prints in domestic circulation, much like the aforementioned sketches of Greco-Roman sculptures. In addition, the bodies in the Sigismund Chapel include a direct reference to Raphael: one of the "Triton and Nereids" reliefs is a copy of a portion of *The Triumph of Galatea* loggia (1512).⁵⁶⁵ Overall, considering the ubiquity of Raphael's style as it proliferated across the continent and irrevocably influenced European art in the following decades, it is fairly safe to assume that the bodies of *Genesis* would have been perceived as quintessentially Raphaelan.

The first examples of cinquecento influence are fairly subtle. For our viewer, they may have even been overshadowed by the dominant classical motifs in *Paradise Bliss*. Still, a perceptive viewer may have noticed that the scene of Adam and Eve's exile is closely based on Raphael's loggia of the same theme (Fig. 78).⁵⁶⁶ References to Raphael's Vatican frescoes in particular are peppered throughout the series.⁵⁶⁷ For example, Piwocka argues that the central rider in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* is a copy of the main knight in *The Meeting of Leo the Great and Attila* (1513-1514, Fig. 79).⁵⁶⁸ One of the earliest scholars of the tapestries, Marian Morelowski, has also argued that Noah in *God Converses with Noah* may be taken from *The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* (1509-1511).⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁵ Kalinowski, *Speculum Artis*, 510, 580.

⁵⁶⁶ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 75.

⁵⁶⁷ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka have catalogued many examples of Coxcie borrowing from Raphael's works in *Genesis*, for example: the angel in *Abel's Sacrifice* based on the angel from *The Liberation of St. Peter*; Abel in the same tapestry based on a soldier from *The Battle of Ostia* (1514), with this model repeated for one of Noah's sons in *The Animals Enter the Ark* (*Katalog*, 87); another of the sons in this tapestry from *God Appears to Isaac* (1514) (*Ibid.*, 115); one of the sons in *God Blesses Noah's Family*, from one of the magi in *The Adoration of the Magi* (1519) (*Ibid.*, 146); the wife of Noah in *The Animals Enter the Ark* from the titular figure in *St. Catherine of Alexandria* (1507) (*Ibid.*, 117); Noah's son in *The Animals Exit the Ark* and daughter-in-law in *God Blesses Noah's Family* from *The Transfiguration* (c. 1516-1520); God in *God Blesses Noah's Family* from God in *Ezekiel's Vision* (1518) (*Ibid.*, 131, 145-146). See also Piwocka, "Echa antyku" and "W kręgu mistrzów cinquecenta."

⁵⁶⁸ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 581.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

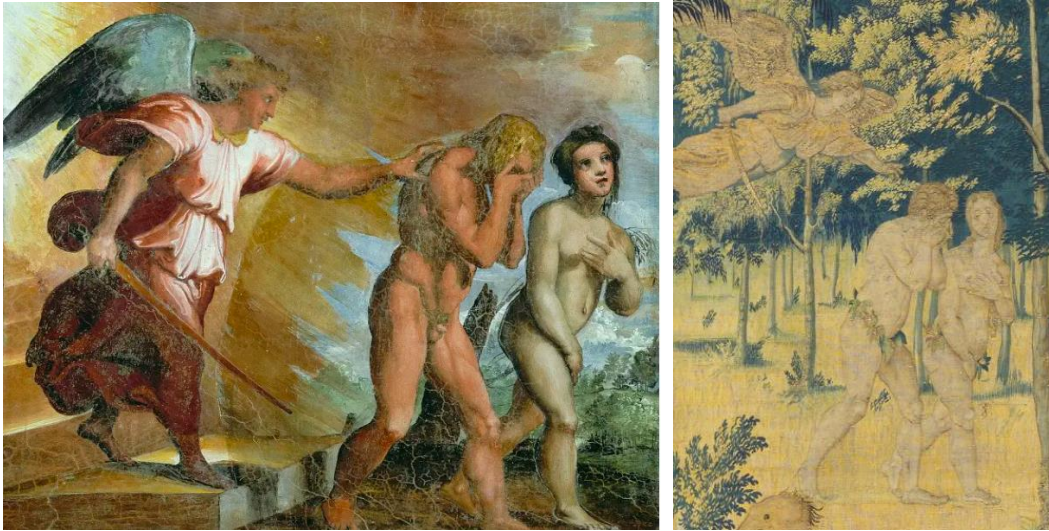


Fig. 80 Raphael, *The Expulsion from Paradise*, 1519, fresco (Rome, Palazzo Apostolico) versus *Paradise Bliss*.



Fig. 81 Detail of Raphael, *The Meeting of Leo the Great and Attila*, 1513-1514, fresco (Rome, Palazzo Apostolico) versus central rider in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

Although it is unlikely that our viewer would have been able to pinpoint most of these exact references in these tapestries, it is quite possible that they would have drawn a general parallel to Raphael's famous style in their physicality and physiognomy. It is also possible that viewers familiar with Raphael's loggias (or prints thereof) would have noticed how the entire compositions of *The Building of the Ark*, *The Flood*, and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice* appear to be based on their Vatican counterparts (Fig. 80, 81, 82).



Fig. 82 Raphael, *Noah Building the Ark*, 1519, fresco (Rome, Palazzo Apostolico) versus *The Building of the Ark*.



Fig. 83 Raphael, *The Deluge*, 1519, fresco (Rome, Palazzo Apostolico) versus *The Flood*. Note especially the similarities in the drowning figures in the foreground (the mounted rider, the man carrying the woman) and the Ark in the background.



Fig. 84 Raphael, *The Sacrifice of Noah*, 1519, fresco (Rome, Palazzo Apostolico) versus *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*. Note especially the framing and poses of the sons of Noah.

For the tapestry medium, the connection between Raphael and *Genesis* is particularly pertinent. As mentioned in previous chapters, Raphael's cartoons for *The Acts of the Apostles* (1515-1516) revolutionised tapestry design across Europe, especially in the production hub of Flanders. As the most-copied set of cartoons in the Renaissance, *Acts* set a new standard of lifelike, large, and muscular figures, inspired by classical models,

arranged in dynamic yet harmonious scenes. *Genesis*'s obvious replication of this style, like all of the other major Flemish cartoonists of the mid-sixteenth century, was inextricable from its Raphaelan genealogy.

Prior to *Genesis*, the most “modern” of the figural tapestries from Sigismund the Old and Bona Sforza's collection would have more closely resembled the designs of Bernaert van Orley (perhaps even including some of his designs), such as the *Romulus and Remus* set from Elizabeth of Habsburg's dowry (see Fig. 19).⁵⁷⁰ The bodies in these tapestries are certainly detailed and lifelike, but they lack the dynamic poses, pronounced musculature, and realistic physiognomy of the Raphaelan models. Nevertheless, it is very possible that Sigismund's wedding guests would have seen at least one prior example of *Acts*-inspired tapestries before, either in prints or at another European court, even though this was (based on extant sources) the first such series at Wawel. Even if they had not viewed modern tapestries in person, the contrast between *Genesis* and the preexisting royal tapestry collection would have been unmistakable. Thus, most probably, our viewer would have immediately recognised these bodies as originating from this “new wave” of Flemish tapestry, now finally making its Polish debut. The connection between Sigismund's tapestries and what was considered the epitome of continental tapestry design becomes a clear signifier of wealth, cultural capital, and magnificence. The novelty of this style compared to previous figural tapestries at Wawel only enhanced these associations.

The references to Raphaelan tapestries in *Genesis* are quite explicit, using several figures directly from the *Acts* cartoons and the *Life of Christ* (or *Scuola Nova*) cartoons from his school (c. 1524-1530). For example, Piwocka argues that one of Noah's daughters-

⁵⁷⁰ Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al, *Obraz Złotego Wieku*, vol. 1, 408. We do know that Bona and Sigismund I owned sets of figural tapestries, but based on surviving documentation, they appear to have favoured heraldics and verdure over figural sets. Bona's will, for example, lists mainly verdure, with two mentions of a figural tapestry. For the reprinted contract, see Gębarowicz and Mańkowski, *Arrasy*, 184.

in-law from *The Animals Enter the Ark* seems to be taken from *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes* (Fig. 83), one of the drowning men in *The Flood* is inspired by Ananias from *The Death of Ananias* (Fig. 84), and Noah's family in *God Blesses Noah's Family* may be based on the apostles in *The Ascension* (Fig. 85).⁵⁷¹ Piwocka also claims that the entirety of *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* may have drawn inspiration from *The Massacre of the Innocents*.⁵⁷²



Fig. 85 Detail of Raphael, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1514-1519, ink on paper (Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina) versus *The Animals Enter the Ark*.



Fig. 86 Detail of Raphael, *The Death of Ananias*, c. 1516, bodycolour on paper (London, Victoria and Albert Museum), versus *The Flood*.

⁵⁷¹ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 117, 126, 142.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 582.



Fig. 87 Detail of Nicolas Beatrixet after Raphael, *The Ascension of Christ*, 1541, ink on paper (London, Royal Collection Trust) versus *God Blesses Noah's Family*.

Moreover, the tapestries may borrow figures from Bernaert van Orley's and Pieter Coecke Van Aelst's Raphael-inspired *Story of Abraham* tapestries (1537), creating a continuous lineage through the development of Flemish tapestry between the *Acts* cartoons and *Genesis*. Anna Misiąg-Bocheńska has drawn a parallel between the positioning of the two figures circling each other in *God Converses with Noah* and in *The Parting of Abraham and Lot*, and has identified Noah in *God Blesses Noah's Family* with Abraham from *The Departure of Abraham* (Fig. 86 and 87).⁵⁷³

⁵⁷³ Misiąg-Bocheńska, "Arrasy biblijne," in *Arrasy*, 145.



Fig. 88 Detail of Pieter Coecke van Aelst (cartoon) and Willem de Pannemaker (workshop), *The Parting of Abraham and Lot*, 1540-1543, wool, silk, gold and silver thread (London, Hampton Court Palace) vs. *God Converses with Noah*.



Fig. 89 Detail of Pieter Coecke van Aelst (cartoon) and Willem de Pannemaker (workshop), *The Departure of Abraham*, 1540-1543, wool, silk, gold and silver thread (London, Hampton Court Palace) vs. *God Blesses Noah's Family*.

Although Raphael is the strongest sixteenth-century presence in *Genesis*, there are other clear nods to cinquecento masters and their *all'antica* influences. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes of *The Deluge* and *The Drunkenness of Noah* (1508-1512) likely inspired the respective designs by Coxcie (Fig. 88 and 89). In the latter scene, the body of Noah tilling the fields in the background could also be based off of a figure in *The Last Judgement*. In addition, Cain in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God* recalls the body of *The Risen*

Christ in Michelangelo's drawing (1533).⁵⁷⁴ The figures from Baldassare Peruzzi's frescoes are also clearly a reference point for Coxcie. The most obvious example is Cain holding his dead brother's head in *Cain Kills Abel*, which is closely inspired by Perseus holding the head of Medusa in the *Perseus Kills Medusa* fresco (c. 1510-1512, Fig. 90).



Fig. 90 Michelangelo, *The Deluge*, 1508-1512, fresco. Rome, Palazzo Apostolico.



Fig. 91 Michelangelo, *The Drunkenness of Noah*, 1508-1512, fresco. Rome, Palazzo Apostolico.



Fig. 92 Detail of Baldassare Peruzzi, *Fame Announcing the Glory of Agostino Chigi while Perseus kills Medusa*, 1510-1512, fresco (Rome, Villa Farnesina) versus *Cain Kills Abel*.

⁵⁷⁴ Piwocka, "W kręgu mistrzów," 26.

For our viewer, the significance of these varied Italian influences may have tied into their perception of the patron. As mentioned previously, Sigismund openly leaned into his Italian heritage and, unlike his father but like his mother, often presented himself and his court in a more Italian than traditionally Polish manner. Depending on the viewer, this may have drawn positive connotations of worldliness, wealth, erudition, and perhaps the novelty of the foreign. Alternatively, for those predisposed to see Sigismund's Italianness as a sign of his lack of commitment to his own kingdom and as a bitter reminder of his unpopular mother, a gigantic set of lavish tapestries bringing *cinquecento* Rome to Kraków may have inadvertently been a confirmation of their fears. Either way, we can locate a kind of *aemulatio* between the "Italianness" of the artist's style and the patron's image.

Finally, although the references to Flemish art are more subtle, it is worth noting that Coxcie does sprinkle in figures from the works of his contemporaries in the *Noah* subset. In *The Flood*, two of the drowning figures are based on Bernaert Van Orley's *Last Judgement* triptych (1517-1525), and Piwocka also argues that the central man in the same tapestry may be based on one of the onlookers in the foreground of the *Last Judgement* (Fig. 91).⁵⁷⁵ However, Misiąg-Bochenska does note that the similarities between Coxcie's bodies and those of Van Orley may have led some viewers to view them as intrinsically Flemish, rather than Italian based on their Raphaelan genealogy (which itself influenced Van Orley).⁵⁷⁶ In this case, Flemishness, especially in relation to tapestry, was an index of supreme quality and expense, of a worldly and cultured collector of the art of kings.

⁵⁷⁵ Misiąg-Bocheńska, "Arrasy biblijne," in *Arrasy*, 145; Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 128.

⁵⁷⁶ Misiąg-Bocheńska, "Arrasy biblijne," in *Arrasy*, 136.



Fig. 93 Detail of Bernaert van Orley, *The Last Judgement*, 1517-1525, oil on panel (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten) versus *The Flood*.

Indeed, although this chapter places the viewer in the centre of the analysis, in the overall aim of commissioning a series with an overt classical and *cinquecento* flavour, we may again be faced with the intention of the patron. Coxcie was, naturally, responsible for the individual models chosen for the bodies of *Genesis*, drawing on his own education and expertise. However, Sigismund's Italian education and passion for the arts had certainly introduced him to the innovations of Raphael and their basis in the Greco-Roman canon. This combined with his humanist education, which placed strong emphasis on Greek and Roman classics, make the connection between ancient bodies and princely magnificence quite obvious. Moreover, as a monarch in sixteenth-century Europe interested in commissioning tapestry, it is nearly impossible that he would not have been aware of the popularity of the *Acts* and the series it inspired at the courts of his peers, even if he had not seen them first-hand. Similarly, he was clearly aware that Flemishness, not just in the tapestry's production but also in the style of its figures, was an immediate mark of quality and magnificence. In short, just as the choice of mannerist style can be read as a conscious choice for his image-creation, as explored in Chapter Four, so too can the overall concept of physicality in the tapestries.

Beyond the style of the bodies, however, we may consider their placement and function within the scenes they occupy. Tying both into their physicality and into their narrative context, it is possible to explore how the bodies of *Genesis* contributed to the tapestries' stories and didactic content, as (possibly) read by our imagined viewer.

6.2. Hermeneutics and the Body

In keeping with their Greco-Roman models, the bodies of the *Genesis* protagonists are muscular, monumental, statuesque, often larger-than-life. Their full bodies are always visible, never amputated by the frame, always grounded on the earth. In moments of virtue and proximity to God, their stance is solid. Such is the case with the beginning of Adam's narrative (Fig. 92): when standing by the Tree of Life in the central episode of *Paradise Bliss*, he is nearly as tall and muscular as God, standing next to him. With his arms outstretched, Adam looks as if he might be even touching God's gilded robe. However, as the story progresses counter-clockwise across the tapestry, his stance becomes much more unstable. When eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he balances precariously on one leg, and he and Eve huddle in shame as they rush out of Eden into their exile. By the next tapestry, however, the penitent Adam is once again firmly planted on the ground, tilling the earth for his family.



Fig. 94 The evolution of Adam in *Paradise Bliss* (first three) and *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

This forms a stark contrast to the serpentine instability of the bodies in *Abel's Sacrifice*, reflecting the incoming fraternal conflict (Fig. 93).⁵⁷⁷ This is further exemplified in Cain's wild pose in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, as he runs blindly into the woods, his fearful gaze cast upward to God, his hands ripping out his hair in torment. The chaos reaches a climax with the flailing mass of bodies in the next tapestry, *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* (Fig. 94). The body lying in the central foreground is a repetition of the design of the dead Abel in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, forming a visual link between Cain's crime and those of his descendants.

⁵⁷⁷ Arguably, Cain's violence is also heralded in the composition of bodies in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*: with Cain sitting apart from the rest of his family, accompanied only by a (perhaps symbolic) lion which will be discussed in the next section (6.4).



Fig. 95 Unstable bodies in *Abel's Sacrifice* (first two) and *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*.

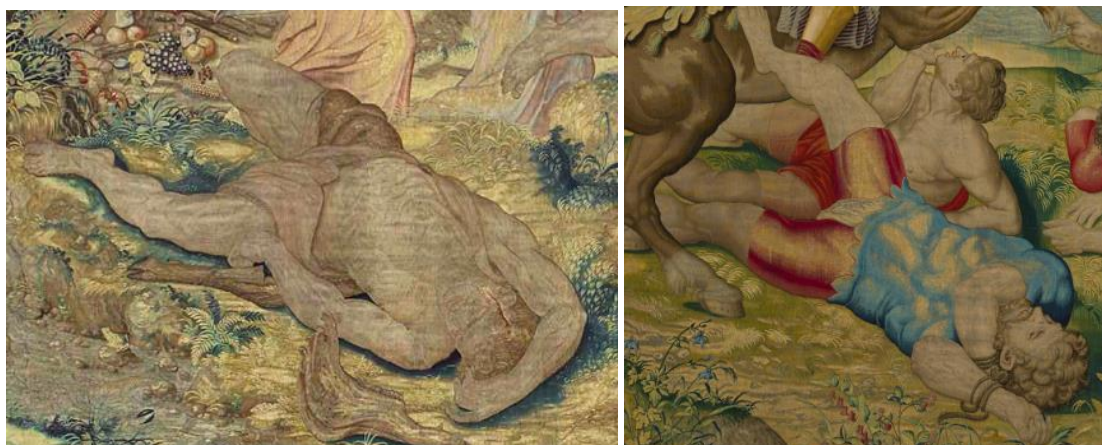


Fig. 96 Abel (*Cain Flees the Wrath of God*) and another victim of the curse of Cain in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

Then, however, we find another sudden change in *God Converses with Noah*, one of the most interesting uses of physicality in the series (Fig. 95). Both God and the patriarch stand across from each other, appearing to be walking in synchronicity in a circle. They are mirrored in *contrapposto*, their hands outstretched in nearly identical conversational gestures. Their bodies are of equal stature, and even their beards mimic each other. Both of their robes are red, although God's are gilded. Therefore, to the viewer, Noah appears to be

in both physical and spiritual proximity to God, and his stance conveys virtue and solidity of character. After the tumult of *Moral Downfall*, he is a new hope.⁵⁷⁸



Fig. 97 The stability of Noah in (L to R) *God Converses with Noah*, *The Building of the Ark*, *The Animals Enter the Ark*, and *The Animals Exit the Ark*.

In the next two tapestries, Noah manages the building and loading of the Ark like an ancient ruler, facing the viewer, towering over the proceedings in the foreground in *contrapposto*, hands extended in gestures similar to *adlocutio*. In *The Animals Exit the Ark*, he adopts the same stance and gesture, but this time his hand is pointing toward God in the heavens, as if to remind the survivors who truly saved them from the Flood. In the final three tapestries (Fig. 96), Noah's stance changes as he gets progressively closer to the ground: first, in a half-bow toward God in *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, then kneeling with arms raised in ecstasy in *God Blesses Noah's Family*, and finally lying slumped on the ground in *Noah's Drunkenness*. This creates a kind of triptych of increasing humility

⁵⁷⁸ The contrast between Cain, typically shown in motion, and the static Noah reflects Philo of Alexandria's commentary on Genesis 4, "On the Posterity of Cain and His Exile." He writes: "On this account it is written in the curses contained in scripture, 'Thou shalt never rest; nor shall there be any rest for the sole of thy Foot.' And, a little afterwards, we read that, 'Thy life shall hang in doubt before Them.' For it is the nature of the foolish man, who is always being tossed about in a manner contrary to right reason, to be hostile to tranquillity and rest, and not to stand firmly or with a sure foundation on any doctrine whatever." Philo of Alexandria, *Works*, Book 8, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book8.html> (accessed 8 February January 2024).

for the patriarch. As his virtue falters, his physical gravitas also decreases, finally dwarfed by his three sons.



Fig. 98 The humbling of Noah in (L to R) *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, *God Blesses Noah's Family*, and *Noah's Drunkenness*.

However, perhaps the most intriguing body in the series is in an unnamed yet prominent figure in *The Flood* (Fig. 97). Contemporary viewers of the tapestry may be surprised that Noah himself does not appear in what is arguably the central tapestry of his sub-series, and that the Ark is only depicted in the far background. However, this was a fairly conventional formula for portraying the Noahic Flood in sixteenth-century art, and therefore unlikely to be perceived as atypical by our viewer familiar with other depictions of the scene. Prominent examples in which Noah is absent and the Ark is either in the background or absent entirely include Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel *Deluge* and Raphael's *Deluge* fresco in the Vatican loggias.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁹ The focus on the human element of the events, particularly on those left behind to perish, puts the patriarchal protagonists (and Sigismund, by proxy) in the background. Still, the tapestry is rich with moral and political messages, as discussed here and in Chapter 5.4, and the grandeur, melodrama, and dynamism of the piece makes it perhaps the most obvious reflection of the patron's magnificence.



Fig. 99 The central figure in *The Flood*.

What is specific about Coxcie's *Flood* is the focus of the scene: a large man who stands in the centre of the tapestry on a patch of dry land, surrounded by people drowning, desperately climbing to safety, or hiding from the storm. His stance is firm, his back to the viewer, his hands cast down in supplication, his eyes fixed on heaven, his expression stoic. Directly behind his face, far in the distance, is the Ark. The presence of this anonymous man creates a kind of pregnant pause for one viewing the tapestry, a moment of calculated confusion. It seems that the viewer is meant to stop and ponder this figure and consider his significance.

The function of this *Genesis* figure is not as clear. He is unlikely to be a reference to any particular character or real-life person, as his face is barely visible to the viewer. However, considering the conspicuous positioning and anonymity of this figure, it is likely that the central man would have provoked some interpretation in our viewer.

In addition to his aesthetic and geometric purpose of centering the tapestry's composition, the man's upward-cast gaze could be read as an allusion to the presence of God amidst the destruction, even though God Himself is not shown in this tapestry. This reading would imply that God holds sway over His divine theatre and is always watching over His children. God is still in control amidst the apparent chaos. In spite of sin, the world has not been abandoned by its Creator. Extrapolating this message to the tapestry's patron, our viewer could interpret this as Sigismund's argument for the need for strong rule and protection in times of crisis, the moral of the Noah story from a princely perspective. Thus, we have another echo of the meta-theme of order versus chaos, as discussed in Chapter 5.2. In addition, this could be read as yet another reprise of the theme of faith. If God indeed is in control even in apocalyptic times, then one must, like this central figure, keep one's eyes fixed on Him for salvation. Just as a king must turn to God for guidance and inspiration, so should his subjects turn to their earthly ruler for leadership.

