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

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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

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[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 Wladysław 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 Stanislaw Orzechowski, Jan Firlej (Grand Marshall of the Crown, the highest office at court), Mikolaj Dzierzgowski (Primate of Poland and Archbishop of Gniezno), Piotr Myszkowski (Grand Secretary and Crown Chancellist, bishop), Jan Przerebski (Grand Secretary and Crown Chancellist, later Archbishop of Gniezno and Primate of Poland), Filip Padniewski (Crown Chancellist, later Grand Secretary and Bishop of Przemysl and Krakow), Stanislaw Fogelweder (Sigismund's private secretary), Francisco Lismanino (Sigismund's theological advisor), Stanislaw 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 Przemysl), Jan Drohojowski (Bishop of Chelm, Kujawy, and Kamieniec), and Hieronim Ossolinski (magnate and sejm delegate, later Castellan of Krakow 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

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[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 Heemskeerck (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 Heemskeerck'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.

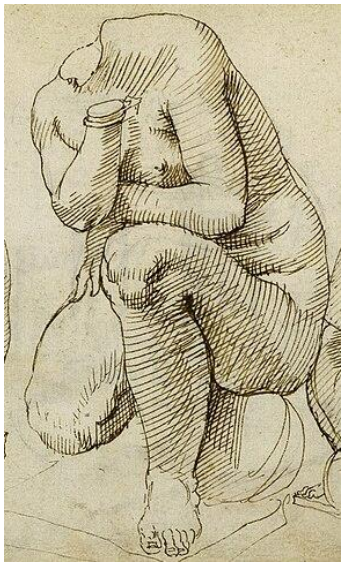


Fig. 74 Maarten van Heemskerck, *Crouching Venus*, 1532-1536, ink on paper (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) vs. Cain in *Abel's Sacrifice.*


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 Heemskeerck'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 Heemskeerck'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 Heemskeerck'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*

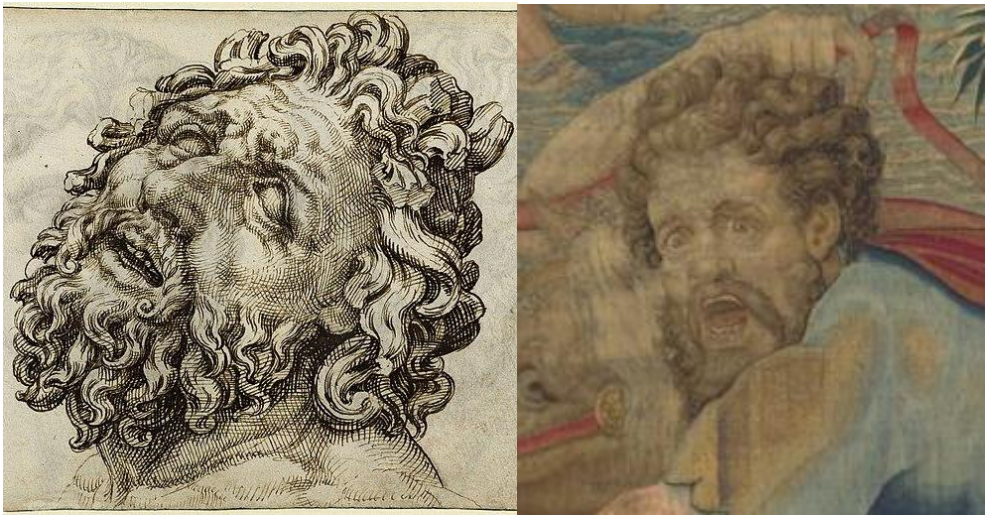

Fig. 77 Maarten van Heemskerck, *Head of the Laocoon*, 1532-1536, ink on paper (Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) versus a drowning man in *The Flood*

Fig. 78 *Ludovisi Medusa*, 2nd cent BC, marble (Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano) versus a drowned woman in *The Flood*.

