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

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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 *imagines* 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 *imagines*: 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 *imagines* of virtues and twenty *imagines* of "various figures," referring to figural tapestries.[224] This last set of drawings may have been the *imagines* of the full Genesis series, which numbered twenty upon their initial unveiling.

[224] Janicki, "*Imagines*," 142-145.

Fig. 7 Michiel Coxcie, *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-Kuizinienė 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-Kuizinienė, *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] Jedzinskaitė-Kuizinienė, *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.

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[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]

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[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]

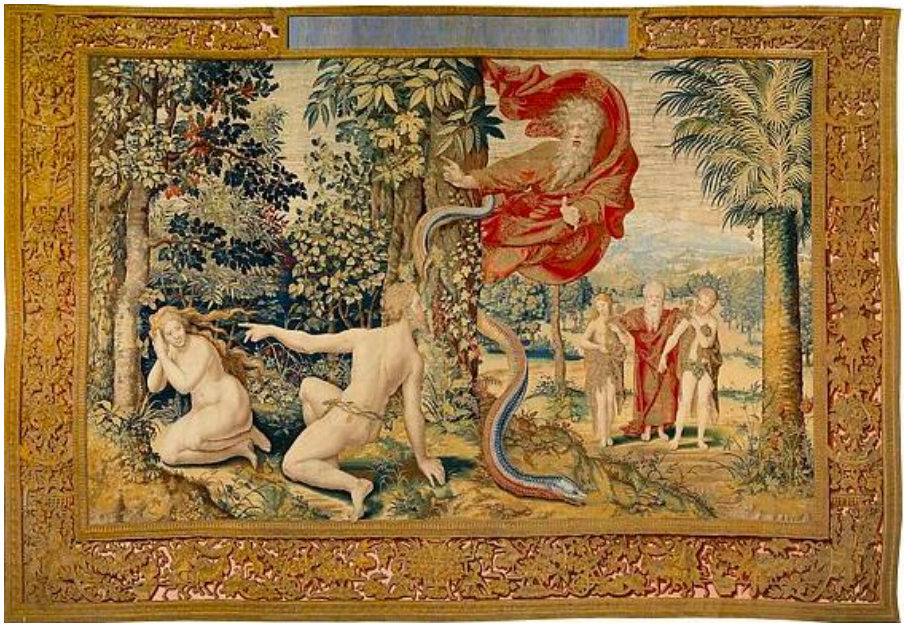

Fig. 9 Pieter Coecke van Aelst the Elder (cartoon), Jan de Kempeneer and Frans Ghieteels (workshops), *God Accuses Adam and Eve After the Fall*, 1551, wool, silk, gold and silver thread. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

[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.