On the other hand, the figure may also be a moral warning for the viewer. He is staring at the divine lightning storm above him, highlighted by Coxcie's masterful use of light, depth, dimension, and texture, especially the contrasting blues and greys in the sky and the rain streaming down across the action below. For this man, however, it is too late. Is he, perhaps, one of those who "laughed at" Noah for his construction of the Ark, as the previous tapestries' inscriptions mentioned, now faced with the consequences of his hubris? As the Hebrews verse cited in the inscription of *The Building of the Ark* states, Noah "having received an answer concerning those things which as yet were not seen, moved with fear, framed the ark for the saving of his house, by which he condemned the world" (Heb 11:7). Noah, the exemplar of wisdom, read the sky, trusted God, and saved himself and his family. As this man reads the sky, all he can do is marvel at the wrath of God.

Interestingly, the model for Noah in *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice* (see Fig. 102) is very similar to this central male figure, albeit turned ninety degrees toward the viewer so that he is visible in profile and clearly identifiable. It is possible that our viewer may have noticed this, as the two tapestries hung in the same room, separated by only one other tapestry. In this case, the similarities between the poses of these two figures compounded with the stark difference in their circumstances could underline the reading of the central man as a kind of moral foil for the patriarch. Overall, the man in *The Flood* may serve as a cautionary tale against pride, faithlessness, and spiritual sloth, and may be read as an encapsulation of the humility of all men (even princes) before the might of God. This is another motif running throughout the series, which chronicles the sinusoidal highs and lows of even the greatest patriarchs. Interestingly, it is precisely on this note that Orzechowski ends his *ekphrasis*. Since the tapestries hang in Sigismund's personal chambers, the king will be able to look up and "contemplate the King of Kings above him, in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin."⁵⁸⁰

As with the grounding central figure in *The Flood*, the placement of the bodies in the entire *Genesis* series reflects the overarching motif of order versus chaos, expressed in the narratives as well as the mannerist style of the cartoons. In more static tapestries such as *Paradise Bliss*, *Fratricide Conceived*, *God Converses with Noah*, and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, the bodies are placed fairly symmetrically, clearly balancing the perceived weight of the scene (see Fig. 28). In the more dynamic tapestries such as *Abel's Sacrifice*, *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, balance is created through what Joseph Manca calls "compositional contrapposto," wherein diagonal placement allows weight to be taken off

⁵⁸⁰ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 55.

of one side of the artwork and added to the other (see Fig. 28 and 29).⁵⁸¹ In both cases (and, therefore, across the entire series), harmony is maintained. If our imagined viewer also had the impression of the overall harmony of the figural compositions, then this, in tandem with the series's fairly overt message of the triumph of order over chaos and the need for strong leadership, would have drawn a salient connection back to the patron and his personal agenda.

Several macro-themes in the bodies of *Genesis* are consistent throughout the series, including classical models, influences from Raphaelan tapestry cartoons, the reflection of characters' morals and motivations through physiognomy, gesture, and placement, and the suggested connection between compositional order and the order-chaos dichotomy. Thus, if the bodies can be read both individually and in terms of their implications for the series's overall narrative and messages, we may explore whether the same can be said for the natural symbolism in the tapestries. Can we presume that our viewer would have engaged in some iconographic reading of the animals and plants of *Genesis*, and how may these readings have interacted with the image and agenda of the patron?

6.3. The Iconography of Creation

As Orzechowski makes no mention of any symbols throughout the series, we have no textual proof as to whether any of the wedding guests did consider hidden meanings in the floral and faunal iconography. However, elite Poles and Lithuanians of the mid-sixteenth century would have been very familiar with the multifaceted symbolic lexicon that proliferated across the European "republic of letters," a conglomerate of images from different times and regions that together formed the early modern episteme of visual thinking. According to Michel Foucault's familiar thesis in *The Order of Things*, signs in

⁵⁸¹ Manca, "Moral Stance," 75.

the early modern period were inextricable from the nature of things themselves. Language was a part of nature, found “among the plants, the herbs, the stones, and the animals,” all of which had signs embedded in them.⁵⁸²

Although natural symbolism abounded throughout the Renaissance world, it did not originate with the humanists. It is relevant for our viewer that Christianity itself is a religion steeped in animal and plant symbolism, from the earliest biblical stories (including the *Genesis* texts) to the common iconography used in prayers, sermons, theological texts, hagiography, the liturgy, the celebrations of feast days, and sacral art. Thus, especially viewing biblical or otherwise religious scenes, a Christian viewer was, in a sense, pre-programmed to identify allegorical or metaphorical images. Moreover, the explicit associations of nature with moral, theological, and even political messages had a long history throughout the early Church (most notably in the *Physiologus*, a didactic compendium imbuing animals with morals) and into the mediaeval bestiaries and encyclopaedias by Isidore of Seville, Albertus Magnus, and others. The moral associations in these texts had their roots in the Bible, ancient classics, local folklore, and mediaeval literature. By the early modern period, the belief that God had imbued creation with natural symbolism was prevalent, bolstered by the 1419 “discovery” of the *Hieroglyphica of Horapollo*, at the time believed to be a genuine ancient Egyptian text, which further fuelled the thirst for recovering ancient truths and a greater understanding of the divine, especially among Neoplatonists. Among others, Francesco Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (1499), Andrea Alciato’s *Emblemata* (1531), and Piero Valeriano’s *Hieroglyphica* (1556) cemented the place of hieroglyphs—and the creation of new symbols and emblems inspired by them—within the humanist canon. In sum, employing these symbols from this centuries-long tradition, literature and artworks could become sources of theological, moral, and self-

⁵⁸² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 35.

insight, and vehicles for the transmission of divine revelation.⁵⁸³ To decode them would bring one closer to a full, divine understanding of the world, that same wisdom which Adam lost at the Fall.

Within Poland itself, there are multiple examples of texts and artworks that appropriated natural symbolism, including the royal family's portrait medals by Gian Jacopa Caraglia (1532) and the popular fortune-telling and astrology book *Fortuna* by Sigismund the Old's chaplain, Stanisław Gąsiorek (1531).⁵⁸⁴ In short, a mid-sixteenth century viewer of the *Genesis* tapestries would have been primed to see visual analogies everywhere. However, because of the variety of contexts from which these symbols originated, from the Old Testament to emblem books, the analogies viewers may have noticed might have overlapped and complicated each other.

In beginning a general overview of the flora and fauna of *Genesis*, we are faced with three general categories of potential symbols. Firstly, there are those with obvious connotations based on either their role in the narrative or their common use in sacral art (e.g. the Noahic dove, Satan the Serpent, Christ the Pelican). Such symbols were almost certainly interpreted in this established context, and not in terms of any alternative meanings that such animals may have conveyed in secular contexts. Secondly, there are those that were unlikely to have been interpreted as symbolic beyond their narrative function (e.g. the animals on Noah's Ark). These may also serve a function similar to Barthes's "reality effect," in which signifiers with no clear signified (i.e. no clear meaning or relation to the narrative) actually serve to create a sense of realism, of bringing the world

⁵⁸³ Dorothea Scholl, "Sense of Nonsense: A Theology of Grotesque," in *Paradigms of Renaissance Grotesque*, 93.

⁵⁸⁴ Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al, *Obraz Złotego Wieku*, vol. 1, 405-406.

to life before the eyes of the viewer.⁵⁸⁵ In fact, this is a similar device to *enargeia*, as evoked in the mannerist style of the tapestries (Chapter 4.4). These animals, at first appearing merely as “filler,” may in fact be working in tandem with the stylistic *enargeia* to enliven the scenes for the audience, and encourage engagement and immersion. The final group, and the group on which we will focus in this section, are those plants and animals whose conspicuous presence may have prompted further interpretation by the viewer. Readings of these symbols may have differed due to the variety of possible meanings attributed to them in the symbolic lexicon, and may also have differed among viewers who were more attuned to the theological or moral meanings, the references to other artworks, or the political subtexts.

It is noteworthy that, aside from the obvious royal associations of the eagle and lion, none of the animals featured in *Genesis* can be linked directly to the animal symbolism in Sigismund the Old’s iconography. While there are significantly fewer animals in the elder king’s commissions and depictions than his son’s, the cover page of Jost Ludwig Decius’s popular history chronicle, *De vetustatibus Polonorum* (1521) features a woodcut of Sigismund the Old surrounded by a bull, a bear, a gryphon, a paschal lamb, and a stag with a crown on its neck.⁵⁸⁶ In this sense, as in so many other aspects of the tapestries, Sigismund appears to have been forging a new path in visual representations of power and magnificence.

Some of the richest and (potentially) most salient natural symbolism in *Genesis* is found in the opening piece, *Paradise Bliss*. For our viewer, this would have set the scene

⁵⁸⁵ See Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard, 141-148 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

⁵⁸⁶ Danuta Szewczyk-Prokurat and Dariusz Nowacki, eds., *Z Wawelu do Lublina: Skarby z królewskiego dworu* (Lublin: Muzeum Narodowe w Lublinie, 2021), 115. The woodcut also features an eagle, a lion, and the Lithuanian mounted knight (*Vytis*), but these are, as previously mentioned, associated generally with the Polish Crown.

for a series in which plants, animals, and other natural phenomena could be examined for moral, theological, and political meaning.

To begin with the central presence in the tapestry, the tree (Fig. 98), Maria Markiewicz has convincingly argued that it is the Tree of Life, not the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (depicted in the scene of Original Sin in the tapestry's middleground). Markiewicz does note that the inscription of *Paradise Bliss* itself supports this reading, as it specifically mentions that "God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life [*ligni vite*]." However, Markiewicz's iconographic analysis underlines the distinction between the central tree and the tree in the middleground. Firstly, the composition of the central tree with two birds near the top and a serpent below seems to be a version of a peridexion tree, a mediaeval Christian symbol for the Trinity. Typically, the tree itself represented the Father, its shadow, the Son, and the fruit, the Holy Spirit.⁵⁸⁷ Secondly, the peacock at Adam's feet is a symbol of immortality, which the fruit of the Tree of Life granted.⁵⁸⁸ Thirdly, the grapevine wrapped around the tree evokes the famous gospel allegory of Christ as a vine, as well as the classical tradition of the Tree of Life as a vine plant, as described by Philo of Alexandria.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁷ See also Werner Telesko, *The Wisdom of Nature: The Healing Powers and Symbolism of Plants and Animals in the Middle Ages* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).

⁵⁸⁸ According to Hope B. Werness, in the Aristotelian tradition, the connotations of peacocks with immortality were extended to Christ's Resurrection and the promise of eternal life for all christians. *The Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in Art* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 320.

⁵⁸⁹ Jn 15:1-7, "I am the true vine; and my Father is the husbandman...Abide in me, and I in you."



Fig. 100 The Tree of Life in *Paradise Bliss* with the serpent in the left foreground, the peacock in the right foreground, and the eagle and parrot in the canopy.

Finally, there is a tradition of depictions of the eagle (here, on top of the Tree of Life) as the “solar bird,” and as an emblem of Christ, who is the source of life in the Church. In ancient Chaldea, the Tree of Life was guarded by the eagle, and in Persia, the Tree of Life was also known as the “tree of the eagle.”⁵⁹⁰ In Rome, the eagle was associated with Jupiter and believed to be the incarnation of souls of dead emperors. This was then reworked by the early Church Fathers and imprinted onto Christ, specifically symbolising his kingdom and triumph over death.⁵⁹¹ In Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies* (c. 625), the author highlights the acuity of the eagle’s vision and its all-seeing eyes, which could be metaphorically interpreted as a symbol of mental acuity, insight, and shrewdness.⁵⁹² Accordingly, in Dante’s *Paradiso*, the eagle was used as a symbol of Divine Justice. Ficino incorporated this notion into his twofold interpretation of the eagle: that of Sol-Deus and

⁵⁹⁰ Markiewicz, “Iconography,” 11-15.

⁵⁹¹ Werness, *Encyclopedia*, 153.

⁵⁹² Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 264.

of Jupiter-Lex. In *Paradise Bliss*, the christological symbolism is perhaps enhanced by the parrot next to the eagle, the mediaeval symbol of the Virgin Birth.⁵⁹³ Moreover, the element of judgement is bolstered by the presence of an ostrich, a common symbol of justice, in the foreground (Fig. 99).⁵⁹⁴ If our viewer picked up on these connections, they could have read the eagle as a symbol of Christ, head of the Church and Divine Judge.



Fig. 101 The ostrich in the bottom left corner of *Paradise Bliss*.

Interestingly, contemporary emblem books infused the eagle with other princely virtues, strengthening the connection between Christ and king. For example, Andrea Alciato's emblem for "The Sign of the Brave" is an eagle on a pillar, who claims to be "distinguished among birds for strength" and to give "standards freely to the fearless," while Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* associates the eagle with generosity, loftiness, and grateful remembrance of kindness received.⁵⁹⁵ However, the most likely immediate interpretation of the eagle by our viewer would have been as the main animal on the Polish coat of arms, the symbol of the monarchy and the kingdom.

⁵⁹³ Markiewicz, "Iconography," 11-15.

⁵⁹⁴ For example: "When they would symbolise a man who distributes justice impartially to all, they depict the feather of an ostrich; for this bird has the feathers of its wings equal on every side." "CXVIII: How a Man Who Distributes Justice Impartially to All," in *Hieroglyphica of Horapollo*, trans. Alexander Turner Corey (c. 1419, reis., London: Pickering, 1840), <https://sacred-texts.com/egy/hh/hh191.htm> (accessed 8 February 2024).

⁵⁹⁵ Andrea Alciato, *Emblemata*, trans. Bartłomiej Czarski (1531, reis., Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2021), 171; Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, trans. Pierce Tempest (1593, reis., London: Benjamin Motte, 1709), 41, 49, 51.

In sum, therefore, the Tree of Life and its eagle in *Paradise Bliss* are our first loaded signifiers, potentially encompassing Christ, leadership of the Church, divine justice, and eternal life, closely associated with Adam and Sigismund by proxy, and inextricably linked to Polish national identity and monarchy. In this reading, the king, the successor of Adam, is presented as the foremost servant of God and his earthly figurehead, tasked with maintaining justice, order, and paternal leadership. Thus, by viewing the eagle and the Tree as one connected symbol, we find a metaphor for righteous and pious kingship. Notably, the eagle reappears multiple times throughout the series (Fig. 100): in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, *Cain Kills Abel*, and *The Flood*. For our viewer, the recurrence of the eagle may have been a nod toward the “Polishness” of the series, its patron, and/or the context of its display. It may also have been a reminder of the central role that the king (synecdochally present in the scenes through the eagle) played as the initiator of the tapestry project and author of the political, moral, and image-creation project they supported. Alternatively, a viewer focused more on the moral-theological aspects of the tapestries rather than their political undertones may have read the recurrence of the eagle as a reflection of God’s omnipresence and constancy, even in times of turmoil, and the need for steadfast faith regardless of circumstance.



Fig. 102 Eagles in (L to R) *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, *Cain Kills Abel*, and *The Flood*.

Returning to the peacock at the foot of the Tree of Life, it is quite possible that our viewer would have also made a connection between this bird and royalty. In addition to the

general association between peacocks and wealth, majesty, and luxury across Europe, *Fortuna* uses the peacock as a symbol of finding favour with kings or lords.⁵⁹⁶ Thus, the combination of this bird with the eagle cements the tapestry as an index of royal splendour.



Fig. 103 The duck and the pelican in *Paradise Bliss*

One more instance of animal symbolism in *Paradise Bliss* is worthy of note, as it expounds the tapestry's theological narrative. At the moment of the Fall, Adam and Eve are accompanied by two birds: a duck and a pelican (Fig. 101). The former, the classical bird of winter, was used as a symbol of death in early Christian art, while the latter was the ubiquitous symbol of Christ the Redeemer.⁵⁹⁷ If our Christian viewer drew these connections, they may have interpreted the tapestry as pairing the death of God's grace in the soul, Original Sin, with the promise of redemption. The presence of these two birds could have been read as a reflection of purification and new life, thereby introducing another meta-theme throughout the *Genesis* series to an audience familiar with these symbolic traditions.

The next tapestry, *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, sees the recurrence of certain birds from *Paradise Bliss*, including the duck, ostrich, and eagle, creating narrative continuity between the two images. Among the many other animals featured in the tapestry, perhaps

⁵⁹⁶ Stanisław Gąsiorek, *Fortuna albo szczęście* (1531, reis., Kraków: Walerian Piątkowski, 1649), B4r.

⁵⁹⁷ Markiewicz, "Iconography," 16.

the most symbolically pertinent is the owl perched on the roof of Adam's hut. The owl's watchful eye, perhaps a reference to the panoptic eye of God over all deeds of mankind, appears thrice more throughout the series (Fig. 102): observing the murder of Abel in *Cain Kills Abel*, *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, and Ham exposing his father in *Noah's Drunkenness*. Notably, two of these are the instances of greatest sin in the series, and *Adam Cultivates* depicts the aftermath of the greatest sin of all, the disobedience of Adam and Eve. In addition, the owl relates back to a recurrent and dominant symbol in the borders: it is the symbol of Minerva, and thereby associated with wisdom, erudition, and foresight. Taken together, our viewer may have read the owl as a kind of silent divine observer watching mankind stumble through sin.

On the other hand, Anna Misiąg-Bocheńska posits a different reading of the owl as a symbol of death, precisely because it features in the scene of the First Parents grappling with their own mortality (*Adam Cultivates the Earth*) and the murder of Abel. In *Noah's Drunkenness*, she argues, it may reference the connection between death and sleep.⁵⁹⁸ One could take this reading one step further by claiming that the final appearance of the owl references the metaphorical death of Ham's morality through his sin and subsequent curse. However, Misiąg-Bocheńska neglects to mention the appearance of the owl in *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice* which seems to detract from the death theory, unless one sees it as a foreshadowing of Ham's sin in *Noah's Drunkenness*. (Indeed, the owl appears to be observing Ham in this scene.) Indeed, Misiąg-Bocheńska's interpretation is supported by Ovid, who describes the owl in Book 5 of *Metamorphoses* as "the prophet of doom and sorrow" and "a dreadful portent for all mankind."⁵⁹⁹ Isidore of Seville reiterates this interpretation, adding that "it is said to portend ill fortune, for when it has been seen in a

⁵⁹⁸ Misiąg-Bocheńska, "Arrasy biblijne," in *Arrasy*, 111.

⁵⁹⁹ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), 200-201.

city, they say that it signifies desolation.”⁶⁰⁰ Thus, the owl in the tapestries may indeed be an observer and prophet of the fates of Cain and Ham. Regardless of whether our viewer arrived at one, multiple, or any of these interpretations, the owl’s visual conspicuousness and lack of obvious connection with the biblical narrative makes it likely to have been noticed by the wedding guests.



Fig. 104 The owl in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, *Cain Kills Abel*, *Noah’s Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, and *Noah’s Drunkenness*.

Cain and Abel, depicted in *Adam Cultivates* as children, are also given symbolic animals (Fig. 103). Cain sits with a lion, which will become another recurring signifier in the series. This symbol is better understood in contrast to its second appearance in *The Flood*. Abel holds a goldfinch, a bird that is “nourished by thorns and thistles,” according to Isidore of Seville.⁶⁰¹ It was the early Christian symbol of martyrdom and resurrection, an allusion to Abel’s death as a precursor of Christ’s.⁶⁰² If our viewer was familiar with Raphael’s oeuvre, they may have noticed the reference to the painting *Madonna of the Goldfinch* (1505-1506) in which, like Abel, the Christ Child holds a goldfinch.

⁶⁰⁰ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 266.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁶⁰² Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 81.



Fig. 105 Cain with the lion and Abel with the goldfinch in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

In the next tapestry, *Abel's Sacrifice*, the woman (identified by Orzechowski as the personification of wrath) standing near the brothers nursing a wolf at her breast with a sheepskin on her head (Fig. 104) may be another commentary on the brothers' parable. The sheepskin alludes to Abel, the First Shepherd (another christological parallel), while the wolf is a reference to the legend of Romulus and Remus, whom Augustine famously compared to Cain and Abel in Book XV of *City of God*:

Thus the founder of the earthly city was a fratricide...So we cannot be surprised that this first specimen...should, long afterwards, find a corresponding crime at the foundation of that city which was destined to reign over so many nations, and be the head of this earthly city of which we speak. For of that city also...the first walls were stained with a brother's blood...As Roman history records, Remus was slain by his brother Romulus. And thus there is no difference between the foundation of this city [Rome] and of the earthly city...The quarrel, then, between Romulus and Remus shows how the earthly city is divided against itself; that which fell out between Cain and Abel illustrated the hatred that subsists between the two cities, that of God and that of men. The wicked war with the wicked; the good also war with the wicked.⁶⁰³

⁶⁰³ Augustine, *City of God*, 391-392.

Considering the ubiquity of Augustine’s work among the educated elite and of the classical myth of the foundation of Rome, it is likely that our viewer would have understood this figure as an allusion to the similarities between the two stories of ill-fated brothers.



Fig. 106 The symbolic woman in *Abel’s Sacrifice*.

In contrast to the previous three tapestries, *Fratricide Conceived* features no animals apart from a small frog in the foreground.⁶⁰⁴ *Cain Flees the Wrath of God* is the only tapestry without any animals. The next piece, *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, features the warhorses of Cain’s cursed descendants, but no wild animals. The stark absence of fauna in the *Cain* sub-series compared to the two *Adam* tapestries, and especially to the pastoral grandeur of *Paradise Bliss*, is unlikely to have gone unnoticed by our viewer. If they were inclined to read into this sudden lack, they may have interpreted this as a

⁶⁰⁴ While interpreting this frog symbolically may be an overstep, it is worthy of note that the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollo associates the frog with an “imperfect man” and a “man who is impudent and quick-sighted.” (“XXV: How They Denote an Imperfect Man,” in *Hieroglyphica*, <https://sacred-texts.com/egy/hh/hh027.htm> (accessed 23 August 2024) and “CI: How a Man Who Is Impudent and Quick-Sighted,” in *Hieroglyphica*, <https://sacred-texts.com/egy/hh/hh174.htm> (accessed 23 August 2024)). The *Physiologus* did use frogs as a baptismal symbol (as they are “reborn” when they exit water and are warmed by the sun), but, according to Herbert Friedmann, frogs were typically used as negative symbols in Renaissance art, typically of impurity, defectiveness, and impudence. Luther even likened his Catholic opponents to frogs. On the other hand, frogs could be used as a sign of spring and the Resurrection. (Herbert Friedmann, *A Bestiary for St. Jerome: Animal Symbolism in European Religious Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 217-219). Taking all this into account, the frog in the tapestry could be read either as a reflection of Cain’s wickedness, or as a hopeful foreshadowing of the promise of rebirth after the Flood (and, later, the Resurrection).

cementation of the gravity of Cain's sin and the growing distance between God and man due to faithlessness and violence. In *Moral Downfall*, this breach is seemingly widened, as the violence that the tapestry depicts extends beyond human combat and onto nature as well. For the first time, the lush landscapes have been colonised: a wooden bridge has been built over the water, and a castle burns in the background (see Fig. 54). In short, it appears that man has attempted to take over the natural kingdom by the sword, to play God over all creation.