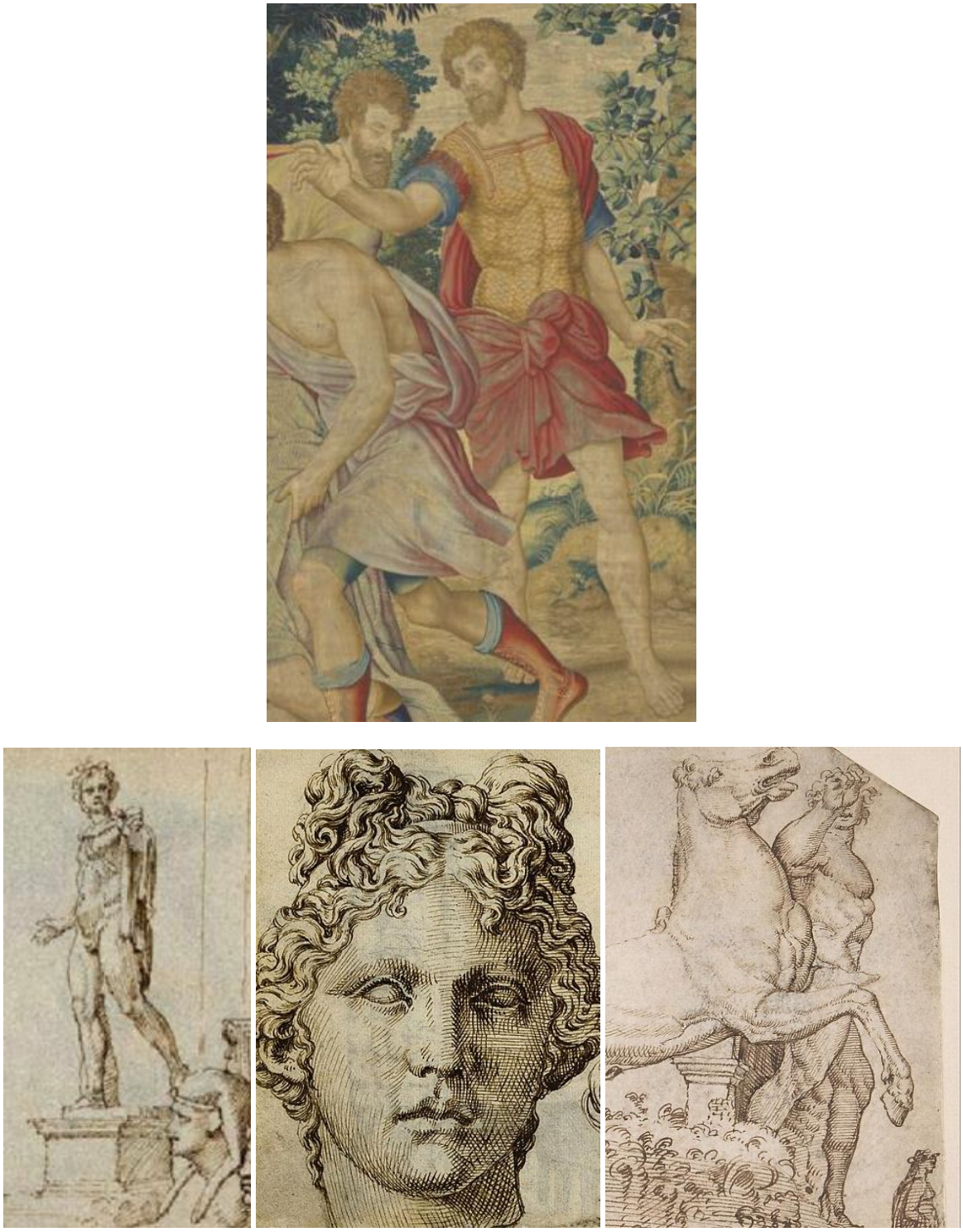

Fig. 79 Ham in *Noah's Drunkenness* and his inspirations: L to R: Maarten van Heemskerck, detail of *Apollo Belvedere*, 1532-1536, ink on paper. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Detail of *Two Studies of the Head of the Apollo Belvedere*, 1532-1536, ink on paper. Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. 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]