While *God Converses with Noah* and *The Building of the Ark* feature only small creatures decoratively peppered throughout, *The Animals Enter the Ark* is a showcase of faunal diversity. We see the reappearance of lions, eagles, ducks, and a peacock, as well as cows, donkeys, camels, antelope, horses, llamas, sheep, goats, monkeys, elephants, a porcupine, and a turtle. Amidst the birds, we also find storks, geese, cranes, and hoopoes. In accordance with the tradition of artistic depictions of Noah's Ark, animals such as dragons and a unicorn are featured as well. As mentioned earlier, it would be imprudent to put too much symbolic weight on these individual animals, all of which serve an obvious narrative purpose with the secondary function of amazing the viewer with the masterful detail of the weaving.

The Flood, however, is a potential reservoir of natural symbolism. Unlike *The Animals Enter*, it is precisely the peculiarity of featuring animals outside of the Ark during the deluge that may have piqued the viewer's curiosity. Thus, it is safer to assume that the animals present in *The Flood* were chosen for reasons other than decoration or surface-level narration. Most notably, we find the recurrence of the eagle and the lion, and the introduction of a heron or bittern (Fig. 105)

To begin with perhaps the clearest symbol, the christo-monarchic eagle, we are once again faced with a multiplicity of meanings. For our Christian viewer, we may have a reaffirmation of the presence of Christ even in the darkest, most cataclysmic hour. This connects the Flood to the salvation narrative through Christ the Redeemer: specifically, the promise of Christ's death on the Cross, washing mankind of their sins, made another apocalyptic Flood unnecessary. In fact, the eagle was an early Christian symbol for baptism, a tradition continued in the mediaeval bestiaries, stemming from Isaiah 40:31: "But they that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." In this tapestry, there is also an interesting link between the eagle and the lightning streaking across the sky: ancient Greeks believed that eagles could control lightning, and used effigies of eagles (*aetoi*) on the roofs of temples as lightning rods.⁶⁰⁵ In this context, the christological eagle could be seen as may saving the Ark from the storm.

Alternatively, a viewer focused more on the political content and the connections with Sigismund may have noted a reaffirmation of the princely virtues associated with eagles from the Eden scene, and their necessity in times of trouble. The obvious Polish connection with the eagle also cannot be overlooked. Considering the dominant contemporary interpretations of the Noah story as an allegory for the kingdom and church in crisis, the eagle perched safely above the flood waters may have been seen as a reference to the strength and endurance of the Polish kingdom amidst political and religious turmoil (perhaps in contrast to its wartorn neighbours).

⁶⁰⁵ Werness, *Encyclopedia*, 152.



Fig. 107 Symbolic animals in *The Flood*: the heron/bittern, lion, and eagle.

The bird on the far left side of the tapestry may offer another allegory for kingship. It is either a heron or a bittern, both of which are used emblematically in the Old Testament. The heron is associated with the highest order of birds. Psalm 103, in praise of the goodness of creation, states that, among the birds' nests, "the highest of them is the house of the heron." On the other hand, two verses associate the bittern with survival amidst the apocalypse. Zephaniah 2:13-14 prophesies that God "will stretch out his hand upon the north, and will destroy Assyria: and he will make the beautiful city a wilderness...and flocks shall lie down in the midst thereof, all the beasts of the nations: and the bittern and the urchin shall lodge in the threshold thereof." Similarly, Isaiah 34:11 states that, during the Last Judgement, "the bittern and ericius shall possess [the destroyed earth]...and a line shall be stretched out upon it, to bring it to nothing, and a plummet, unto desolation." In the mediaeval bestiary tradition, storks were said to fear rainstorms, and could be read as an allegory for the righteous surviving metaphorical tempests. As Isidore of Seville writes, they "fly above the clouds that [they] cannot feel the storms in the clouds."⁶⁰⁶ Even if our viewer did not draw the connection between the bird and the Bible verses, the fact that, like the eagle, it is perched safely and stoically on dry land gives the impression of endurance

⁶⁰⁶ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 265.

amidst catastrophe. Incidentally, this would be a fitting interpretation given the tapestry's context, considering that steadfastness, prudence, and stability were a fairly accurate encapsulation of Sigismund's political and religious agenda, even reflected in one of his devices: "With patience, I break the tough."⁶⁰⁷

The lion, previously associated with Cain in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, is a more enigmatic presence, and another loaded signifier. The most obvious association for the lion would have been with the Polish Crown. As with most royal houses in Europe, the lion featured prominently in Polish monarchic heraldry, as well as in art commissions. For example, on his sarcophagus, the head of Władysław II Jagiełło rests between two lions, and the first medal of Sigismund Augustus (1532, shortly after his *vivente rege* coronation) depicts a lion on the reverse.⁶⁰⁸ In this sense, for our viewer, the presence of a lion may have simply been a metonym of the Crown. However, as the lion was one of the most commonly-used motifs in natural symbolism, it is important to consider the multitude of other meanings that the viewer may have assigned to it.

Negative connotations of the lion include ambition, pride, animosity, the most severe chastisement, and fever in Ripa's *Iconologia*, and, in the *Hieroglyphica*, "the terrible," here meaning the power to strike fear into the hearts of other men.⁶⁰⁹ On the other hand, according to both texts, it may represent magnanimity, dominion over oneself, ethics and morals subduing the passions, strength of mind, force of eloquence, generosity, liberality, grateful remembrance, reason, virility, valour, intrepidity, strength, watchfulness, and associations with the Sun.⁶¹⁰ Isidore of Seville also associates lions with

⁶⁰⁷ Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 97.

⁶⁰⁸ Ziętkiewicz-Kotz et al., *Obraz Złotego Wieku*, vol. 1, 364.

⁶⁰⁹ Ripa, *Iconologia*, 3, 12, 15, 29; "XX: How the Terrible," in *Hieroglyphica*, <https://sacred-texts.com/egy/hh/hh022.htm> (accessed 20 February 2024).

⁶¹⁰ Ripa, *Iconologia* 6, 26, 29, 30, 32, 34, 49, 54, 57, 64, 70, 75; "XVII: How They Denote Intrepidity," "XVIII: How They Denote Strength," and "XIX: How They Denote a Watchful Person," in *Hieroglyphica*, <https://sacred-texts.com/egy/hh/index.htm> (accessed 20 February 2024).

positive qualities, especially “tender-heartedness:” “they spare those who are lying prone, they allow captives whom they meet to return home, and they never kill a human except in great hunger.”⁶¹¹

Scriptural references to the lion also convey varying messages. Often, the lion represents the strength and faith of God’s chosen people. For example, in Jacob’s prophetic blessings for his sons in Genesis 49:9, he declares that Judah is “a lion’s whelp,” referring to the strength and fertility of his descendants. The prophecy for Israel in Numbers 23:24 predicts that “the people shall rise up as a lioness, and shall lift itself up as a lion: it shall not lie down till it devour the prey, and drink the blood of the slain.” Proverbs states the lion is “the strongest of beasts, who hath no fear of anything he meeteth” (30:30), and that “the just, bold as a lion, shall be without dread” (28:1). In Isaiah 21:8, a lion, symbolising the chosen people, observes the destruction of Babylon, declaring: “I am upon the watchtower of the Lord, standing continually by day: and I am upon my ward, standing whole nights.”

On several occasions, the lion is also used as a metaphor for the wrath of God against the wicked: for example, in Sirach 27:31 (“Mockery and reproach are of the proud, and vengeance as a lion shall lie in wait for him”) and 28:27 (“They that forsake God shall fall into it [death], and it shall burn in them, and shall not be quenched, and it shall be sent upon them as a lion, and as a leopard it shall tear them”). In God’s message to Israel in Hosea 11:9-10, he promises to spare his people, yet strike fear in the hearts of sinners: “I will not execute the fierceness of my wrath...because I am God, and not man: the holy one in the midst of thee, and I will not enter into the city. They shall walk after the Lord, he shall roar as a lion: because he shall roar, and the children of the sea shall fear.” On the

⁶¹¹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 251.

other hand, the lion is sometimes used to represent corruption, evil, danger, or an uncontrollable force, as in Psalm 90, Isaiah 30:6, Jeremiah 2:28-30 and 4:7, Ezekiel 22:24-25, and 1 Peter 5:8.⁶¹² Taking all of these connotations into account, at least some of which our biblically-literate viewer would have drawn, the common theme appears to be that the innate power and passion of the lion can be used for good or evil.

Considering the obvious iconographic associations between lions and princely rule in Europe, and the context of the *Genesis* lions appearing in a royal commission, it is quite possible that our viewer may have not only seen biblical allusions in the lion, but references to Sigismund's persona and agenda as well. For example, standing on dry land amidst destruction, it may represent steadfast and righteous rule in times of crisis, courage against all odds, and moral strength in curbing both the ruler's individual passions and the "tempests" in his kingdom. On the other hand, since the lion is not safe on the Ark, it may represent all of the negative qualities for which mankind is being punished, such as pride, violence, unbridled immorality, and corruption. Unlike the eagle, a more unambiguously positive symbol, the lion is unable to fly away from the destruction and seek sanctuary on the Ark. Within the context of the scene, it is likely doomed to drown. Thus, it may serve as a warning against a prince's use of power for evil or immoral gains. Alternatively still,

⁶¹² Ps 90:13: "Thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk: and thou shalt trample under foot the lion and the dragon." Isa 30:6: "The burden of the beasts of the south. In a land of trouble and distress, from whence come the lioness, and the lion, the viper and the flying basilisk." Jer 2:28-30: "Where are the gods, whom thou hast made thee? let them arise and deliver thee in the time of thy affliction: for according to the number of thy cities were thy gods, O Juda. Why will you contend with me in judgement? you have all forsaken me, saith the Lord.) In vain have I struck your children, they have not received correction: your sword hath devoured your prophets, your generation is like a ravaging lion." Jer 4:7: "The lion is come up out of his den, and the robber of nations hath roused himself: he is come forth out of his place, to make thy land desolate: thy cities shall be laid waste, remaining without an inhabitant." Ezek 22:24-25: "Son of man, say to her: Thou art a land that is unclean, and not rained upon in the day of wrath. There is a conspiracy of prophets in the midst thereof: like a lion that roareth and catcheth the prey, they have devoured souls, they have taken riches and hire, they have made many widows in the midst thereof." 1 Pet 5:8: "Be sober and watch: because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, goeth about seeking whom he may devour."

the lion may not represent an earthly ruler, but may be a manifestation of the wrathful Old Testament God culling the wicked and saving the chosen people.

Likewise, the lion laying next to a young Cain in *Adam Cultivates the Earth* (see Fig. 109) would have also been a complex image for our viewer. In this context, the lion may be a herald of all of its negative associations that will be personified in the adult Cain, and by his progeny drowning in the Flood: unfettered passions, rage, violence, and pride. Still, its presence with the child-Cain may suggest that his fate is not prescribed, as the lion is not an innately negative symbol. Cain could have chosen a path representative of the lion's positive qualities, but gave way to weakness and sin. Therefore, whether the lion represents free will or a destiny of violence remains ambiguous.

All of these theories remain speculative. Considering the amount and variety of interpretive contexts for the lion, it is probable that the lions in *Genesis* would have carried different meanings for different viewers, perhaps even for the artist and the patron themselves, making it one of the richest yet most enigmatic signifiers in the series.

In the next tapestry, *The Animals Exit the Ark*, we are once again faced with a menagerie that, as in *The Animals Enter the Ark*, should primarily be considered as a narrative device, not a repository of symbolism. The one vignette that does stand out, however, is the lion fighting a dragon in the right middle ground. A copy of a Da Vinci drawing (Fig. 106), this may be a reference to the aforementioned verse in Psalm 90:11-14:⁶¹³

For he hath given his angels charge over thee; to keep thee in all thy ways.
In their hands they shall bear thee up: lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.
Thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk and thou shalt trample under foot

⁶¹³ For the connection to the drawing, see-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 133.

the lion and the dragon.

Because he hoped in me I will deliver him: I will protect him because he hath known my name.



Fig. 108 Leonardo Da Vinci, *Dragon Striking Down a Lion*, unknown year, ink on paper (Florence, Gallerie degli Uffizi) versus *The Animals Exit the Ark*.

The fighting lion and dragon in the tapestry may simply be a fantastical gloss on Coxcie's part. However, if interpreted in light of this verse, the scene could become an exhortation to rise above discord, violence, and evil, which is destined to devour itself: a fitting addition to the overall didactic content of the series. This reappearance of the lion in an arguably negative context further supports the use of lions throughout the series as a moral warning. Furthermore, while it may seem surprising to include a scene of conflict while disembarking the Ark (an overall positive episode), the lion and dragon are echoed by two of Noah's sons arguing in the left foreground. Not only does this foreshadow the fraternal dynamics in *Noah's Drunkenness*, but it also hints that it would not be long before sin reappeared on earth after the purifying deluge (as *Noah's Drunkenness* will soon show).

Next, *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice* (Fig. 107) features a stork perched fairly conspicuously in the middle ground. In *Etymologies*, the stork is described as a "messenger of the spring" that has "an uncommon concern for their offspring."⁶¹⁴ Aside from the

⁶¹⁴ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 264.

common use of the stork as a symbol of new life, it carried specific significance in the Polish context. In Slavic folklore, the stork was thought to bring harmony, prosperity, and protection to families on whose roofs it nested.⁶¹⁵ In *Fortuna*, it also represents the notion that “the lost will be found,” tying into the theme of safety and guidance.⁶¹⁶ It is almost certain that our viewer would have been familiar with this tradition, and could have connected it to the divine blessing of Noah’s family. Taking it one step further, they may have extrapolated it onto Sigismund by proxy of his avatar, Noah. In this sense, the stork may be a moral figure, signifying the blessings bestowed upon dynasties and kingdoms thanks to the guidance of a strong leader.

In the same tapestry, the lion makes its final appearance, now dead and being skinned by one of Noah’s sons. This would fit with the more negative interpretation of the lion, here representing the triumph of peace, morality, and valour over the passions. However, it is noteworthy that the lion is being slain by Ham, the son who will soon betray his father, and consequently be cursed and exiled. Considering Ham’s villainous characterisation, this lion could also be interpreted as a harbinger of Ham’s sin, and thus take on the animal’s more positive associations. Here, killing and skinning the lion would be akin to Ham rejecting the virtuous path (like Cain) and unleashing his sinful passions. As in its previous appearances, the lion once again resists prescribed interpretation, perhaps making it one of the most fruitful conversation pieces among the animals of *Genesis*.

Finally, the all-seeing owl reappears for the first time since the murder of Abel. Notably, his gaze is fixed on Ham skinning the lion. As mentioned previously, the owl is another potentially loaded signifier, meaning that our viewer may have had different

⁶¹⁵ Interestingly, the same folkloric beliefs about storks were also popular in Germany and the Low Countries, meaning that this may have been an intentional use of the symbol by Coxie.

⁶¹⁶ Gąsiorek, *Fortuna*, C2v.

reactions to its reappearance. Here, it could be read as foreshadowing Ham's sin in *Noah's Drunkenness*, or simply a reference to the watchful eye of God over humanity as it rebuilds itself. To a viewer reading all of this tapestry's vignettes together, there may also be a hidden moral exhortation. The owl may bolster the message of the lion-and-dragon episode and the quarrel between brothers: as the Flood has not purged the world of the potential for sin, God must keep a watchful eye on mankind, and mankind must be vigilant over their own moral wellbeing.



Fig. 109 Symbolic animals in *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*: L to R, the stork, lion, and owl.

In *God Blesses Noah's Family*, the rainbow streaming down from the heavens is a clear symbol for any biblically-literate viewer: hearkening back to the tempests streaking across the sky in *The Flood*, it represents the promise of redemption and prosperity, the wrath of God in negative. The next and final instance of potential natural symbolism occurs in *Noah's Drunkenness*, where the owl is perched on a central tree. This time, it is many times larger than life with giant golden eyes: an unmissable presence (see Fig. 108). This owl is more visible and more obviously associated with gaze than ever before in *Genesis*, befitting Ham's sin as one of the eyes. Depending on the viewer's interpretation, the owl may signify the death of grace in Ham's soul through his sin, or the connection between death and sleep. Moreover, as *Noah's Drunkenness* is the coda of the initial 1553 series,

the viewer may have been left with a stark and haunting reminder of God's omniscience and watchfulness over the deeds of men, even over those of the mightiest rulers.

As a whole, the natural symbolism in the tapestries works in tandem with the biblical narratives, providing recognisable and striking images to highlight pertinent moments in the episodes. Depending on the background and interpretive process of the viewer, these symbols may have worked to highlight the moral messages, the political agenda, or Sigismund's image-creation, or indeed a combination of the three.

While the viewers' interpretations of some of the animals are unlikely to have diverged greatly due to their fairly uniform use in the textual and visual symbolic lexicon, others, such as the lion, owl, and eagle, are truly loaded signifiers. However, this does not mean that the tapestries opened the door for readings in conflict with each other or created interpretive disorder. The only creature that contained potentially antonymous meanings within itself is the lion. However, the differences in these interpretations do not dramatically change the narrative of the tapestries or the messages they contain. The two interpretations of the lion are two sides of the same coin: the positive and negative uses of power. Whether one sees the lion as a representation of power used responsibly or immorally, it fits in to the other depictions of princely virtue and moral exhortations throughout the series. From Sigismund's perspective, the overall themes and messages remain unaffected.

As with the grotesque borders discussed in Chapter 4.4, the natural symbolism introduces an element of controlled chaos in a positive sense. The menagerie of creatures introduces abundance, both in the amount of potentially symbolic creatures and in the amount of possible readings of them. Like the Genesis story itself, the flora and fauna become a site of metaphorical birth and rebirth, of endless creation and metamorphosis of

meanings. This could create an environment for Sigismund to use rich symbolic images to project magnificence and encourage active participation with his artworks without losing control over the overall didactic and image-creation project.

As with the style and composition of the bodies, the creatures of *Genesis* create continuity throughout the tapestries. In Chapter 5.6, we explored a potential reading of the *Genesis* series as a cycle, based on repetitive narrative beats and motifs across the four subsets of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses. It is worth asking whether the “cycle theory” is supported or complicated by the use of bodies and natural symbolism.

6.4. Revisiting the *Genesis* “Cycle”

Overall, the iconography does support the cyclical reading. To begin with the bodies, there is a clear homogeneity in the physicality, physiognomy, and use of gesture throughout all of the characters, as they are all based on the same canon of Greco-Roman and *cinquecento* models. The two main patriarchs are both clearly associated with classical models (as well as Cain and Abel in certain tapestries), creating continuity between Adam and Noah. With no visual evidence of the Moses series, we can only speculate on whether Coxcie continued this theme with his depictions of Moses. However, it is reasonable to assume that the body of the third patriarch was presented in a similar fashion. Interestingly, perhaps the most compelling evidence for a cyclical reading of the bodies stems from Coxcie’s most overt use of classical models in the first and last tapestries. In *Paradise Bliss*, we see clear uses of famous models such as the *Laocoon* and *Dying Gaul*, and in *Noah’s Drunkenness*, we see in Ham a chimaera of *Apollo Belvedere* and one of the *Dioscuri*. In this way, Coxcie book-ends the series with the clearest notes of the Greco-Roman influences he uses throughout, references that would have been the easiest for our viewer to identify.

Continuity can also be found in the transparent references to Raphael and Michelangelo in most of the tapestries, adding a distinct cinquecento flavour to the entire series. Moreover, all of the subsets employ the same visual techniques of balancing order and chaos through offsetting the dynamism and staticity of characters and through the use of “compositional *contrapposto*.”

In certain cases, the gestures and poses of the protagonists’ bodies reinforce the cyclical elements in their narratives, as established in Chapter 4.6. Most notably, Adam and Noah both have scenes of proximity to God, so close as to nearly touch His robe (*Paradise Bliss* and *God Converses with Noah*, respectively). We also find the aforementioned reuse of certain models in different subsets, including the dead Abel reappearing in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* (see Fig. 100), and the central man of *The Flood* reappearing as Noah in *Noah’s Thanksgiving Sacrifice*. Furthermore, by the end of Noah’s series, we are returned to the same physical position whence we began. In the last three tapestries, Noah’s body slowly comes closer to the ground, finally lying on the ground against a tree, which is exactly how we find Adam in the first episode of *Paradise Bliss* (Fig. 108). Perhaps, then, we are faced with another moral of the series as a whole, based on one of the most famous verses of Genesis: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return to the earth, out of which thou wast taken: for dust thou art, and into dust thou shalt return” (3:19).



Fig. 110 The first two scenes of *Paradise Bliss* versus *Noah's Drunkenness*.

As for the natural symbolism, the most conspicuous and loaded signifiers such as the owl, lion, and eagle appear in key moments throughout the series, emphasising the recurrence of key themes and morals. However, perhaps the most noticeable “cyclical” element in the iconography is the homogeneity of the backgrounds. From *Paradise Bliss* to *The Flood*, Coxcie uses the same lush greenery, the same designs of deciduous trees and shrubs framing the action. This creates the impression that the narrative, although it spans hundreds of years, is playing out in one location.

One counterpoint to this can be made here. It is reasonable to assume that the lost Moses set, initially displayed between *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* and *God Converses with Noah*, would have broken up the environments with the desert scenes and, potentially, an interior scene of Moses before Pharaoh. This is, of course, speculative: it is possible that Coxcie adapted some of the settings to merge more fluidly with the rest of the tapestries, and we have no indication from Orzechowski that any of the Moses scenes were actually set in the desert. We can only be certain of the surviving tapestries, in which we do see a clear continuity of the landscapes through the first eleven pieces.

After the Flood, in *The Animals Exit the Ark*, the landscape has clearly suffered from the cataclysm, and this desolate wasteland carries into *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*. However, in *God Blesses Noah's Family*, the landscape has resurrected, once again the lush idyll of the prelapsarian days, the Ark only a faint memory in the far background.

Crucially, the blueprint for this recurring landscape is introduced in *Paradise Bliss*, thus implying that the settings of subsequent tapestries are echoes of Eden. The most explicit echo is the recurrence of the tree wrapped in vines (Fig. 109), featured prominently as the Tree of Life in the centre of *Paradise Bliss*. A nearly identical tree, albeit fruitless, appears in nearly every subsequent extant tapestry, even in the darkest moments of Cain's fratricide or the wars of his descendants. Most strikingly, we find the tree cleaved in two and partly submerged in the foreground of *The Flood*. Along with the rest of the landscape, it returns in *God Blesses Noah's Family*.

For a viewer approaching the tapestries from a theological standpoint, the tree may be a reference to the enduring covenants between God and his chosen people, the first of which was made by the Tree of Life in Eden. As discussed in Chapter 5.5, the *Genesis* series can be read as a chronicle of early covenant history, comprising a series of important "covenant moments." The tree is a constant reminder of these moments, and their relevance across the generations. On the other hand, recentring the focus to Sigismund's image-creation and agenda, the visual reinforcements of the cyclical reading stress the immutability of dynasty and correlated princely virtues on which the cycle is based. Thus, not only in the narrative but also in the iconography, Sigismund could position himself to the viewer as a "most Christian prince," a member of an illustrious genealogy, a king guided by proximity to the divine, righteous paternal leadership, and courage and resilience amidst crises.



Fig. 111 The tree in *Paradise Bliss* (top), *The Flood* (bottom left), and *God Blesses Noah's Family* (bottom right).

6.5. Conclusion

Many of the animals, plants, and bodies of *Genesis* punctuate the tapestries with their striking appearance, prominent placement, and purposeful composition. They serve as points of interest for the viewer, gateways through which one can contemplate the theological and political content. For an audience primed for visual thinking through the early modern episteme and familiar with the European symbolic lexicon accumulated from antiquity to the Renaissance, it is highly likely that at least some of these images would have stood out as moral signifiers.

The monumental Greco-Roman bodies, especially those of the protagonists, can be seen as indices of power, majesty, and princely virtue. This can be directly applied to Sigismund, for whom they act as avatars and exemplars. In their physicality, stance, and gesture, as well as in the composition of harmonious scenes, the bodies convey *gravitas*, solemnity, order, and moral strength. Conversely, the bodies in less-stable poses and in more chaotic, dynamic scenes convey discord, frailty, and moral warning to the viewer. Notably, this is a continuation of the overarching order-versus-chaos motif present in the visual styles of mannerism and grotesque (Chapter Four) and in the narratives (Chapter Five). The Raphaelan references in the bodies (especially in relation to the *Acts* cartoons) alongside the notable Flemish influences contribute to the commission's overall connotations of worldliness, novelty, foreignness, cultural capital, and luxury. By proxy, this elevates the magnificence of the patron.

The natural symbolism works in tandem with the bodies to highlight moral messages, extol the virtues of the patron, and perhaps even offer subtle political and theological commentary. Thus, as with all of the previous layers of tapestry reading offered in preceding chapters, we can apply the triadic model to reach a full understanding of the iconography in relation to the patron. In some cases, due to varied associations with certain symbols, these messages may have been interpreted differently from viewer to viewer, but even these divergences would not have derailed the overall themes, or destabilised the general didactic focuses of the series. If anything, the fact that the tapestries offered these “conversation moments” to the viewer opened the door for increased engagement with the images. As discussed regarding the style, encouraging such engagement could propel the viewer to read the scenes in greater depth, thereby making them more receptive to their messages. Thus, similarly to the grotesque borders, Sigismund could channel magnificence through the abundance of rich imagery while maintaining control over the project.

As Orzechowski insists in his *ekphrasis*, even in the eyes of the viewer, Sigismund is the centre of the series, even after this final level of iconographic reading which Orzechowski himself does not consider. On the stage of the pastoral theatre of *Genesis*, the statuesque patriarchs are his actors, the surrounding flora and fauna his chorus. Like the choice of mannerist and grotesque style, as well as choice of episodes and protagonists, the iconography is the final element in crafting a cohesive visual program.

Conclusion: “The Mind and Innate Majesty of this Greatest King”

This thesis posed the question: what can the Jagiellonian Genesis tapestries reveal about the relationship between religion and power in Sigismund Augustus’s kingship? In order to answer this question, we have explored a reading of *Genesis* on multiple levels: from choice of medium to materiality and style, to story and characters, and finally to iconography. This reading considered both the potential vision of the patron and the reception of a contemporary viewer.

As outlined in the Introduction, there are several justifications for a reexamination of *Genesis* using new methodology. Firstly, while previous scholars such as Frances Yates and Thomas Campbell have extensively proven that tapestry is a crucial primary source for understanding early modern princely power and image-creation, the *Genesis* series is barely mentioned in existing studies of European tapestry. Secondly, Stanisław Orzechowski’s *ekphrasis* allows us to take a reading of *Genesis* where many previous scholars have been unable to go with other sets: namely, to reception. Whether due to methodological choices or a lack of sources, many past studies of the “politics of tapestry” have taken a top-down approach, viewing tapestry as a propaganda tool imposing the messages of its patrons. This method does not consider the equally important role of the audience in meaning-making and image-creation. The method proposed in this thesis has incorporated the possible reception of the tapestries at the 1553 unveiling, thereby allowing us to see *Genesis* as a site of the negotiation of power, politics, and religion, where “authorship” and meaning-making are conceived by both the patron and the viewer.

Thirdly, while *Genesis* has been studied by Polish art historians, it also has the potential to contribute to a much-needed visual and material turn in the history of early modern Polish religion. As Campbell et al have provided the groundwork to use tapestry

as historical primary sources, this thesis has built on this to reconsider a monarch whose public and private relationship to religion remains a controversial issue among historians, and whose religious politics can be elucidated through sources of different media.

At the onset, this thesis has attempted to address two methodological problems which face any political reading of tapestry: the existence of sources about the commission and about the reception. In the case of *Genesis*, there is a relative lack of sources on the commission, but one very valuable source on the initial reception (the *ekphrasis*), which sets *Genesis* apart from other series of the period. Addressing the first issue, there is a strong case to be made for Sigismund's personal involvement in the commission, especially due to established norms of tapestry patronage, his father's direct involvement in his own commissions, and Sigismund's documented engagement with art patronage in different media. However, due to this lack of sources, this thesis has not ascribed too much "authorship" to Sigismund. According to the methodology of situational authorship, we need not seek a singular author of a work of art, but rather see the meaning of artwork as contextually dependent. In other words, based on the aforementioned arguments, we have found that Sigismund played a leading role in the conception of the *Genesis* project, but we have also considered whether his audience was likely to have interpreted the images in a singular manner, or whether a divergence of interpretations was possible. Regarding the second issue, Stanisław Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* of the unveiling has provided insight into the series's reception, while remaining cognisant of the text's generic constraints and rhetorical aims, as explored in Chapter Three.

Overall, this thesis has shown the benefits of applying an interdisciplinary methodology combining history and art history in order to fully examine the politics of a tapestry series. While history has situated the commission within the context of relevant events and literature that may have informed its creation and reception, art history has

allowed us to understand the meanings of style, iconography, and materiality. It is this interdisciplinary approach that provides the basis of the seven-step method for reading tapestry proposed in the Introduction.

1. Reading *Genesis*

According to the seven-step method, the first layer of reading *Genesis* considered the medium of tapestry itself as a pan-European signifier of magnificence, wealth, power, dynasty, and cultural capital. In Chapter One, we saw how tapestry was the luxury medium *par excellence*: its visual and material splendour combined with its portability made it an ideal choice for an itinerant court. For Sigismund, the medium also carried the weight of dynastic continuity via his parents' collection, while commissioning entirely new designs (*editiones principes*) placed *Genesis* in the highest echelon (and price bracket) of the tapestry market.

The second step of the method concerned the intentions behind the commission, especially its timing. In other words, why would Sigismund make such an expensive and grand commission at this particular moment, circa 1547? As mentioned in Chapter One, *Genesis* can be seen as emblematic of two trends simultaneously. On one hand, such a grand commission was a celebration of a new prosperous reign (a continuation of his father's relatively successful reign), a young king representing a new generation of an illustrious dynasty, and his impending nuptials to his (at the time) second wife. At the same time, *Genesis* was an attempt to convey an image of princely power at a time of relative instability for the triangular political relationship of Crown, Church, and nobility in Poland-Lithuania. At the time of his coronation as sole ruler in 1548, Sigismund was faced with the rapid rise of the Polish Reformation as well as the germinating seeds of the executionist movement among the middle and lower nobility. His reluctance to acquiesce to the nobility

in legislative and judicial reform or to relinquish any royal prerogatives had led to rumours of absolutist tendencies, while his public ambivalence on religious matters made him a controversial figure for Catholics and Protestants alike. Compounded by the scandals over his *vivente rege* coronation and his clandestine marriage to Barbara Radziwiłł, concerns over his fitness to rule a “nation of warriors” given his Italian humanist upbringing, his apparent preference for Vilnius over Kraków, his lack of heirs, and the religious violence engulfing the rest of the continent, Sigismund had inherited a highly precarious political situation. In short, a bold statement of princely power and ruling competence, and a political and religious agenda to unite the estates in support of the monarchy, was vital.

While all of this illuminates the domestic context of the *Genesis* commission, the third step of the method expanded the context to the international arena. *Genesis* was not commissioned in a vacuum, but as part of a thriving European tapestry market, the primary artistic stage for displays of power and image creation within the sixteenth-century ruling class. As we have already discussed the connotations of the medium itself for patrons, the most important element here is genre: in this case, biblical tapestry. Through this lens, in Chapter Two, we have seen that *Genesis* was simultaneously in dialogue with other major commissions of the time, while treading new ground. While Old Testament biblical tapestry was a very popular genre for image-creation projects among patrons, mostly due to the use of the patriarchs as exemplars of princely virtue, the stories in *Genesis* were either entirely new on the market or had at most one predecessor since the beginning of the century. In this way, Sigismund could use a recognisable and comprehensible visual-material lexicon for his messages, while showing innovation and individualism both in his stylistic preferences and in the didactic content. In comparison to many of the other most popular biblical sets on the market, the *Genesis* stories also show the first signs of one of the major elements of the series programme: the theme of nonviolence.

Having established both the domestic and international contexts for reading *Genesis*, Chapter Three introduced the final element of the series' background, the most important primary source for understanding the vision of the patron and the reception of the viewer: Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*. This text cannot be approached as a forensic eyewitness account of the unveiling, as it was a text written within an ancient generic and rhetorical tradition and with clear didactic aims, in addition to the author's personal motivations. Rather, the *ekphrasis* is a rich document of a moral and political reading of *Genesis* centred on the person of Sigismund Augustus. Establishing himself as a "tour guide" for the reader, Orzechowski uses his authorial power to canonise interpretations of the individual tapestries and of the commission as a whole. The text creates a stage for image-creation and meaning-making, focused on princely virtue (via the patriarchs and their comparisons to Sigismund's own attributes as described in the panegyric), magnificence, and Sigismund's "authorship" over the entire project, as well as moral exhortations for both the viewer and the King. Thus, Orzechowski not only immortalises his image of the tapestries, but his image of Sigismund as well. In the end, the tapestries are not the true focus of the *ekphrasis*, but Sigismund himself, with the tapestries functioning as mirrors of his power, virtue, and moral programme.

With the *ekphrasis* as our chief written source, we moved on to a close reading of the tapestries themselves, beginning with their materials and style: the fourth and fifth steps of the method. We questioned how materiality and style helped craft the overall programme of *Genesis*.

Beginning with materiality, we have found that the enormous size of the tapestries, especially in the most dramatic panoramas, and their placement in rooms closely associated with the king's person clearly conveyed the magnificence of the commission, and presented a tangible material gap between the wealth of the Crown and the other estates. This nod

toward royal supremacy supported the allusions toward patrimonial rule in the narrative. Moreover, the floor-to-ceiling tapestries that completely covered the walls and windows of the chambers created an artificial, insulated environment in which sound was muffled, light was dimmed, and the dimensions of physical space were muddled. With all of this combined, the viewer was fully surrounded by the world of *Genesis*, dropped into a different time and place. This immersive biblical environment allowed the viewer to contemplate the messages of the tapestries more deeply, and perhaps even have a spiritual experience. As the provider of this experience, Sigismund placed himself in a highly privileged position as one who could transform secular space into sacred space and give his subjects the means to connect with the divine.

As for the style of the central scenes of *Genesis*, namely mannerism, we have again found support for an image-creation and didactic programme. As the court style *par excellence* of the period, mannerism was a clear signifier of wealth, worldliness, eliteness, and cultural capital. One of the main attributes of mannerism is its “excesses,” many of which we see in the tapestries, including excesses in the scale and scope of the landscapes and in the amount and size of bodies. All of this creates the sense of an epic narrative with monumental implications, again encouraging audience participation in its content. However, the “excesses” of *Genesis* do not threaten to upset the intricate equilibrium in composition, as they are counterweighted by symmetry and a visual balance between order and chaos. This dichotomy, also dominant in the narrative content, is perhaps the most visible and thematically relevant aspect of the tapestries’ style. It also has significant political and theological implications, as it evokes cosmic harmony. Just as God never abandons the faithful on earth, even in moments of chaos, so too does the King hold sway over his kingdom and ensure its wellbeing.

However, an important question that has arisen when considering the “excesses” of *Genesis* is the extent to which the overpowering visuals would have occluded the narrative and didactic content. The answer to this can be found if one considers the vividness and affective power as an example of the classical rhetorical tool of *enargeia*, a concept very similar to the *maniera* of mannerism as described by Vasari. In the tradition of the ancient and mediaeval sermons as well as Renaissance sacral art, we have found textual and visual *enargeia* used not to distract from important messages, but to reinforce them by encouraging the audience to connect on an emotional and individual level, to imagine themselves in the world of the Bible. In other words, the tapestries’ *enargeia* had the potential to strengthen the didactic content. This is precisely the phenomenon on which Orzechowski focuses throughout his *ekphrasis*. He connects his lush descriptions of the tapestries’ *enargeic* content to his moral and theological interpretations of the artworks, which he calls the “images that teach.”⁶¹⁷ Thus, through *enargeia*, the viewer could connect more deeply and personally to the “teachings” of *Genesis*, and, by proxy, to the patron and progenitor of these teachings.

While the Netherlandish grotesque borders may seem to disrupt the tapestries’ immersive and *enargeic* potential, a stylistic analysis has revealed that they, too, can be read as a part of the visual and didactic programme. Like mannerism, Netherlandish grotesque was a signifier of wealth and cultural capital, with the added benefit of the style’s novelty and foreign trendiness. Thus, *Genesis* was literally framed in the symbols of magnificence.

While the borders do visually interrupt the immersion of the world of *Genesis*, they support the overall thematic content. They are not separate from the narrative; rather, the

⁶¹⁷ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53.

relationship between the figural scenes and borders is that of *ergon* and *parergon*, in Kantian terms. As was the common approach in the early modern period, ornament interfaces with the main content. Most notably, the borders depict many “excesses,” especially in the amount of mythological deities, creatures, and greenery, while keeping everything contained in the strapwork. This is an echo of the overarching order versus chaos motif. However, while chaos in the figural scenes is negative, always associated with violence and destruction, the borders show a more positive side of chaos, associated with fertility and abundance. Thus, Sigismund wielded the lush imagery of grotesque ornament to convey magnificence while maintaining control over the commission’s didactic project. Moreover, the framing of sacred scenes in profane borders means that the theological and exegetical content of Genesis is unable to overshadow its political and image-creation work. All are at play in tandem. There is a constant visual reminder of the central presence of secular power and its inseparable relationship to religion.

All in all, a reading of the mannerist and grotesque elements of *Genesis* has revealed that, as immersive and visually overpowering as the tapestries were, their didactic content centred on Sigismund’s persona and messages has still emerged as a central focus, supported through the power of *enargeia*.

The next layer of reading *Genesis*, elucidated in the sixth step of the method, took us from the visual content to the narrative content: specifically, its religious and political messages in relation to the patron and his programme for kingship. Again, we have relied on Orzechowski’s *ekphrasis* and the inscriptions as crucial sources, while also considering a variety of other relevant secondary texts: exegetical, theological, political, and literary works circulating throughout Poland and the wider “republic of letters” with which both Sigismund and his audience would have been familiar. Using these texts, we have built on the foundations laid by Orzechowski, but have been able to go beyond the generic confines

of *ekphrasis* and reveal more of the possible theological and political messages in *Genesis*. Chapter Five introduced a triadic model for reading the didactic content of *Genesis*, which considered:

1. The Old Testament patriarchs as avatars and exemplars for Sigismund, particularly in terms of the princely virtues they displayed;
2. The moral messages for the patron, the viewer, and all of Sigismund's subjects;
3. Sigismund's religious and political agenda as expressed in the *Genesis* episodes.

Depending on the individual viewer's perspective, one or more (or all) of these were at play simultaneously.

Based on this triadic model and using both the *ekphrasis* and supplementary texts, several macro-themes have emerged from a reading of the narrative content of *Genesis*. First, we have seen a clear image forming of the patron himself. Through the virtues and deeds of the patriarchs, we are faced with a strong, independent leader with divinely-bestowed power, the metaphorical father of a nation. Indeed, the image of the Pentateuchal patriarchs as a quasi-dynastic lineage and the context of *Genesis* as the "book of the generations of Adam" is especially noteworthy, as it allowed Sigismund to tap into dynastic themes. In this way, he could gesture toward the concerns about his lack of an heir and draw on his own illustrious lineage (especially comparisons with his father, which we have already seen on a material level with the choice of the tapestry medium itself). In a metaphorical sense, Sigismund placed himself within the genealogy of the patriarchs themselves, a "dynasty" of chosen men of God and great earthly leaders, with Sigismund as their successor, blessed with the same virtues and granted the same proximity to God.

Like the patriarchs, the model for Sigismund found in the tapestries is a philosopher-king, a dual wielder of wisdom and power, a secular and confessional peacekeeper who uses erudition, piety, righteousness, and justice to lead his people through turbulent times. In addition, like Adam the First Farmer and Noah the First Vintner, the king must practise metaphorical “husbandry” over his own moral health and that of his kingdom. Notably, these virtues were all established staples of both Polish and wider European models for kingship, and can be found in other sixteenth century biblical sets mentioned in Chapter Two. Thus, we have once again seen Sigismund drawing on similar lexica to those of his princely peers: not only in terms of medium and genre, but narrative and messages as well. However, based on contemporary Polish discourse on kingship as well as the specific political and religious backdrop of the commission, these virtues were also particularly pertinent for a monarch in Sigismund’s somewhat-precarious position to highlight.

On the other hand, the tapestries contrast this image of the ideal ruler with the deadly sins of pride, wrath, and spiritual sloth (especially in loss of faith and despair) that are the downfall of earthly leaders who abuse their God-given power, and of their subjects by proxy. If one approaches *Genesis* not as a series but as a cycle, as proposed in Chapter Five, the princely virtues of the patriarchs appear to be enduring fixtures for any godly leader, based in God’s unchanging design for his earthly representatives. If mankind is destined for a recurring cycle of sin and redemption, death and rebirth, cataclysm and renewal, then kings must look to these biblical ur-models for guidance and inspiration.

Having crafted this model of a “most Christian prince” for himself, Sigismund could use the tapestries to convey how he viewed his role in statecraft. There are evident nods toward patrimonial rule, which is in keeping not only with contemporary treatises written for Sigismund (especially Modrzewski’s *De Republica*) but also with Sigismund’s own

actions in the first years of his reign, and the ensuing critiques of his absolutist tendencies from his opponents. On the other hand, the centring of “covenant moments” across the *Genesis* episodes mirrors the king’s need to form political “covenants,” in Modrzewski’s words, with his subjects and neighbours, regardless of creed.

The tapestries propose that faith and trust in God, along with strong independent leadership, is the only way to ensure order in chaos, a dichotomy echoed from the stylistic reading and one that has emerged as perhaps the foremost macro-theme of *Genesis*. From Sigismund’s perspective, this would have been the most important and expedient message to communicate to his viewer: to imagine the king in patriarchal terms, as he has presented himself through patriarchal avatars in the tapestries.

As a result of the established order that such a monarch could provide, the kingdom will be under the dual protection of God and king. In fact, the king is presented, via his patriarchal exemplars, as a divinely-ordained ruler, the earthly representative of God with a direct connection to him, tasked with maintaining equilibrium in the kingdom. Therefore, the viewer is exhorted to have faith and trust both in the monarch and in the God he serves. As a result, the kingdom will emerge from turbulent times as a kind of new chosen people, and will be blessed with renewal, abundance, prosperity, and peace.

The message of nonviolence and the goal of peace and stability above all is paramount to the *Genesis* project. Across the series, violence is shown as the direct result of disorder, imbalance, immorality, and loss of faith. Violence is not triumphant; rather, it is the harbinger of a nation’s downfall. The one outlier in this regard is *The Battle of the Amalekites*, the only example of military action by a patriarch in the series, which ends in a victory for Moses. However, according to the biblical story, the Israelites battled the Amalekites after the latter staged an unprovoked attack on them, framing the violence in

the tapestry as self-defence. The patriarchs, then, are never presented as the aggressors in warfare.⁶¹⁸

Through his proximity to God, the king, like the patriarchs, is the holder of great wisdom and knowledge of the divine. He is, in this sense, both a secular and a spiritual (perhaps even ecclesiastical) leader. In this vein, much of the theological and moral content of the tapestries centres around themes applicable both to the monarch and to his people. We have seen, for example, the theme of repentance from sin and the promise of redemption. In *Genesis*, this applies just as much to the “chosen people” *en masse* as to the patriarchs, who all have their moments of fallibility and subsequent reparation. We have also seen the overarching promise of a merciful, omnipotent, and omnipresent God, who never abandons his children even in their darkest hour, and is the ultimate source of order and balance. Finally, we have found the exhortation to, in Augustinian terms, keep one’s eyes on the City of God rather than the City of Man, both in holy ruling and in holy living.

In sum, this is the image and agenda that Sigismund projected through the narrative content of the tapestries. Depending on their background and perspectives, the individual viewer may have picked up on some of these allusions and not others. Regardless, these messages about princely virtue, Christian kingship, religious politics, and morality permeated the entire *Genesis* narrative, across all of its protagonists and episodes, and could be supported by common understandings of the Book of Genesis based on widely-read texts. Therefore, it is highly likely that the viewer would have grasped the overall didactic and moral programme.