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[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 verdures over figural sets. Bona's will, for example, lists mainly verdures, 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 Beatrizet 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, Misiag-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]

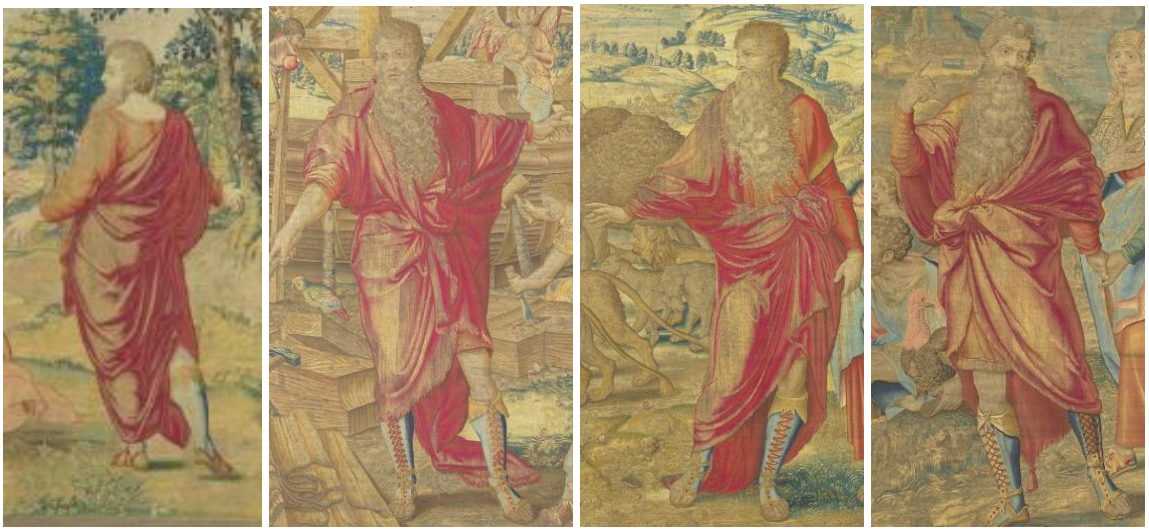

Fig. 97 The stability of Noah in (L to R) *God Converses with Noah*, *The Building of the Ark*, *The Animals Enter the Ark*, and *The Animals Exit the Ark*.

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.