⁶¹⁸ As this tapestry and the rest of the *Moses* set have been lost, it is impossible to offer any more commentary on how *The Battle of the Amalekites* frames violence, and how this may impact the overall message of nonviolence.

However, this leaves one aspect of *Genesis* unexplored, the seventh and final step of the method: the potential symbolism in its iconography, and whether this iconography would have bolstered or undermined the themes of the commission as discussed in the previous six steps.

Based on the early modern propensity toward image-thinking and the popularity of symbols, emblems, and hieroglyphs within the humanist episteme that was prevalent at Wawel, we have seen that the viewer of *Genesis* would have picked up on at least some examples of symbolism within the bodies, flora, and fauna of the tapestries. However, more so than in any other previous level of the reading, we must remember that Sigismund is unlikely to have had significant input into such minute details as the poses of certain figures or the inclusion of symbolic animals. Therefore, we have primarily considered the viewer's perspective in reading the iconography. We have also noted that there was no unified iconographic lexicon in the Renaissance: symbols had varying meanings in various contexts, and interpretations of certain symbols may have varied from viewer to viewer, adding a further level of nuance to an iconographic reading.

In general, the monumental bodies of the patriarchs, modelled on Greco-Roman sculpture and *cinquecento* sacral art, are most likely to have been read as signifiers of heroism, *gravitas*, power, princely virtue, and moral strength, all of which reflect onto Sigismund. As discussed in Chapter Six, the viewer may have been familiar with these references, for example, through the popular prints circulating across Europe, or, for the many who had studied in Italy, through seeing these works in person. We have contrasted the bodies of Sigismund's avatars with the unstable and chaotic bodies of the antagonists and background characters, which convey frailty, moral failing, and disharmony. This echoes the order versus chaos dichotomy found in the narrative and stylistic content. In addition, the Raphaelan influences in the physicality and physiognomy would have struck

a stylistic contrast with the older tapestries from his parents' collection, forming a visual parallel with the accession of a new king, the start of a new era for Poland, a son outside of his father's shadow. The numerous references to Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* cartoons in particular would have drawn a parallel with the "Flemishness" of other great tapestry sets inspired by these cartoons in the collections of the most renowned patrons. Thus, we have found yet another element supporting the magnificence and splendour of the commission, and of Sigismund by proxy.

Readings of the natural symbolism in *Genesis* have revealed further links to the meta-themes of the commission. Much like the fantastical beasts in the borders, the diverse fauna furthers the magnificence project by creating an abundant and exotic menagerie of God's creation, albeit one that never overtakes the narrative (figural) content of the scenes. Also similarly to the borders, these animals could maintain control over the didactic project by bolstering the messages of the tapestries, all under the guise of visual splendour. In the animals, we have found highlights of the princely virtues extolled by the patriarchs, underscores of the moral warnings in certain episodes, some possible subtle political and theological messages, and even the symbols of the Polish Crown. Despite the possible divergent meanings attributed to certain creatures, such as the recurrent lion and owl, there are no instances where a symbol could inject a subversive meaning, one that could complicate or contradict the message of the individual scene or the commission as a whole. Rather, the fact that many of these symbols could be interpreted differently encouraged deeper audience engagement with the artworks. They could serve as conversation pieces and eye-catching points of interest, gateways through which the audience could ponder the tapestry in terms of its moral, political, or theological content. While the natural symbols are the "supporting cast" of the figural scenes, they do not distract the viewer but redirect their attention toward the most important overarching themes.

In sum, at all levels of reading *Genesis* from medium and materiality to style, narrative, and iconography, we have found a cohesive didactic programme, one that can be expressed using the triadic model of image-creation, political/religious programme, and moral messages. This entire programme, based in the historical context of the commission, is in direct dialogue with Polish and European models of kingship, the intellectual and theological topos of Christian humanism, and the overall religious and political milieu of Sigismund's early reign. Whether in the vision of the patron or through the eyes of the audience, Sigismund's person and agenda has remained a central focus. All threads lead back to him, and to the bond between religion and power in his kingship.

Audience interpretation may have varied on certain details, such as the meanings of individual symbols or the most prominent moral messages of the stories. However, there are no elements that had the potential to destabilise the overall coherent programme. Nor is it necessary to assume that every viewer must have read *Genesis* according to the seven-step method outlined in this thesis in order to grasp the "full" meaning. Those with an above-average knowledge of Italian art, for example, may have found more interpretive substance in the Raphaelan bodies, while those with a robust exegetical education may have uncovered more of the moral exhortations in the patriarchs' stories. Even a viewer who gave the tapestries a cursory overview or sought no deeper meaning in the content would have understood the overarching project of magnificence and the crafting of Christian kingship through biblical imagery. As a tapestry commission the size of *Genesis* was, first and foremost, an exercise in crafting magnificence, even such a surface-level impression meant that a sizable piece of the image-creation "work" of the tapestries was a success.

On the other hand, a viewer who went beyond this reading in even one aspect (for example, exegesis or natural symbolism) would have grasped a more nuanced level of the project, one that suggested the precise kinds of princely virtues and political, religious, and

moral messages that the tapestries conveyed. Many of the series' initial viewers would have fallen in this category, considering both the level of education of social elites who would have been present at the wedding, as well as the context of the unveiling, a guided tour. Although the amount of guests and the atmosphere of a wedding celebration may have hindered the deepest of analyses, we have evidence that guests such as Orzechowski had the time and space to craft their own interpretations of the images before them upon only one viewing.

Because each level of a reading of *Genesis* reinforces the same image of Sigismund, the same political and religious themes, and the same morals, any level of interpretation would have achieved a similar result. For example, Orzechowski's reading in the *ekphrasis* based on Sigismund's magnificence, princely virtues, and the morals of the biblical stories would be complemented but not complicated by an analysis focusing on the style, or the iconography, or the contemporary political allusions. Peeling back each subsequent layer of *Genesis*, we have found new material that deepens and strengthens the themes and the image of Sigismund, but never material that problematises them. Thus, we can understand *Genesis* as a *speculum principis* for the patron, in the same way that Orzechowski did in his *ekphrasis*. Reading the series brings us closer, in his words, to "the mind and innate majesty of this greatest king, which can best be perceived through his commissions."⁶¹⁹

2. Recommendations for Further Study

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this study was not merely to use historical context to better understand the *Genesis* tapestries, rather to use the tapestries to better understand Sigismund and how he perceived his own reign in relation to religion. This raises the question: does a close reading of *Genesis* provide any new insight into Sigismund

⁶¹⁹ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 51.

as a historical figure, especially in terms of religious politics, that can be carried forward in further research?

Although Sigismund's personal piety was not a focus of this thesis, *Genesis* does seem to support the view held by a minority of historians that Sigismund's commitment to tolerance was not just a result of pragmatism but also of some level of personal conviction. On one hand, for a man so notoriously secretive about his beliefs, it is unlikely that *Genesis* was intended as an individual *credo*. On the other hand, there are elements of the tapestries' theological content which cannot be extricated from what we know of Sigismund's own religiosity. These are, most notably, the irenic overtones of the entire project, such as the insistence on peace and redemption amidst violence and discord. The theme of lineage and genealogy discussed in Chapter Five may also be applicable in this regard. As Alexandra Walsham has argued, the common sixteenth-century reading of the Book of Genesis as a book of generations was often used as an extended metaphor for the entire family of believers, whose lineage of faith could be traced back to Adam.⁶²⁰ In the context of *Genesis*, the visual chronicle of the generations of Adam is a nod toward the spiritual blood-ties of all Christians through their common ancestry and common foundations in the akinetic elements of their faith. All of these irenic elements are aligned both with Sigismund's religious policies and the personal convictions he expressed. As other scholars have argued, there was certainly an element of political and financial pragmatism to his irenicism: specifically, to avoid alienating any powerful faction or risk further destabilisation of the decentralised monarchy. However, considering that we find these same themes in a commission so closely linked to his own persona, Sigismund's own faith may not have been far removed from his religious politics.

⁶²⁰ Walsham, *Generations*, 42.

Moreover, the theological depth of *Genesis* and its function as one of Sigismund's primary tools of image-creation stands in contrast to the popular notion that Sigismund was disinterested in religion, with a piety that was tepid at best. The (relatively) theologically neutral ground of *Genesis* does not make a claim either for Sigismund's innate Catholicism or tacit Protestantism. However, it does make a strong claim both for the centrality of religion not just in his politics but in his desired image as a ruler, based on the models of Christian kingship he sought to emulate.

While Christianity in general was a core facet of Sigismund's princely persona, we need not see Sigismund's relationship to the Catholic Church as an institution and its doctrines as any less complex or murky than the general Polish populace's at this time. As Polish religious historians have consistently shown, the previous national myth of early modern Poland as a bulwark of Roman Catholicism is not based in historical reality. In its "Golden Age," Poland-Lithuania was a heterodox polity, a theatre of religious diversity where confessional boundaries were murky and malleable. In this light, Sigismund's religiosity is anything but controversial, and he need not be remembered as an anomaly in a lineage of devout Catholic kings. Rather, he is an apt reflection of a country whose religious milieu was anything but homogenous at the time: like the polity he ruled, he was a complex figure who grappled with faith both publicly and privately, and whose religiosity cannot be neatly pigeon-holed into one confession. Thus, as studies on interreligious relations and multi-confessionalism enjoy popularity in early modern Polish historical scholarship, it is worth reexamining Sigismund's role as one of the foremost players in the trajectory of the Polish Reformation, a crucial figure in understanding the nuances of early modern Polish kingship and religion.

Diverging from the dominance of textual studies in this historiographic field, it is also necessary to embark on more interdisciplinary research into early modern Polish

religion. While the Polish Reformation experienced its “religious turn” several decades ago, it is now time for a visual and material turn. Some avenues for future study may be the art collections of other important figures in the Reformation, such as bishops and noble patrons of Reformed churches, as well as more work on liturgical materials, devotionalia, and illuminations in manuscripts of various confessions.

This study has also argued that the *Genesis* tapestries were in need of a more thorough analysis through the lens of the “politics of tapestry,” as Thomas Campbell previously applied to Henry VIII’s collection. The discussion of *Genesis* must be historically contextualised and refocused to centre Sigismund as both an author-figure and the main subject. Moreover, the highly-relevant religious angle for Sigismund’s crafting of kingship cannot be ignored. This study’s other interventions into existing scholarship have included examinations of materiality, iconography, the choice of subjects, and the interpellation of the viewer through both style and narrative. However, the scope of this thesis has excluded any discussion of the tapestries’ use after 1553, either by Sigismund or his successors. This is potentially fertile ground for a reexamination of the didactic content of *Genesis* in the eyes of the viewers and the subsequent owners in very different contexts of display, stretching as far as the late eighteenth century.⁶²¹

Furthermore, this thesis has only discussed twenty (fifteen surviving) tapestries from Sigismund’s collection, of which nearly one hundred and forty pieces remain. The next logical step would be to embark on a closer reading of the *Tower of Babel* tapestries, the addition to *Genesis* delivered several years later, as well as the verdure and grotesques. According to several scholars such as Magdalena Piwocka and Carmen Cramer Niekrasz,

⁶²¹ Some groundwork in this regard has already been laid by Maria Hennel-Bernasikowa in “Arrasy Zygmunta Augusta świadkiem królewskich uroczystości,” in *Theatrum Ceremoniale*, 245-254, but more work (especially from the viewer’s POV) remains to be done.

the extant Jagiellonian tapestries can and should be read as one cohesive decorative programme for the king's residence.⁶²² This theory should be tested on both a visual and a thematic level. This would also open the question of whether the original *Genesis* pieces take on any different meanings in the context of the entire collection.

In general, further research on the Jagiellonian collection, especially in anglophone publications, would give these tapestries their rightful place amongst the heavily studied series in western Europe. This would also contribute to the larger project of ending the ghettoisation of Central-Eastern Europe in anglophone early modern history and art history, which newer generations of scholars are working to remedy.

For international historical and art historical scholarship, this thesis has argued that the methodology of the “politics of tapestry” must be reinvigorated, albeit in an updated form. While the questions asked by Thomas Campbell and his contemporaries about the role of Renaissance tapestry as princely propaganda have been satisfyingly answered, we must alter and expand the discussion to consider court tapestry as a stage for the negotiation of power, a nexus for patrons to make meaning, define kingship, and convey an agenda, all in dialogue with the interpretations of their viewers. Indeed, although Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* is a rarity in its length, descriptiveness, and affective rhetoric, I have mentioned in the Introduction that it is not the only surviving document on tapestry reception by viewers. In particular, I would encourage further study on the Madrid manuscript describing the iconography of the *Seven Deadly Sins*, as well as the other sources mentioned by Campbell (see footnote 25) from eyewitnesses to the collections of the Habsburgs, Valois, and Henry VIII. Even beyond these examples, it is crucial for tapestry researchers

⁶²² Piwocka, “Art of majesty,” 406; Nickrasz, “Woven Theatres,” 3, 29, 109.

to seek out such documents so that we may give proper consideration to the reactions of contemporary audiences, not just the programmes of the artists and patrons.

The seven-step method proposed in the Introduction is a possible way of examining meaning-making while avoiding the pitfalls of the top-down, “propaganda-centric” approach, considering the many material, stylistic, narrative, and iconographic levels of reading tapestry. This thesis has posited that all of these levels are relevant in reaching a full understanding of a tapestry’s didactic power. Moreover, as stated previously, this methodology is necessarily interdisciplinary. A study of tapestry in its fullest scope cannot ignore its historical context or its art historical significance.

For example, this method could certainly be applied to the aforementioned *Tower of Babel* tapestries, albeit with a different body of supporting sources. The case of *Babel* is significantly more opaque than the rest of *Genesis*, however: we have no dates for the start of the commission or its delivery, no *ekphrasis* to guide us, little in the way of natural symbolism, and much fewer references to the Babel story in contemporary political and theological literature than to the patriarchs covered in this thesis. On the other hand, *Babel* shares the same material and stylistic DNA as the rest of *Genesis*, and its story opens up new discussions about the nature of Christian kingship. Similarly to the story of Cain, *Babel* presents a kind of reverse *speculum principis*, a tragedy of princely virtues in the negative. Considering the relevance of the Babel story in Reformation literature, the tapestries’ most potent commentary may be on the religio-political landscape of Poland and, like the Noah set, the role of the king in a time of interconfessional strife. There would also be room for a reexamination of the concept of tyranny introduced in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, as Nimrod, the antagonist of *Babel*, is explicitly named a *tyrannus* in the inscriptions.

On the other hand, the seven-step method used in this thesis was developed specifically for figural tapestries. If we were to study the non-figural Jagiellonian tapestries (especially the verdure and grotesques), it would be necessary to assess whether all of these steps would still apply, or would need to be amended on a generic basis. For example, the sixth step would need to focus less on narrative and characterisation, and more on allusions to mythology, folklore, natural history, emblemata, etc., while the seventh step (iconography) would play a more dominant role.

In general, as we reconsider the politics of tapestry, we should first look to regions that have been largely ignored by previous studies. Poland-Lithuania is one of these, but many European collections have fallen to the wayside in favour of the Habsburg collections, which remain the dominant focus. In addition to reexamining lesser-known French and Italian collections, there is significant work to be done on Renaissance tapestry in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. Naturally, there is also a great need to expand these studies beyond Europe, although scholarship on tapestries from other continents may need an amended methodology to reflect the cultural and historical contexts of these regions.

One of the most fruitful avenues of study for new tapestry scholarship may be comparative research between collections, of which very few exist. Such studies could reveal the material, narrative, stylistic, and iconographic elements of the medium that were part of the overall tapestry language of kingship, and which elements were particular to a certain patron. This would give us more insight into the agency of rulers in crafting a unique vision for their commissions based on their personal image, agenda, and domestic context, versus adhering to the norms of European tapestry patronage and engaging in dialogue with their peers. Based on this study of *Genesis*, it appears that the trans-continental language of court tapestry is just as important in reading a series as individual or regional specificity, but this is a topic that requires further investigation.

Imbuing new tapestry studies with a religious angle could also be productive. In the past, Thomas Campbell has made convincing claims about Henry VIII's biblical tapestries as message-boards for his religious agenda when splitting from Rome and crafting the Church of England. *Genesis* reinforces the idea that biblical tapestries can be representative of the inextricable link between kingship and religion in the eyes of both rulers and their subjects. This link has been thoroughly studied in both historical and art historical studies on early modern kingship, albeit rarely using the tapestry medium. Based on these two examples of prominent biblical tapestry sets, it is worth reexamining biblical sets from other courts to reach a fuller understanding of the relationship between religion and power for early modern rulers. As *Genesis* shows us, these textiles can provide multi-layered insight into their patrons and the milieux in which they were displayed. Early modern tapestries are not only magnificent works of art, but rich historical sources for examining contemporary politics, theology, and the very nature of kingship.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of *Genesis* tapestry inscriptions

1. *Paradise Bliss*: “Deus Ade et Eve ne pomo ligni vite vescerentur preceperat. illi inobedientes eieci sunt Paradiso. GEN III.” (“God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life. They, disobedient, were exiled from Paradise.”)
2. *Adam Cultivates the Earth*: “Iubet Deus Adamo operari terram. GEN III” (“God commands Adam to cultivate the earth.”)
3. *Abel’s Sacrifice*: “Per fidem Abel meliorem obtulit Deo hostiam quam Cain. GEN IIII, HEBR XI.”⁶²³ (By his faith Abel made a better offering to God than Cain.”)
4. *Fratricide Conceived*: “Egrediamur foras.” (Let us go out into the field.”)
5. *Cain Kills Abel*: “Iniustus Cain iracundi[a]e suggestu iustum occidit Abelem. GEN IIII.” (Prompted by wrath, unjust Cain kills Abel.”)
6. *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*: “Cain a Deo correptus territus profugit. Profugientem Vindicta et Desperatio sequuntur. GEN IIII.” (Cain, seized by terror, flees from God. The fugitive is followed by Vengeance and Despair.”)
7. *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*: “Ob i[m]pioru[m] giga[n]tu[m] et tiiranoru [sic] mala exempla et viole[n]tias Deus minatur exitiu[m] mundo. GEN VI.” (Because of the evil deeds and violences of godless giants and tyrants, God threatens the world with its ruin.”)
8. *God Converses with Noah*: “Noe a[m]bulat cu[m]] Deo, cui Deus futuru[m] aperit diluviu[m] Arcamq[ue] servatricem facere iubet. GEN VI.” (Noah walks with God. God reveals the future Flood and commands him to build the protective Ark.”)
9. *The Building of the Ark*: “Noe per fidem ad salutem domus su[a]e aparat. Impii virum subsannantes riden[t]. GEN VII. HEBR XI.”⁶²⁴ (By his faith Noah builds an Ark for the salvation of his house. The godless mock him.”)

⁶²³ “Now faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not. For by this the ancients obtained a testimony. By faith we understand that the world was framed by the word of God; that from invisible things visible things might be made. By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice exceeding that of Cain, by which he obtained a testimony that he was just, God giving testimony to his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh.” Heb 11:1-4.

⁶²⁴ “But without faith it is impossible to please God. For he that cometh to God, must believe that he is, and is a rewarder to them that seek him. By faith Noe, having received an answer concerning those things which as yet were not seen, moved with fear, framed the ark for the saving of his house, by the which he condemned the world; and was instituted heir of the justice which is by faith.” Heb 11:6-7.

10. *The Animals Enter the Ark*: “Noe cu[m] omni familia o[m]nisq[ue] generis animalib[us] ingreditur Arcam ridetibus impiis. GEN VII.” (Noah enters the Ark with his whole family and all kinds of animals. The godless laugh at him.”)
11. *The Flood*: “Aquis inundantibus omnia perunt. Sola mediis in tempestatibus servatur Arca. GEN VII.” (With the flooding waters everything dies. Amidst the tempest, only the Ark is protected.”)
12. *The Animals Exit the Ark*: “Deus aquis cessantibus servatum Noe cum familia cu[u]tisq[ue] animalibus educit ex Arca. GEN VIII.” (With the waters resting, God leads the saved Noah and his family and all the animals out of the Ark.”)
13. *Noah’s Thanksgiving Sacrifice*: “Noe extructo altari offert Deo holocausta ex omnibus animantibus mundis. GEN VIII.” (“Having raised an altar, Noe makes God a burnt offering from all the creatures of the world.”)
14. *God Blesses Noah’s Family*: “Deus benedicit Noe eiusq[ue] filiis ostenditq[ue] eis posita in nubibus iridem signi aeterni cu[m] eis foederis. GEN IX.” (God blesses Noah and his sons and shows them a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the eternal covenant with them.”)
15. *Noah’s Drunkenness*: “Noe inebriatus iacens verendis nudis a iuniori filio ridetur quod reliquos puduit. GEN IX.” (The inebriated Noah is mocked by his younger son for his awful nakedness, which shames the others.”)

Appendix 2: Stanislaw Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* from *Panegyricus nuptiarum...*

Post coenas et post certamina et ludos, sternitur genialis lectus in interiore thalamo, rara et non alias uti ferebatur visa apud reges cortinarum magnificentia. In quibus ut ortus nostri autores, ita calamitatis parentes Adam et Eva ad effigiem veritatis stabant textu depicti, ambo per omnes cortinas auro praetextati. Et quoniam illae primorum parentum effigies preter ceteras res visendas admirabili fuerunt materia et opere, eas ad Cebetis instar demonstrabo, ut inde cum opus ipsum preclari artificis. Tum vero ingenium optimi regis pernoscatis, quod ex studio ipsarum rerum potissimum cernitur.

In prima cortina ad caput genialis lecti, parentum nostrorum contextu expressa foelicitatis cernebatur effigies, in qua foelices illi cum essent, non erubescabant nudi. Porro utriusque nuditas ita commovebat animos, ut viri Evae, Adamo vero lascive introingressae arriderent puellae. Aperta enim pube ille viri, haec foeminae sexum sinu ostendebant pleno.

Secunda cortina arboris pomum et serpentis referebat suasum, tanta arte, ut et serpentis fallacias, et Evae gulam, et Adae peccatum loqueretur ipsa cortina.

In tertia repraesentabatur exilium illud nostrum miserum et calamitosum. Hic fugam Adae et trepidationem Evae, tum Deum iudicem iratum perhorresceres, teque damnari una, ac de te sententiam ferri spectans diceres, ita omnibus umbris, ac partibus cortina peccatum Adae et iram Dei in nos exagerabat.

In quarta labor et dolor noster ob oculos proponebatur. Adam infoelix, mortali indutus pelle, patria pulsus, alienam colebat terram gravibus rastris. Eva vero proterva humilem horrida in pelle servabat casam, geminam circum sinum educans sobolem. Casae cespitem culmen congestum cernebatur, tum varie circumquaque, supraque insuetae volucres obstrepebant Evae, casaque volabant, peccatum exprobrantes, ac illi insultantes exuli.

In quinta gratum Deo Abelis sacrificium, Caini contra ingratum proponitur, impii fratris irarum causae. Videres furem Cain dentibus mordere manum pre iracundia, quam illi a tergo mulieris specie docta artificis textu depinxerat manus.

In sexta impius frater impetum facit iustum in Abelum, quem ille sinistra arripit vertice, dextra vero illum mento mactat equino, promptum ad caedem, et ad mortem paratum. Hic mira imitatione expressos cerneret instantis tyranni vultus, inflatas cervices, furiosos oculos, turbatam faciem, horrentes comas, ictus denique ipsos furiis agitados, ac in fratrem contortos.

In septima, coelo prospicientem in terras, ars incredibilis effinxerat iratum Deum. lacebat in conspectu Abelis cadaver tetrum cruore, ac pallore foedum, horribile visu. Ex adverso stabat adornans fugam sceleratus Cain, quem depraehensum caedis, consequitur iuxta

desperatio, deinde indignata ultio muliebri habitu. Praeclara effigies, quae docet impiorum fratrum tristes semper fuisse exitus.

In octava docetur, quam mali corvi malum sit ovum. Scite enim expresserat artifex, quam scelerata fuerit Caina soboles. Ibi videres virgines ad stuprum rapi ingenuas, violari matronas, diripi urbes, privatas eripi res, caedes edi, ac vi rem plane geri: ut haec soboles ilio dignissima fuerit patre.

In nona cortina versabatur vindex ille malorum, et fautor bonorum divina specie Deus, ambulans cum Noe, et diluvium illi pollicens, quo sceleratos illos esset obruturus. His formis, atque figuris motus modo, et lingua defuit, caetera ad veritatis effigiem proxime accedebant. Hic ornatus thalami fuit, tanto rege dignus.

Et quoniam fidelem navamus nunc operam eis, qui aut abfuerunt, aut haec propter reverentiam regii thalami non viderunt, addam de Noach patre reliquam historiam, eodem contextu descriptam. Quod ut faciam, educam vos e thalamo paululum. Deinde mox huc revertar, ac per intermedium vestibulum, legatione in Egyptum Mosis, eiusdem cum Pharaone colloquio. Tum Israelis transitu, data lege, ac bello Amalechico per cortinas auro pretextas amplissime exornatum in atrium vos introducam grande, quod ante vestibulum ipsius thalami est.

Et in primis iratum Deum Cainitis vobis ostendam. Noach patri de arca praecepta dantem, ac modum arcae praescribentem. Haec admirandi operis cortina pendebat ad caput athrii.

In secunda ita aedificabatur arca, ut modo non fabrorum, & securium exhaudirentur in opere sonitus.

In tertia cogebat in arcam animalia Noe, victumque comportabat, ac se suosque in arcam includebat.

In quarta, ruptas coeli cataractas, apertasque abyssus, ac effusam coelo hyemem videres, cum fulgurum, fulminumque vi, quibus impiam sternebat pavor sobolem. Quo in loco turpem fugam Cainitarum conscientiae testem cerneris, alios arbores redundantibus aquis inscendere, alios, editas rupes capere, alios vero altos montes petere. Plena tumultus haec fuerat cortina, perterre faciebatque spectatorem, ut is quoque stupidus ad tam horrendam effigiem metueret sibi a diluvio, arcamque cogitaret.

In quinta compositi fluctus aquis diminutis cernebantur. Tum victimae caese et admoti altaribus ignes, ac directum ad coelum sacrificium, placatusque Deus insignem in opere ostendebant artem, quam in cortina mirandum in modum condecorabant illa extinctorum hominum cadavera flaccida, et aquis putrida et rancida. Nihil unquam poterit a quoquam vero similis excogitari.

In sexta benedicatur Noach, irisque effulget coelo, signum pacis et charitatis Dei in nos, triplici specie: una aquea, diluvii horrendi memoriam nobis conservans. Altera pallida, crucem Ecclesiae nunquam defuturam pollicens. Tertia vero ignea, cuius non comparet finis, aeterna impiorum supplicia nobis designat.

Haec fuit cortinarum admirabilis ars, atque series, quae docent quo animo et qua mente Sigismundus Augustus sit praeditus, qui sibi tot et tantis exemplis in thalamo et in omni suo athrio iram vindicis Dei ob oculos proposuit, ut sive dormiat, sive vigilet et noctu et interdum illi regi regum subiectum se esse cum uxore sua cogitet, apud quem peccato sua sunt semper parata supplicia. Sed nos revertamur iam in thalamum, captosque regi nostro canamus hymenaeos.

Translation by C.A. Stackpole:

After the dinner and contests and games, the marriage bed was prepared in the bedchamber, in which hung magnificent tapestries, rare and not otherwise seen among kings. On them, our parents and the cause of our misfortune, Adam and Eve, stood as if they were alive, painted by the art of weaving, both woven in gold on all of the tapestries. And because the figures of our first parents, aside from other details worthy of note, stood out thanks to the remarkable nature of the materials and artistry, I will present them in the style of Cebes, so that you will come to know not only the works of an outstanding artist, but also the mind and innate majesty of the greatest king, which is most fully expressed through his commissioning of such things.

On the first tapestry, at the head of the marriage bed, you could see the image of the bliss of our forefathers presented in the textile, in which they, in their happiness, were not ashamed of their nakedness. And the nudity of both had such an effect on the viewers that the men smiled at Eve, and the girls who had come in smiled playfully at Adam. For his unclothed nature revealed his masculinity, and hers her femininity.

The second tapestry showed the fruit of the Tree and the temptation of the serpent with such artistry, that the tapestry itself spoke of the serpent's temptation and Eve's gluttony, and Adam's sin.

On the third our exile, miserable and disastrous, was shown. Here, you would recoil in terror at the sight of Adam's flight, Eve's trembling, and God the wrathful judge, so that, looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well. Such did the tapestry depict the sin of Adam and the wrath of God in all its shades and details.

On the fourth, our toil and pain was presented before our eyes. Miserable Adam, covered in an animal pelt, exiled from his homeland, cultivated foreign land with a heavy hoe. And

reckless Eve in a shaggy pelt guarded a lowly mud hut, watching two children next to her. You could see the roof of the hut covered in grass, and around and above all sorts of unusual birds raised their voices at Eve, recalling her sin and mocking her exile.

On the fifth, Abel's pleasing offering to God is shown and, conversely, the unpleasing offering of Cain, the cause of the godless brother's wrath. You could see how mad Cain bites his own hand in anger, which the skilled hand of the artist personified in the tapestry behind Cain's back in the form of a woman.

On the sixth, the godless brother strikes at righteous Abel, ready for the strike and prepared for death. Cain holds him by the head with his left hand, while killing him with a horse's jaw[bone] in his right hand. Here you could see the face of the fierce tyrant, wonderfully presented: the taut neck, the crazed eyes, the tormented face, the bristled hair, and finally the blow itself, dictated by anger and directed at his brother.

On the seventh, the wrathful God looking down at the earth is presented with unbelievable artistry. Before the eyes of the viewer are the remains of Abel, covered with gore, disfigured by pallour, terrifying to behold. Across from him stood the perpetrator, Cain, preparing to flee, and right behind him, catching him in the act of the murder, hurries Despair, followed by outraged Vengeance in the form of a woman. What a magnificent image that teaches us that the end of godless brethren is always sad.

On the eighth we have proof that the evil crow lays evil eggs. For the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain's progeny were. There you could see the rape of the noble virgins for the purpose of adultery [i.e. illicit sex], the violation of the matrons, the pillaging of cities, the theft of private property, the bloodshed and blatant violence, such that this progeny was most worthy of such a father.

On the ninth tapestry the avenger of evil and protector of good appeared in His divine form, walking with Noah and telling him of the Flood, in which He wanted to bury the aforementioned criminals. These forms and figures lacked only movement and speech, and the rest was presented as if they were alive. Such were the decorations of the wedding chamber, worthy of such a great king.

And because we now want to serve those with this work who were not there, or who did not enter the royal bedchamber out of respect, I will add the further story of the patriarch Noah, described in the same context. For this end, I will lead you for a moment out of the bedroom, wherein I will shortly return, and into an antechamber, richly decorated, with tapestries woven with gold showing Moses's embassy to Egypt and his meeting with Pharaoh, then the passage of the Israelites, the passing down of the law, and the war with the Amalekites. Then I will take you to a great hall next to the antechamber of the bedchamber.

And first, I will show you God, enraged at the progeny of Cain, as he gives the patriarch Noah instructions for the Ark and tells him how to build it. This tapestry of excellent handiwork hung at the head of the room.

On the second tapestry, the building of the Ark was presented in such a way that one could almost hear the voices of the workers and the clanging of axes at work.

On the third, Noah led the animals into the Ark, loaded provisions, and closed himself and his family into the Ark.

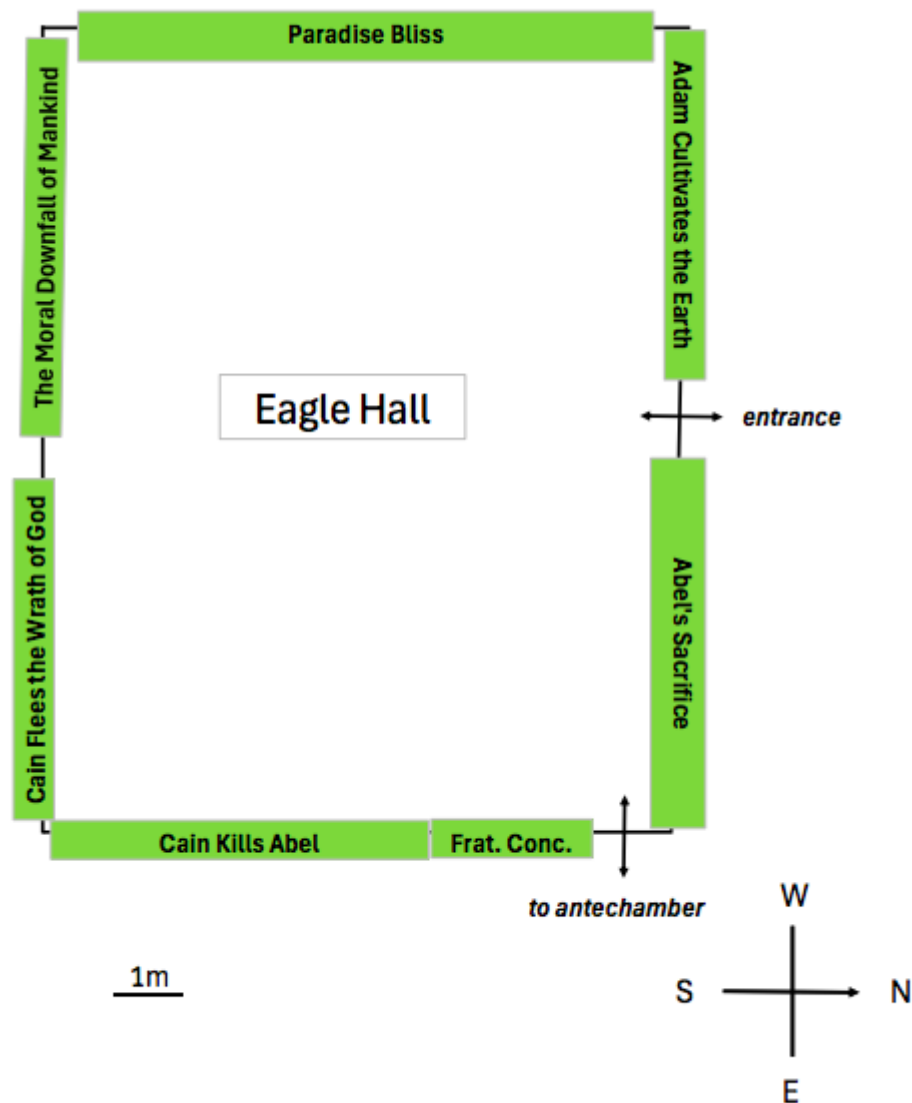
On the fourth you could see the heavens split with a downpour, the open abyss, and the skies pouring out a storm with thunder and lightning. Struck with fear, the godless progeny fell to the ground. Here, you could see the shameful flight of Cain's progeny, a sign of their guilty consciences, some climbing trees in the overflowing waters, others climbing exposed rocks, and others seeking the high mountains. This tapestry was so full of confusion and so terrified the viewer that he himself, struck dumb at such a horrible sight, feared for himself in the flood and longed for the Ark.

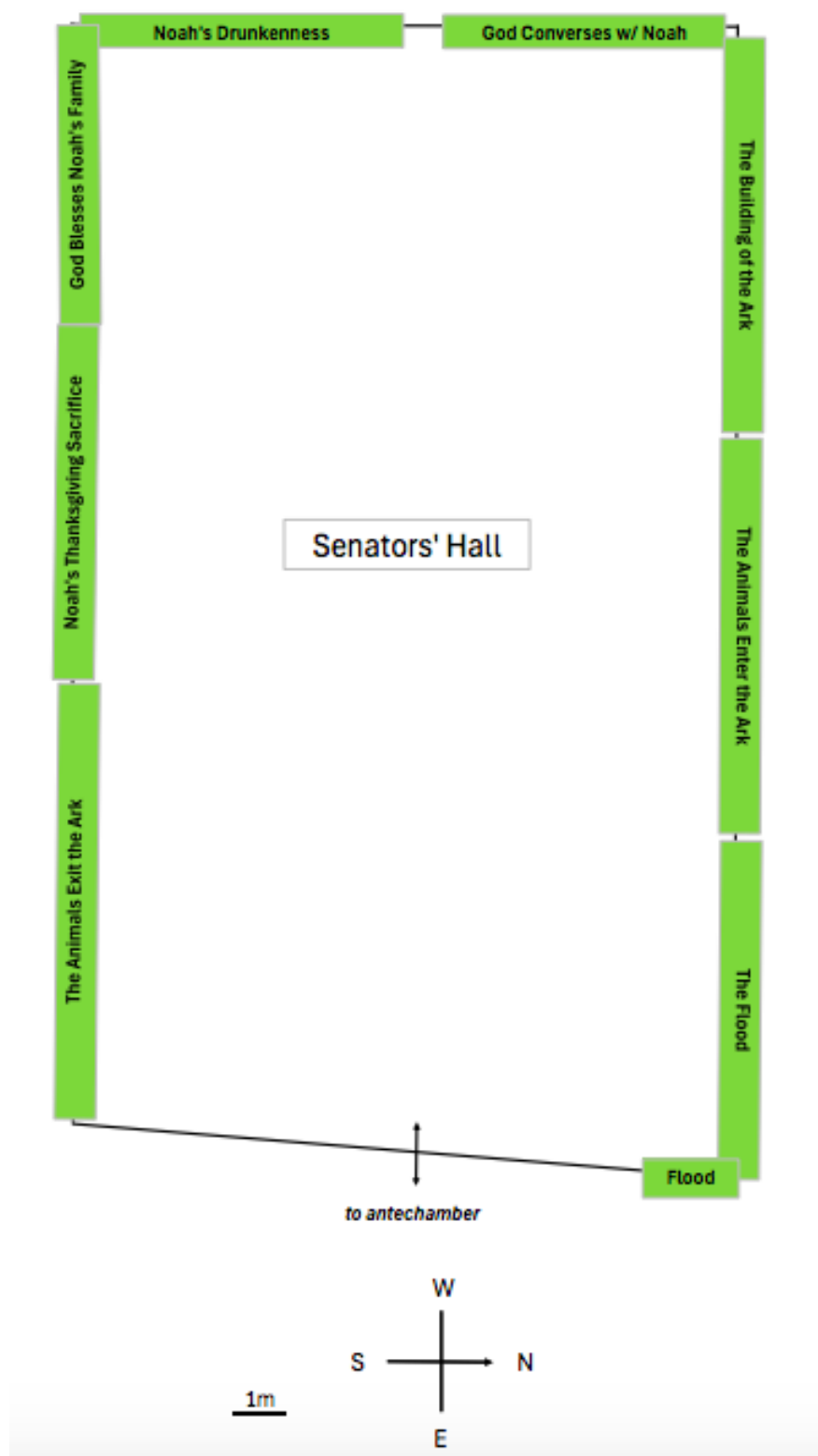
On the fifth you could see the calm waves after the retreat of the waters. With illustrious artistry it presented the killing of animals as an offering, the lighting of fires on the altars, carrying the smoke of prayers straight to the heavens and merciful God. And the particular ornaments of this tapestry were the flaccid remains of the drowned, rotting in the water and putrid. No one will ever be able to imagine something closer to reality.

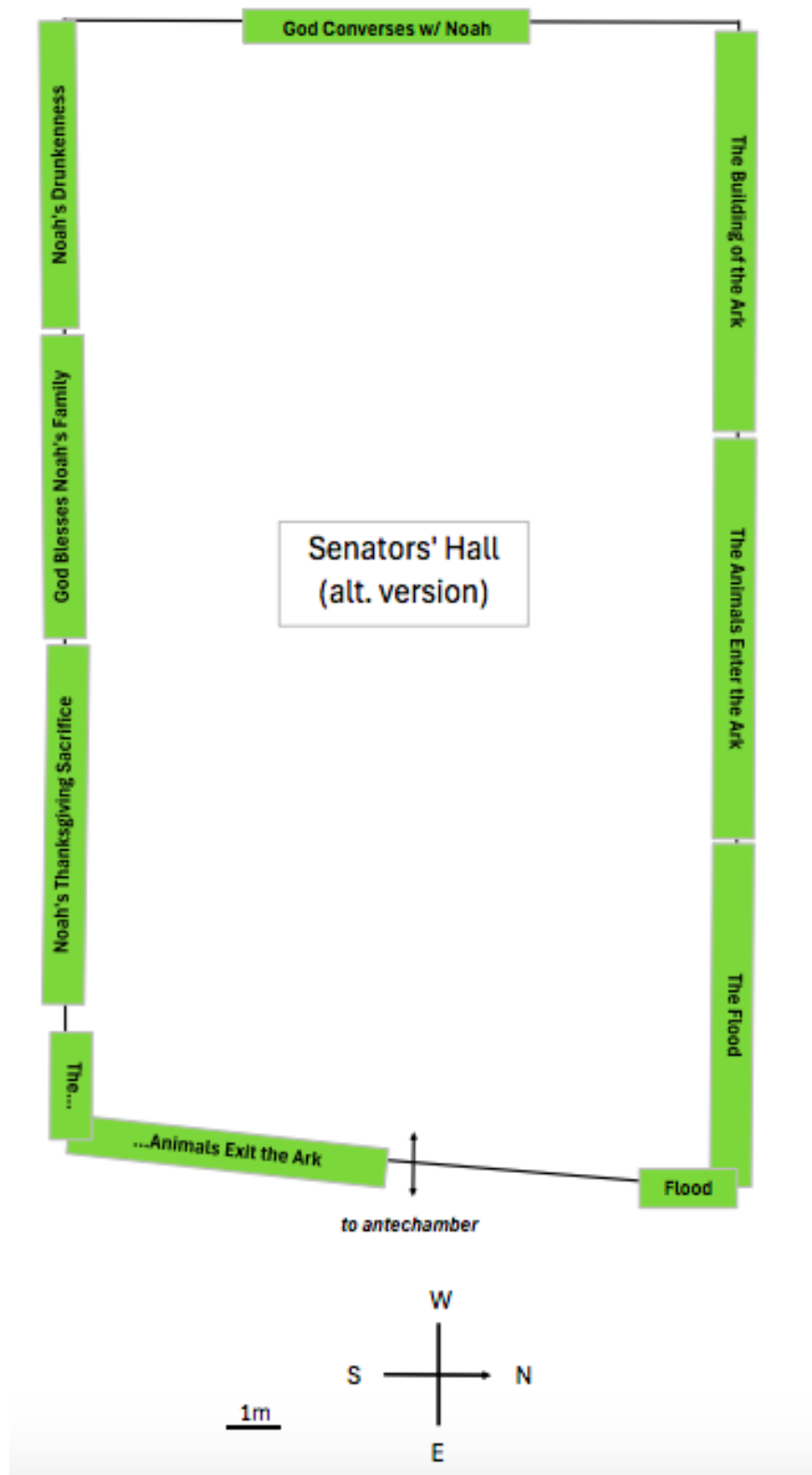
On the sixth, Noah receives a blessing and a rainbow shines in the sky, as a sign of peace and God's love for us, and in three forms: one colour, like water, maintaining our memory of the terrible flood. The second pale-coloured, promising that the Church will never be without its cross. The third like fire, which never ends, showing us the eternal punishment awaiting the godless.

Such was the admirable art and sequence of the hangings which demonstrate the spirit and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been endowed, he who with such and sundry examples in the wedding chamber and in each of his rooms placed himself beneath the eyes of a wrathful God, so that, whether waking or sleeping, by night or by day, he and his wife would contemplate the King of Kings above them, in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin.

Appendix 3: Maps of possible *Genesis* hanging locations at their unveiling (31 July 1553) and discussion







Marcin Fabiański has explained in numerous works that it is impossible to know with certainty which rooms were used for the *Genesis* unveiling for several reasons. Firstly, we have very few extant sources on the functions of rooms within Wawel in this period,⁶²⁵ and secondly, we know based on accounts of other royal weddings in the decades preceding Sigismund and Catherine's that the nuptial bedchambers were not necessarily located within the same set of rooms or even on the same floor of the castle.⁶²⁶ Thirdly, because we do not know for certain how many of the *Genesis* tapestries were present for the unveiling (based on Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*, it is possible to argue that up to three of the tapestries were not delivered on time, which will be discussed in Chapter Three), it is difficult to draw firm conclusions on which rooms hosted which tapestries based on architectural dimensions. It is also important to note that the tapestries' current dimensions may differ somewhat from the originals, as their modern versions are reconstructions after significant destruction and deconstruction during over two centuries in the Tsarist collection.⁶²⁷

That said, Fabiański has proposed two of the most likely locations for the *Genesis* unveiling, based on Orzechowski's ekphrastic tour of the rooms, the chronology he presents, and the hints he gives as to their placement within the rooms, as well as certain conclusions that can be drawn from the dimensions of the rooms and the tapestries. First of all, based on the height of the tapestries, they could only fit on the second (main) floor of the castle, the *piano nobile*, which was used for ceremonial functions and also housed some of the royal apartments. The two areas on this floor that were large enough to host the series and not otherwise occupied by private apartments were the Eagle Hall and Senators' Hall

⁶²⁵ Fischinger and Fabiański, *Dzieje*, 128.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, 129, 131.

⁶²⁷ Hennel-Bernasikowa and Piwocka, *Katalog*, 24-32..

with an adjoining antechamber in the north wing, and the Tournament Hall and Heads' Hall with an adjoining antechamber in the east wing.⁶²⁸

The only point that would make the location of the Tournament and Heads' Hall impossible is the presence of two tapestries in the *Genesis* set that Orzechowski omits: *Fratricide Conceived* and *Noah's Drunkenness*. Based on calculations of the dimensions of the tapestries and the walls in both sets of rooms, these two tapestries could only fit into the Eagle and Senators' Halls.⁶²⁹ In this thesis, I have adopted the stance that it is more likely that these two textiles were indeed unveiled along with the rest of the series. As I argued in Chapter Three, Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* (the text from which this conundrum arises) was not intended as a forensic eyewitness account but as a rhetorical text within a specific genre. The absence of these two tapestries is not the only strange "error" in the text: he divides *Paradise Bliss* into three tapestries and *God Converses with Noah* into two, while we know that these episodes were contained in one hanging each. Moreover, he conflates *The Animals Exit the Ark* and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, although no scholar has suggested the possibility that either of these two tapestries were absent at the unveiling.

Since we have proof that Orzechowski did duplicate tapestries in his account, it is certainly within the realm of possibility that he omitted *Fratricide Conceived* and *Noah's Drunkenness* as well. Additionally, considering that the author had only one opportunity to view the tapestries before writing the *ekphrasis*, late at night during a revelrous wedding feast, it seems much more likely that the omissions are simply more "errors" or instances

⁶²⁸ Ibid., 132-133.

⁶²⁹ In the case of *Fratricide Conceived*, If it were in the Tournament Hall, it would have to be rolled up at least 10 cm, or the tapestry next to it, *Cain Kills Abel*, would have to be rolled up the same amount. In this case, however, the door to the next room housing the Moses set would be blocked. In the Eagle Hall, however, *Fratricide* would fit easily onto the same wall as *Cain Kills Abel* with 1.61 m to spare for the door. In the case of *Noah's Drunkenness*, there would likewise not be enough wall space in the Head's Hall to accommodate it, allowing for one door leading from the antechamber into the hall. For measurements of all of the rooms in question, see Fabiański, *Wokół wawelskiego dworu*, 204.

of creative liberty, and not an indication that Sigismund displayed an incomplete set at his wedding.⁶³⁰ In order to resolve the conundrum, we must ask ourselves if it is more likely that Orzechowski made these omissions, taking all of these factors into account, or that the tapestries did not exist at the 1553 wedding at all.

As I have included *Fratricide Conceived* and *Noah's Drunkenness* in my analysis, I have necessarily assumed that the locations of the *Genesis* unveiling were the Eagle Hall and the Senators' Hall with the adjoining antechamber. However, even if one discards these two tapestries from the discussion and adopts the alternate theory of the Tournament/Heads' set of rooms, this would not significantly impact my overall argumentation regarding the link between the function of space and the impact of the tapestries. In both cases, the first two subsets of *Genesis* (Adam and Eve/Cain and Abel) hung in a wedding bedchamber, regardless of its location. Both the Heads' Hall and the Senators' Hall were the grandest rooms at Wawel, both were used for similar governmental and ceremonial functions, and both had been used for past royal weddings.

Although it may be impossible with the evidence we have to arrive at a definite answer regarding the location of the *Genesis* unveiling, or to definitively state whether the aforementioned tapestries were present at the wedding, we may attempt to answer one further question that arises from Orzechowski's ekphrasis: was *God Converses with Noah* in the bedchamber or in the larger hall with the other *Noah* tapestries? This question stems from Orzechowski's repetition of the tapestry in his account of the bedchamber and in the larger hall.

⁶³⁰ It is noteworthy that *Fratricide Conceived* features a slightly different border design than the rest of the set (although *Noah's Drunkenness* has an identical design to the rest), but this does not necessarily mean that it was commissioned separately or from different artists. In fact, we know it was produced in the same workshop, that of Jan van Tieghem, as other tapestries that Orzechowski does identify at the unveiling (see list of tapestries above): *Cain Kills Abel* (the next tapestry in the biblical chronology), *The Animals Exit the Ark*, and *God Blesses Noah's Family*.

In answering this question, we must also keep in mind that the tapestries may have been somewhat larger (i.e. longer) in their original state before their deconstruction and reconstruction, so we must leave a margin of some additional centimetres when considering if they would fit on the walls. With this in mind, it is only possible that *God Converses with Noah* hung in the larger hall, as none of the possible bedchambers would be big enough in perimeter to host it, even assuming that *Fratricide Conceived* was not present. In addition, *God Converses* fits narratively with the rest of the Noah tapestries in the larger hall, and Orzechowski specifically notes that “this tapestry of excellent handiwork hung at the head of the room [the hall].” It seems unlikely that he would have made such a point of stating the location of this tapestry within the room in error.⁶³¹

In the end, Fabiański leans toward the east wing rooms (the Tournament/Heads’ Halls) rather than the north wing (the Eagle/Senators’ Halls) as the more likely location of the *Genesis* unveiling. Firstly, he argues that the Senators’ Hall was often used for dancing and masques, and therefore would not have been used to unveil the Noah subset.⁶³² However, the evidence that he uses to support this comes from a treasury record from February 1543 for hardware fittings “*ad theatra stubae magnae RMtis*,” and for tables for the same room: “*tempore nuptiarum pro scamnis ad salam magnam 4, qualibet 18 ulnarum*.”⁶³³ The nuptials in question would be those of Sigismund and his first wife in May 1543, but as Fabiański himself mentions, there was no known precedent for the rooms at Wawel used for certain aspects of royal weddings. There is no evidence that any masques or dances took place in the Senator’s Hall at the 1553 wedding. Fabiański also draws on a

⁶³¹ Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 54. Fabiański has also convincingly refuted the possibility that Orzechowski did not make a mistake, and that there were in fact two separate tapestries (one of God walking with Noah, likely the extant *God Converses*, and one lost tapestry of God conveying the instructions for the Ark), in *Wokół wawelskiego dworu*, 202.

⁶³² Specifically, it hosted a ball for Bona Sforza and Sigismund the Old’s wedding in 1518, and a spectacle for Sigismund and Elizabeth’s wedding in 1543. It also may have served as a ballroom for this latter wedding, but the dancing may also have been held in the Head’s Hall. *Ibid.*, 195

⁶³³ Fischinger and Fabiański, *Dzieje*, 133.

quote from Łukasz Górnicki's *Dzieje w Koronie Polskiej* (c. 1595-1603) describing the wedding. Although the author was present at the festivities, this text was written half a century after the wedding, and was not a work intended as a historical chronicle but as a colourful memoir of life at court, making it quite dubious as an accurate eyewitness account. Another possible point in favour of Fabiański's theory is a mention he makes later in this same cited work that the Heads' Hall was used to display tapestries for Sigismund and Elizabeth's wedding in 1543, but again, this was not a room that was designated for such a function at all royal weddings at Wawel.⁶³⁴

On the other hand, there are a few points in favour of the Eagle/Senators' set of rooms. In addition to the possible presence of the three tapestries Orzechowski omits, which would exclude the Tournament/Head's option entirely, we may also examine the dimensions of *Paradise Bliss*. One of the largest and most extravagant of the tapestries, it was clearly intended as a centrepiece which covered the wall behind the marital bed, according to Orzechowski's account.⁶³⁵ If the tapestry hung in the Tournament Hall, around 1.7 m of the tapestry's length would have had to have been rolled up or rolled onto the adjacent wall in order to fit. If it hung in the Eagle Hall, it would have only had to be rolled up around 25 cm to accommodate for a covered fireplace in the corner.⁶³⁶ It seems more likely that such a tapestry would be given a place of display that best showcased its attributes, especially as it framed the marriage bed. On the other hand, as Fabiański has convincingly shown, there is essentially no way that *The Flood*, arguably the most magnificent of the entire series, would not have been displayed across two adjacent walls

⁶³⁴ Ibid., 147

⁶³⁵ Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.

⁶³⁶ Fabiański, *Wokół wawelskiego dworu*, 207.

to accommodate for the door into the larger hall.⁶³⁷ Therefore, it is not entirely impossible that *Paradise Bliss* could have been similarly hung.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 215, 218.

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Summary

In the late 1540s, King Sigismund II Augustus of Poland commissioned a set of twenty figural tapestries from Brussels depicting the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses. The *Genesis* series, designed by Michiel Coxcie, was unveiled at Sigismund's wedding to Catherine of Austria, daughter of Ferdinand I, in July 1553. As the last male heir of the Jagiellon dynasty, Sigismund was a polarising figure due to his enigmatic religious convictions, his scandalous clandestine marriage to a Lithuanian noblewoman, his perceived weaknesses in statecraft, and suspicions of his absolutist inclinations. When he became sole ruler of Poland-Lithuania in 1548, Sigismund had to establish himself as a capable and powerful monarch amidst a climate of domestic and international instability. This thesis argues that the commissioning of the *Genesis* series was an attempt to convey such an image to his most influential subjects and peers, with a particular focus on the role of religion in rule. This thesis explores the question: what can the Jagiellonian *Genesis* tapestries reveal about the relationship between religion and power in Sigismund Augustus's kingship?

Among the many avenues one could take in studying Sigismund's image creation and religio-political messaging, the *Genesis* series is a relevant yet essentially untapped source. While the tapestries are recognised by leading researchers such as Thomas Campbell as one of the stand-out achievements in the medium, they have been largely neglected by anglophone scholarship. The attention they have received from Polish and foreign publications has rarely touched on their relationship to the person and politics of Sigismund Augustus. Considering that Sigismund's private and public relationship to religion remains a point of contention among historians, it is even more relevant to explore sources that shed light on this aspect of his kingship. Furthermore, studying *Genesis* through the lens of early modern Polish religious history and the Polish Reformation is an attempt to introduce more visual and material sources into a field that has been dominated by intellectual history, with a focus on texts above all.

Using an interdisciplinary historical/art historical methodology, this thesis considers both the vision of the patron and the audience's reception. On one hand, using the established approach of Campbell, Frances Yates, and other pioneers of tapestry studies, it focuses on Sigismund as a kind of author-figure for the series. A patron had input in every step of the commissioning process, and his vision was a driving force in the artists' and weavers' creations. On the other hand, this thesis treats tapestry as a space of bilateral meaning-making rather than as princely "propaganda," which has been the prevailing methodology in the most noteworthy tapestry studies to date. In fact, *Genesis* is one of the few series whose contemporary reception can be examined in depth due to the existence of an eyewitness account: an *ekphrasis* by the rhetorician Stanisław Orzechowski, who was present at the 1553 unveiling. By considering *Genesis* as a case of situational authorship, we find that the meaning of artwork is contextually dependent, differs between potential audience members, and is a collaborative effort between patron and viewer.

Adapting the various methods used by previous tapestry scholars, this thesis employs a seven-step method for a reading of (figural) tapestry:

1. The significance of the medium itself
2. The intentions behind the timing of the commission (political, religious, etc.)
3. The significance of the chosen genre in a domestic and European context
4. The materiality of the medium and its effect on reception
5. The style of the tapestries and its affective and didactic potential
6. The moral, political, and religious messages in the narrative
7. The use of symbolic iconography

Alongside Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*, the layers of this reading are based on exegetical, theological, political, literary, and artistic sources. The interweaving of historical and art historical methods is vital to this thesis: history can tell us about the political/religious contexts of commissions and the intellectual culture surrounding them, but art history reveals the impact of materiality, style, and iconography, including in the context of other artworks.

Beginning with the first step of the method, it is well-established that the medium of tapestry in the mid-sixteenth century was a signifier of magnificence, wealth, cultural capital, and princely (especially dynastic) power. This is due to its cost, its convenient portability, and its history as the highest form of court art for decades. The fact that *Genesis* was a comparatively huge set of entirely new designs (*editiones principes*) woven with silver and gold made them even more luxurious, rivalling the most expensive tapestry commissions of the Holy Roman Emperors.

The timing of the commission is just as crucial to consider. Around 1547 (the most probable estimated date of the start of the commissioning process), Sigismund was about to succeed his ailing father. A young monarch, the son of an illustrious dynasty, poised to usher in a prosperous new reign had every reason to celebrate his magnificence with such grand designs. On the other hand, *Genesis* can easily be read as an attempt to prop up an image of strength and political acumen at a time when the Polish monarchy itself was in a tenuous triangular relationship between the Church and the nobility. At this time, the Polish Reformation was reaching its zenith, the executionist movement was beginning to germinate, and Sigismund's own reputation was far from spotless.

Meanwhile, on the continent, the biblical genre was enjoying immense popularity among princely patrons, especially for its potential to convey thinly-veiled political and theological messages through ubiquitous stories and characters. *Genesis* is unique in that it featured stories rarely or never covered in other tapestry sets at the time, while still using familiar generic and narrative lexica.

When embarking on a reading of *Genesis*, arguably the most important primary source is the *ekphrasis*. While all of its generic and rhetorical constraints must be kept in mind, as

well as the author's personal motivations, this is a rich text that combines a moral interpretation of *Genesis* with a portrait of the patron. Orzechowski focuses on the princely virtues of the patriarchs, the morals of the parables for the king and his subjects, the magnificence of the textiles themselves, and how all of these reflect Sigismund's "spirit and mind" as the deviser of the project.

On a material level, *Genesis* astounds the viewer with its size, a manifestation of royal supremacy. Moreover, its strategic original placement in rooms associated with the king's body natural and body politic solidify the connection between patron and art. The tapestries created an artificial environment allowing the viewer to be surrounded by the world of *Genesis*, in which they could more deeply contemplate the messages contained therein—messages that, in large part, pertained to Sigismund's person and agenda.

The mannerist style of *Genesis* was the court style *par excellence*, a visual language of princely power. In addition, the "excesses" of size, emotion, physicality, and dynamism in mannerism have profound affective potential for the viewer, perhaps even allowing them to connect with the content on a more emotional and personal level through the use of *enargeia*. Crucially, these "excesses" never descend into a chaos that could overwhelm the narrative. This introduces us to the motif of order versus chaos throughout *Genesis*, maintained here through symmetry and compositional balance. This gestures both toward the protection of God over the faithful, as well as a king over his subjects in turbulent times. The Netherlandish grotesque style of the borders can be read in a similar vein: they represent worldliness and cultural capital as a novel and expensive form of ornament, but also support the didactic content of the main scenes. In the borders, we find "excesses" in the mythological beings and beasts, all kept in check by the strapwork, as well as symbolic references to the stories they frame.

The narrative reading of *Genesis* is based on a triadic model, comprising the patriarchs as exemplars for Sigismund, the moral messages, and the political/religious agenda. Certain elements may have been more apparent than others depending on the viewer's background. Overall, *Genesis* presents Sigismund as a strong monarch and "father" of a nation who rules with princely virtue, and keeps peace amidst chaos. It exhorts the viewer to have faith both in God and their king, who should be both a spiritual and secular leader. The virtues *Genesis* promotes, such as strength, wisdom, piety, moral temperance, and especially faith, were all part of Polish and European models for kingship, and were expedient for Sigismund to reference in his circumstances. Reading *Genesis* as a cycle of recurring motifs presents its model for Christian kingship as an unchanging and divinely-ordained fixture for rulers throughout the ages, as relevant for Moses as for Sigismund.

Finally, the iconography of *Genesis* adds nuance to but ultimately supports this narrative reading. The early modern tendency toward visual thinking meant that contemporary viewers of *Genesis* would have picked up on some of the conspicuous symbolism placed throughout, although Sigismund himself is unlikely to have had much input into these minute details. The protagonists' bodies, based on Greco-Roman sculpture, are signifiers

of *gravitas*, heroism, and moral and physical strength—naturally, intended as a reflection on Sigismund. Although there was no codified symbolic lexicon in the Renaissance, the most common meanings attributed to the flora and fauna found in *Genesis* support the messages contained therein, particularly princely virtues and moral exhortations. There are no instances where a diverging interpretation of a symbol could contradict the scene’s messaging; rather, the symbols could be conversation pieces encouraging deeper engagement with the tapestries.

All of these layers of reading *Genesis* create a unified programme centred on Sigismund’s image-creation as a Christian prince and his approach to political and religious rule in his early reign. Regardless of whether a viewer was more drawn to one level of interpretation or another, or which message stood out more than others, the overall programme of magnificence and imagining Christian kingship in a mid-sixteenth-century Polish context remained cohesive and comprehensible. *Genesis*, then, should be read as a mirror for Sigismund.

Looking forward, the findings of this thesis argue for a return to studies of the “politics of tapestry,” albeit with an increased focus on reception. We can and should use tapestry to delve deeper into the images that monarchs wished to project, and how these were received by their subjects and peers. This thesis also shows the need for more visual and material culture studies within Polish Reformation history. Finally, it argues that religion was a crucial part of Sigismund’s image and politics, and calls for more scholarly reconsideration of his central place within the religious history of the period.

Streszczenie

Pod koniec lat 40. XVI wieku, król Zygmunt II August zlecił wykonanie serii dwudziestu arrasów figuralnych w Brukseli, przedstawiających historię Adama i Ewy, Kaina i Abla, Noego, oraz Mojżesza. Seria *Genesis*, zaprojektowana przez Michiela Coxciena, została zaprezentowana podczas ślubu Zygmunta z Katarzyną Habsburżanką, córką Ferdynanda I, w lipcu 1553 r. Jako ostatni męski potomek dynastii Jagiellonów, Zygmunt był postacią budzącą kontrowersje ze względu na swoje enigmatyczne przekonania religijne, skandaliczne potajemne małżeństwo z litewską szlachcianką, postrzeganą słabość w zarządzaniu państwem, oraz podejrzenia o dążenia do absolutyzmu. Kiedy w 1548 r. objął pełną władzę nad Polską i Litwą, musiał ugruntować swoją pozycję jako zdolny i potężny monarcha w warunkach niestabilności wewnętrznej i międzynarodowej. Niniejsza praca argumentuje, że zlecenie serii *Genesis* było próbą ukazania takiego wizerunku najbardziej wpływowym poddanym i rówieśnikom króla, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem roli religii w jego rządach. Główne pytanie badawcze brzmi: co arrasy *Genesis* mogą nam powiedzieć o relacji między religią a władzą w królowaniu Zygmunta Augusta?

Wśród licznych możliwych kierunków badania wizerunku Zygmunta i jego religijno-politycznego przesłania, seria *Genesis* pozostaje istotnym, choć zasadniczo niewykorzystanym źródłem. Chociaż arrasy te są uznawane przez czołowych badaczy, takich jak Thomas Campbell, za jedno z najwybitniejszych osiągnięć w tej dziedzinie, anglojęzyczne badania w dużej mierze je pomijają. Nieliczne analizy polskie i zagraniczne rzadko odnoszą się do ich związku z osobą i polityką Zygmunta Augusta. Biorąc pod uwagę, że prywatne i publiczne relacje Zygmunta z religią pozostają przedmiotem sporu wśród historyków, tym bardziej warto zbadać źródła rzucające światło na ten aspekt jego królowania. Ponadto analiza *Genesis* w kontekście historii religii w Polsce w okresie nowożytnym oraz polskiej reformacji to próba wprowadzenia większej liczby źródeł wizualnych i materialnych do dziedziny zdominowanej przez historię intelektualną, w której przeważają teksty.

Wykorzystując interdyscyplinarną metodologię z historii i historii sztuki, niniejsza praca analizuje zarówno wizję patrona, jak i odbiór przez widzów. Z jednej strony, posługując się podejściem wypracowanym przez Campbella, Frances Yates i innych pionierów badań nad arrasami, koncentruje się na Zigmuncie jako swego rodzaju „autorze” serii. Patron miał wpływ na każdy etap procesu zamówienia, a jego wizja była siłą napędową dla artystów i tkaczy. Z drugiej strony, praca ta traktuje arrasy jako przestrzeń dwustronnego (bilateralnego) tworzenia znaczeń, a nie jedynie jako „propagandę” książęcą, co było dominującym podejściem w najbardziej znaczących badaniach nad arrasami do tej pory. W przypadku *Genesis* mamy rzadką możliwość zbadania odbioru współczesnego dzięki zachowanej relacji naocznego świadka – ekfrizie autorstwa retora Stanisława Orzechowskiego, który uczestniczył w prezentacji arrasów w 1553 r. Analiza *Genesis* jako przykład sytuacyjnego autorstwa ujawnia, że znaczenie dzieła sztuki jest zależne od

kontekstu, różni się w zależności od odbiorcy, i jest efektem współpracy między patronem a widzem.

Adaptując różne metody stosowane przez wcześniejszych badaczy arrasów, niniejsza praca posługuje się siedmioetapową metodą analizy arrasów figuralnych:

1. Znaczenie samego medium;
2. Intencje stojące za wyborem momentu zamówienia (polityczne, religijne itd.);
3. Znaczenie wybranego gatunku w kontekście krajowym i europejskim;
4. Materialność medium i jej wpływ na odbiór;
5. Styl arrasów oraz ich potencjał afektywny i dydaktyczny;
6. Moralne, polityczne i religijne przesłania narracji;
7. Wykorzystanie symbolicznej ikonografii.

Oprócz ekfrazy Orzechowskiego, kolejne warstwy analizy opierają się na źródłach egzegetycznych, teologicznych, politycznych, literackich, i artystycznych. Przenikanie się metod z dziedzin historii i historii sztuki jest kluczowe dla tej pracy: historia wyjaśnia konteksty polityczne i religijne zamówień oraz kulturę intelektualną otaczającą je, podczas gdy historia sztuki ujawnia wpływ materialności, stylu i ikonografii, również w kontekście innych dzieł sztuki.

Już na pierwszym etapie metody ustalono, że w połowie XVI wieku medium arrasu było symbolem wspaniałości, bogactwa, kapitału kulturowego i władzy książęcej (szczególnie dynastycznej). Wynikało to z jego kosztów, wygodnej przenośności, oraz historii jako najwyższej formy sztuki dworskiej. Fakt, że *Genesis* było stosunkowo ogromnym zestawem całkowicie nowych projektów (*editiones principes*) utkanych ze srebra i złota, czynił je jeszcze bardziej luksusowym, rywalizującym z najdroższymi zamówieniami cesarzy Świętego Cesarstwa Rzymskiego.

Znaczenie momentu zamówienia jest równie istotne. Około 1547 r. (najbardziej prawdopodobna data rozpoczęcia procesu zamówienia) Zygmunt miał objąć pełną władzę po schorowanym ojcu. Młody monarcha, syn wspaniałej dynastii, gotowy rozpocząć pomyślne rządy, miał wszelkie powody, by celebrować swoją wspaniałość takimi projektami. Z drugiej strony *Genesis* można odczytywać jako próbę zbudowania wizerunku siły i przenikliwości politycznej w czasie, gdy polska monarchia znajdowała się w kruchej, trójkątnej relacji między Kościołem, szlachtą i królem. W tym czasie polska reformacja osiągała swój szczyt, ruch egzekucyjny zaczynał się rozwijać, a reputacja Zygmunta daleka była od nieskazitelnej.

Tymczasem na kontynencie gatunek biblijny cieszył się ogromną popularnością wśród książęcych mecenasów, szczególnie ze względu na swoją zdolność do przekazywania subtelnych politycznych i teologicznych przesłań za pośrednictwem powszechnie znanych opowieści i postaci. *Genesis* jest dziełem wyjątkowym, ponieważ przedstawia historie rzadko lub nigdy wcześniej niepokazywane w innych cyklach arrasowych, jednocześnie korzystając ze znanych form narracyjnych i gatunkowych.

Najważniejszym źródłem do analizy *Genesis* to ekfrazą Orzechowskiego. Choć trzeba uwzględnić jej ograniczenia gatunkowe i retoryczne, jak również osobiste motywacje autora, jest to bogaty tekst, który łączy moralną interpretację Księgi Rodzaju z portretem patrona. Orzechowski skupia się na książęcych cnotach patriarchów, moralnych przesłaniach przypowieści skierowanych do króla i jego poddanych, wspaniałości samych tkanin, oraz na tym, jak wszystkie te elementy odzwierciedlają „duszę i umysł” Zygmunta jako twórcy projektu.

Na poziomie materialnym, *Genesis* zdumiewa widza swoimi rozmiarami, które stanowią manifestację królewskiej supremacji. Co więcej, strategiczne umiejscowienie arrasów w komnatach związanych z „ciałem naturalnym” i „ciałem politycznym” króla wzmacniało związek między patronem a dziełem sztuki. Arrasy tworzyły sztuczne środowisko, pozwalające widzowi otoczyć się światem *Genesis* i głębiej kontemplować zawarte w nim przesłania — w dużej mierze odnoszące się do osoby Zygmunta i jego agendy politycznej.

Manieryzm—styl, którym charakteryzuje się *Genesis*—był stylem dworskim *par excellence*, wizualnym językiem władzy książęcej. Co więcej, „nadmiary” manieryzmu w zakresie rozmiaru, emocji, fizyczności, i dynamizmu mają głęboki potencjał afektywny dla widza, być może nawet pozwalając mu na bardziej emocjonalne i osobiste połączenie z treścią poprzez użycie *enargeia*. Co istotne, te „nadmiary” nigdy nie przechodzą w chaos, który mógłby przytłoczyć narrację. Wprowadza to motyw porządku kontra chaosu, utrzymywany w *Genesis* dzięki symetrii i równowadze kompozycyjnej. Wskazuje to zarówno na ochronę Boga nad wiernymi, jak i króla nad jego poddanymi w niespokojnych czasach. Podobnie można interpretować niderlandzki groteskowy styl bordiur: reprezentuje on światowość i kapitał kulturowy jako nowatorska i kosztowna forma ornamentyki, ale jednocześnie wspiera dydaktyczną treść głównych scen. W bordiurach znajdujemy „nadmiary” w postaci istot i bestii mitologicznych, utrzymywanych w ryzach przez pasy ornamentalne, a także symboliczne odniesienia do przedstawianych historii.

Analiza narracji *Genesis* opiera się na modelu triadycznym, obejmującym patriarchów jako wzorce dla Zygmunta, moralne przesłania, oraz agendę polityczno-religijną. Niektóre elementy mogły być bardziej widoczne niż inne w zależności od pochodzenia widza. Ogólnie rzecz biorąc, *Genesis* przedstawia Zygmunta jako silnego monarchę i „ojca” narodu, który rządzi z książęcą cnotą i utrzymuje pokój w czasach niestabilnych. Wzywa widza do wiary zarówno w Boga, jak i w swojego króla, który powinien być jednocześnie przywódcą duchowym i świeckim. Cnoty promowane w *Genesis*, takie jak siła, mądrość, pobożność, moralna powściągliwość, a zwłaszcza wiara, były częścią polskich i europejskich modeli królewskości, i były dla Zygmunta szczególnie użyteczne w jego sytuacji. Odczytywanie *Genesis* jako cykl powtarzających się motywów przedstawia model chrześcijańskiej królewskości jako niezmienny i bosko ustanowiony wzór dla władców na przestrzeni wieków, tak samo aktualny dla Mojżesza, jak i dla Zygmunta.

Ikonografia *Genesis* dodaje niuansów, ale ostatecznie wspiera tę narrację. Nowożytna skłonność do myślenia wizualnego oznaczała, że współcześni widzowie *Genesis* z pewnością zauważali widoczną symbolikę zawartą w tkaninach, choć Zygmunt raczej nie

miał dużego wpływu na te drobne szczegóły. Ciała protagonistów, wzorowane na rzeźbie grecko-rzymskiej, są oznaką odwagi, heroizmu oraz moralnej i fizycznej siły — co naturalnie miało stanowić odbicie samego Zygmunta. Choć w renesansie nie istniał skodyfikowany leksykon symboliczny, najczęstsze znaczenia przypisywane florze i faunie przedstawionej w *Genesis* wspierają zawarte w nim przesłania, szczególnie cnoty książęce i moralne nawoływania. Nie ma przypadków, w których odmienna interpretacja symbolu mogłaby zaprzeczyć przekazowi sceny; raczej symbole mogły stanowić temat do rozmów, zachęcając do głębszego zaangażowania w arras.

Wszystkie te warstwy analizy *Genesis* tworzą spójny program skoncentrowany na kreowaniu wizerunku Zygmunta jako chrześcijańskiego księcia, oraz jego podejściu do rządów politycznych i religijnych na początku swojego panowania. Niezależnie od tego, która warstwa interpretacji bardziej przyciągała uwagę indywidualnego widza, lub jakie przesłanie było dla niego bardziej wyraziste, ogólny program wspaniałości i wyobrażenia chrześcijańskiego królowania w polskim kontekście połowy XVI w. pozostawał harmonijny i zrozumiały. *Genesis* należy zatem odczytywać jako „lustro,” tkane *speculum principis*, dla Zygmunta.

W przyszłości wnioski tej pracy wskazują na potrzebę powrotu do badań nad „polityką arrasów,” choć z większym uwzględnieniem odbioru. Arrasy powinny być wykorzystywane do głębszego badania wizerunków, które monarchowie pragnęli przekazać, oraz ich odbioru przez poddanych i rówieśników. Praca ta pokazuje także konieczność większego uwzględnienia badań nad kulturą wizualną i materialną w historii polskiej reformacji. Ostatecznie podkreśla, że religia była kluczowym elementem wizerunku i polityki Zygmunta Augusta, wzywając do ponownego przemyślenia jego centralnego miejsca w historii religijnej tego okresu.

Samenvatting

In de late jaren 1540 gaf koning Sigismund II Augustus van Polen opdracht voor een reeks van twintig figuratieve wandtapijten uit Brussel, die de verhalen van Adam en Eva, Kaïn en Abel, Noach en Mozes uitbeelden. De *Genesis*-serie, ontworpen door Michiel Coxcie, werd onthuld tijdens Sigismunds huwelijk met Catharina van Oostenrijk, dochter van Ferdinand I, in juli 1553. Als de laatste mannelijke erfgenaam van de Jagiellon-dynastie was Sigismund een polariserend figuur vanwege zijn mysterieuze religieuze overtuigingen, zijn schandalige clandestiene huwelijk met een Litouwse edelvrouw, zijn vermeende zwakheden in staatsmanschap en verdenkingen van zijn absolutistische neigingen. Toen hij in 1548 de enige heerser van Polen-Litouwen werd, moest Sigismund zichzelf vestigen als een capabele en krachtige monarch te midden van een klimaat van binnenlandse en internationale instabiliteit. Deze scriptie stelt dat de opdracht voor de *Genesis*-serie een poging was om een dergelijk imago over te brengen aan zijn invloedrijkste onderdanen en tijdgenoten, met bijzondere aandacht voor de rol van religie in zijn heerschappij. Deze scriptie onderzoekt de vraag: wat kunnen de Jagiellon *Genesis*-wandtapijten onthullen over de relatie tussen religie en macht in het koningschap van Sigismund Augustus?

Onder de vele mogelijke invalshoeken bij het bestuderen van Sigismunds beeldvorming en religieus-politieke boodschap is de *Genesis*-serie een relevant maar grotendeels onaangeboord onderwerp. Hoewel de wandtapijten door toonaangevende onderzoekers zoals Thomas Campbell worden erkend als een van de opmerkelijke prestaties in het medium, zijn ze grotendeels verwaarloosd door Engelstalige wetenschap. De aandacht die ze hebben gekregen in Poolse en buitenlandse publicaties heeft zelden hun relatie tot de persoon en politiek van Sigismund Augustus belicht. Aangezien Sigismunds private en publieke relatie tot religie een punt van discussie blijft onder historici, is het des te relevanter om bronnen te verkennen die licht werpen op dit aspect van zijn koningschap. Bovendien is het bestuderen van *Genesis* door de lens van de vroegmoderne Poolse religieuze geschiedenis en de Poolse Reformatie een poging om meer visuele en materiële bronnen te introduceren in een vakgebied dat wordt gedomineerd door intellectuele geschiedenis, met een nadruk op teksten boven alles.

Met behulp van een interdisciplinair historische/kunsthistorische methodologie beschouwt deze scriptie zowel de visie van de opdrachtgever als de ontvangst door het publiek. Enerzijds, met gebruik van de gevestigde benadering van Campbell, Frances Yates en andere pioniers op het gebied van wandtapijstudies, richt het zich op Sigismund als een soort auteur-figuur van de serie. Een opdrachtgever had invloed op elke stap van het productieproces, en zijn visie was een drijvende kracht achter de creaties van de kunstenaars en wevers. Anderzijds behandelt deze scriptie wandtapijten als een ruimte voor bilaterale betekenisvorming in plaats van als vorstelijke "propaganda," wat de overheersende methode is geweest in de meest opmerkelijke studies over wandtapijten tot nu toe. In feite is *Genesis* een van de weinige series waarvan de contemporaine ontvangst in detail kan worden onderzocht dankzij het bestaan van een ooggetuigenverslag: een ekphrasis van de redenaar Stanisław Orzechowski, die aanwezig was bij de onthulling in

1553. Door *Genesis* te beschouwen als een geval van situationeel auteurschap ontdekken we dat de betekenis van kunstwerken contextueel afhankelijk is, verschilt tussen potentiële toeschouwers en een gezamenlijke inspanning is tussen opdrachtgever en kijker.

Door gebruik te maken van verschillende methoden die door eerdere wandtapijtgeleerden zijn toegepast, hanteert deze scriptie een zevenstappenmethode voor het lezen van (figuratieve) wandtapijten:

1. De betekenis van het medium zelf
2. De intenties achter het moment van opdrachtgeving (politiek, religieus, enz.)
3. De betekenis van het gekozen genre in een binnenlandse en Europese context
4. De materialiteit van het medium en het effect ervan op de receptie
5. De stijl van de wandtapijten en hun affectieve en didactische potentieel
6. De morele, politieke en religieuze boodschappen in het narratief
7. Het gebruik van symbolische iconografie

Naast Orzechowski's ekphrasis zijn de lagen van deze analyse gebaseerd op exegetische, theologische, politieke, literaire en artistieke bronnen. De verweving van historische en kunsthistorische methoden is essentieel voor deze scriptie: geschiedenis kan ons vertellen over de politieke en religieuze contexten van opdrachten en de intellectuele cultuur eromheen, terwijl kunstgeschiedenis inzicht geeft in de impact van materialiteit, stijl en iconografie, ook in de context van andere kunstwerken.

Uitgaande van de eerste stap van de methode is het algemeen erkend dat het medium wandtapijt in het midden van de zestiende eeuw een teken was van pracht, rijkdom, cultureel kapitaal en vorstelijke (vooral dynastieke) macht. Dit komt door de hoge kosten, de gemakkelijke verplaatsbaarheid en de geschiedenis van wandtapijten als de hoogste vorm van hofkunst gedurende decennia. Het feit dat *Genesis* een relatief enorme reeks geheel nieuwe ontwerpen (*editiones principes*) was, geweven met zilver en goud, maakte ze nog luxueuzer en vergelijkbaar met de duurste wandtapijtopdrachten van de keizers van het Heilige Roomse Rijk.

Het moment van opdrachtgeving is minstens zo cruciaal om te overwegen. Rond 1547 (de meest waarschijnlijke geschatte datum waarop het opdrachtproces begon) stond Sigismund op het punt zijn zieke vader op te volgen. Een jonge monarch, zoon van een illustere dynastie, die een welvarend nieuw bewind zou inluiden, had alle reden om zijn pracht te vieren met zulke grootse ontwerpen. Aan de andere kant kan *Genesis* gemakkelijk worden gelezen als een poging om een beeld van kracht en politiek vernuft te versterken in een tijd waarin de Poolse monarchie zich in een preciaire driehoeksverhouding bevond tussen de Kerk en de adel. In deze periode bereikte de Poolse Reformatie haar hoogtepunt, begon de executionistische beweging wortel te schieten, en was Sigismunds eigen reputatie verre van vlekkeloos.

Ondertussen genoot het bijbelse genre op het continent enorme populariteit onder vorstelijke opdrachtgevers, vooral vanwege het potentieel om subtiele politieke en

theologische boodschappen over te brengen via alom bekende verhalen en personages. *Genesis* is uniek omdat het verhalen bevatte die zelden of nooit voorkwamen in andere wandtapijtreksen uit die tijd, terwijl het toch gebruik maakte van vertrouwde genres en narratieve lexica.

Bij het interpreteren van de *Genesis*-serie is de ekphrasis wellicht de belangrijkste primaire bron. Hoewel rekening moet worden gehouden met de generieke en retorische beperkingen van de tekst, evenals de persoonlijke motivaties van de auteur, biedt deze een rijke inhoud die een morele interpretatie van *Genesis* combineert met een portret van de opdrachtgever. Orzechowski richt zich op de vorstelijke deugden van de aartsvaders, de morele lessen van de parabels voor de koning en zijn onderdanen, de pracht van de wandtapijten zelf, en hoe al deze elementen Sigismunds "geest en verstand" als bedenker van het project weerspiegelen.

Op materieel niveau imponeert *Genesis* de toeschouwer door zijn omvang, een manifestatie van koninklijke suprematie. Bovendien versterkte de strategische oorspronkelijke plaatsing van de wandtapijten in ruimtes die verband houden met het natuurlijke lichaam en het politieke lichaam van de koning, de band tussen de opdrachtgever en de kunst. De wandtapijten creëerden een kunstmatige omgeving waarin de toeschouwer werd omringd door de wereld van *Genesis*, waardoor deze de boodschappen die erin besloten lagen – die grotendeels betrekking hadden op Sigismunds persoon en agenda – intenser kon overdenken.

De maniëristische stijl van *Genesis* was de ultieme hofstijl, een visuele taal van vorstelijke macht. De "excessen" van omvang, emotie, fysiek en dynamiek binnen het maniërisme hebben een diepgaand affectief potentieel voor de toeschouwer, waardoor deze misschien zelfs een emotionele en persoonlijke verbinding met de inhoud kon aangaan door het gebruik van *enargeia*. Cruciaal is dat deze "excessen" nooit ontaarden in chaos die het narratief zou kunnen overweldigen. Dit leidt ons naar het motief van orde versus chaos dat door heel *Genesis* terugkomt, hier behouden door symmetrie en compositorische balans. Dit wijst zowel op Gods bescherming van de gelovigen als op een koning die over zijn onderdanen waakt in onrustige tijden. De Nederlands-groteske stijl van de randen kan op een soortgelijke manier worden gelezen: deze vertegenwoordigt wereldlijkheid en cultureel kapitaal als een nieuwe en dure vorm van ornament, maar ondersteunt ook de didactische inhoud van de hoofdtonelstukken. In de randen zien we "excessen" in de mythologische wezens en beesten, allemaal in toom gehouden door bandwerk, evenals symbolische verwijzingen naar de verhalen die ze omlijsten.

De narratieve interpretatie van *Genesis* is gebaseerd op een triadisch model, bestaande uit de aartsvaders als voorbeelden voor Sigismund, de morele boodschappen en de politieke/religieuze agenda. Bepaalde elementen waren wellicht duidelijker voor sommige toeschouwers, afhankelijk van hun achtergrond. Over het algemeen presenteert *Genesis* Sigismund als een sterke monarch en "vader" van een natie die met vorstelijke deugd regeert en vrede bewaart te midden van chaos. Het spoort de toeschouwer aan om zowel vertrouwen te hebben in God als in hun koning, die zowel een spiritueel als een seculier

leider zou moeten zijn. De deugden die *Genesis* promoot – zoals kracht, wijsheid, vroomheid, morele matigheid en vooral geloof – waren allemaal onderdeel van Poolse en Europese modellen voor koningschap en waren voor Sigismund van groot belang om in zijn omstandigheden te benadrukken. Het lezen van *Genesis* als een cyclus van terugkerende motieven presenteert zijn model voor christelijk koningschap als een onveranderlijke en door God verordende richtlijn voor heersers door de eeuwen heen, net zo relevant voor Mozes als voor Sigismund.

Ten slotte voegt de iconografie van *Genesis* nuance toe, maar ondersteunt uiteindelijk deze narratieve interpretatie. De vroegmoderne neiging tot visueel denken betekende dat tijdgenoten van *Genesis* veel van de opvallende symboliek in het werk zouden hebben opgepikt, hoewel het onwaarschijnlijk is dat Sigismund zelf veel invloed had op deze minutieuze details. De lichamen van de hoofdrolspelers, geïnspireerd op Grieks-Romeinse beeldhouwkunst, staan symbool voor gravitas, heroïsme en morele en fysieke kracht— uiteraard bedoeld als een weerspiegeling van Sigismund. Hoewel er in de Renaissance geen gecodificeerde symbolische lexicon bestond, ondersteunen de meest voorkomende betekenissen die worden toegeschreven aan de flora en fauna in *Genesis* de boodschappen in de tapijten, met name vorstelijke deugden en morele aansporingen. Er zijn geen voorbeelden waar een afwijkende interpretatie van een symbool de boodschap van een scène zou kunnen tegenspreken; in plaats daarvan konden de symbolen als gespreksonderwerpen dienen die een diepere betrokkenheid bij de wandtapijten stimuleerden.

Al deze lagen van interpretatie van *Genesis* creëren een samenhangend programma dat draait om Sigismunds beeldvorming als christelijke prins en zijn benadering van politiek en religieus leiderschap tijdens de vroege jaren van zijn regeerperiode. Ongeacht of een toeschouwer zich meer aangetrokken voelde tot het ene interpretatie niveau dan tot het andere, of welke boodschap het meest opviel, bleef het algehele programma van pracht en de verbeelding van christelijk koningschap in een Pools midden-zestiende-eeuws kader consistent en begrijpelijk. *Genesis* moet daarom worden gelezen als een “spiegel” voor Sigismund.

Vooruitblikkend pleiten de bevindingen van deze scriptie voor een hernieuwde studie van de "politiek van wandtapijten," zij het met een sterkere focus op receptie. Wandtapijten kunnen en moeten worden gebruikt om dieper in te gaan op de beelden die monarchen wilden projecteren, en hoe deze werden ontvangen door hun onderdanen en tijdgenoten. Deze scriptie toont ook aan dat er behoefte is aan meer studies naar visuele en materiële cultuur binnen de Poolse Reformatiegeschiedenis. Tot slot betoogt zij dat religie een cruciaal onderdeel was van Sigismunds imago en politiek, en roept op tot meer wetenschappelijke heroverweging van zijn centrale rol binnen de religieuze geschiedenis van die periode.

Curriculum Vitae

Christina Anne Stackpole was born in Vancouver, Canada, in 1996. After growing up between Canada and Poland, she began her undergraduate studies at the University of St. Andrews in 2014, before transferring to McGill University in 2017. She obtained her bachelor's degree in History with a minor concentration in World Cinema in 2020, and was the recipient of the C.C. Bayley Prize for academic excellence for a graduating student from the History Department. In 2021, she received her master's degree in History from University College London, where she wrote her dissertation on the *Genesis* tapestries under the supervision of Benjamin Kaplan. In September 2021, she began her PhD in History at Leiden University, under the supervision of Judith Pollmann, Stijn Bussels, and Felicia Rosu. Her thesis was entitled *Imagining Christian Kingship in Sigismund II Augustus's Genesis Tapestries (1553)*. During the three years of her PhD research, she completed a course in Scientific Integrity, and contributed articles to the *Central European Yearbook* and a chapter to a forthcoming edited volume on sixteenth century Polish monarchy. She also presented papers at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference (2022, Minneapolis), the LUCAS & Cambridge University Doctoral Conference (2023, Leiden), and the Cambridge Humanities Doctoral Conference (2024, Cambridge). In addition, she gave three guest lectures on her research at the Polish Academy of Sciences and the University of Warsaw in 2024. In January 2025, she began a five-year postdoctoral position at the University of Warsaw as a researcher in the ERC Advanced Grant project *Scholars, Animals, Images, Geographies, and the Arts: De-exoticizing Eastern Europe in the Early Modern Period*. Independently, she is preparing a taxonomical database of flora and fauna in early modern Flemish tapestry.

Propositions

1. Sigismund II Augustus played a vital role in the commissioning of the *Genesis* tapestries.
2. Through the stories of the Old Testament patriarchs, the *Genesis* tapestries make an argument for the importance of faith: in God and in the King.
3. As *Genesis* shows, the tenets of Christian kingship were central in the creation of Sigismund's princely persona in the 1550s.
4. The style, materiality, narrative, and iconography of *Genesis* work in tandem to promote a cohesive didactic programme.
5. Renaissance tapestry is better understood as a convergent space of meaning-making between patron and audience (and artist), rather than as a form of visual propaganda.
6. Our study of the conception and reception of tapestry series would benefit from including more eyewitness accounts.
7. The incorporation of visual/material studies into Polish Reformation scholarship would offer new insight into the field.
8. A comprehensive reading of figural tapestries should include their historical/political context alongside examinations of their genre, narrative, iconography, style, and materiality.
9. As the turbulent history of *Genesis* until the present day demonstrates, European cultural institutions must continue the important work of art repatriation.
10. A three-year study of sixteenth-century textiles may occasionally lead even the most stalwart researcher to unravel.