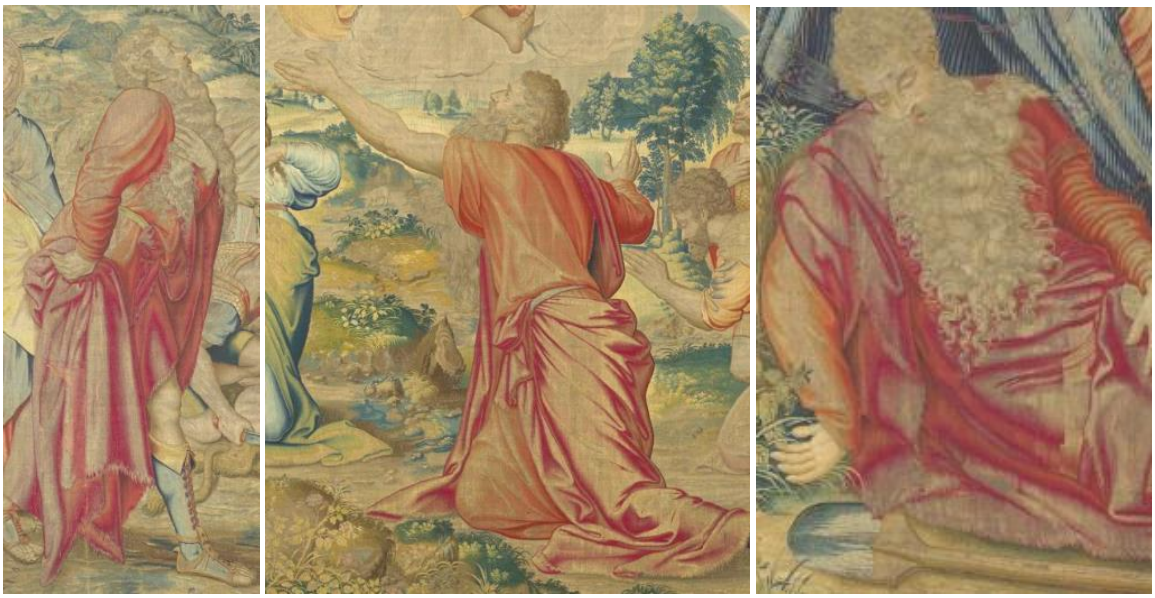

Fig. 98 The humbling of Noah in (L to R) *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, *God Blesses Noah's Family*, and *Noah's Drunkenness*.

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."

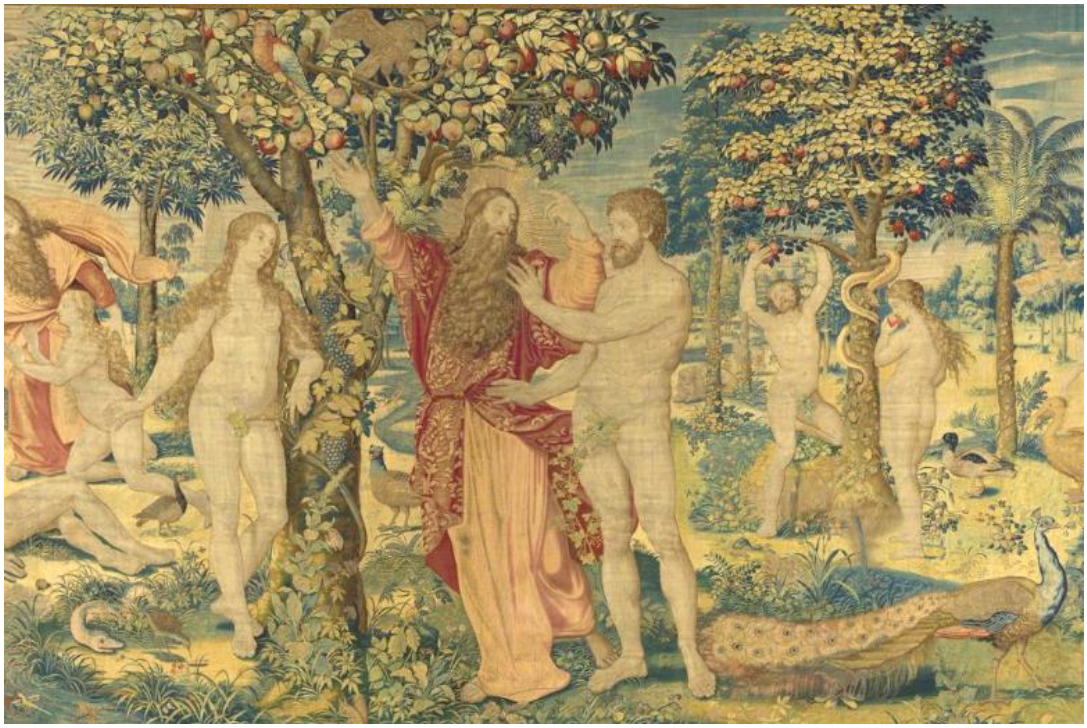

Fig. 100 The Tree of Life in *Paradise Bliss* with the serpent in the left foreground, the peacock in the right foreground, and the eagle and parrot in the canopy.

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.

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[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

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[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 Coxcie.
[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.

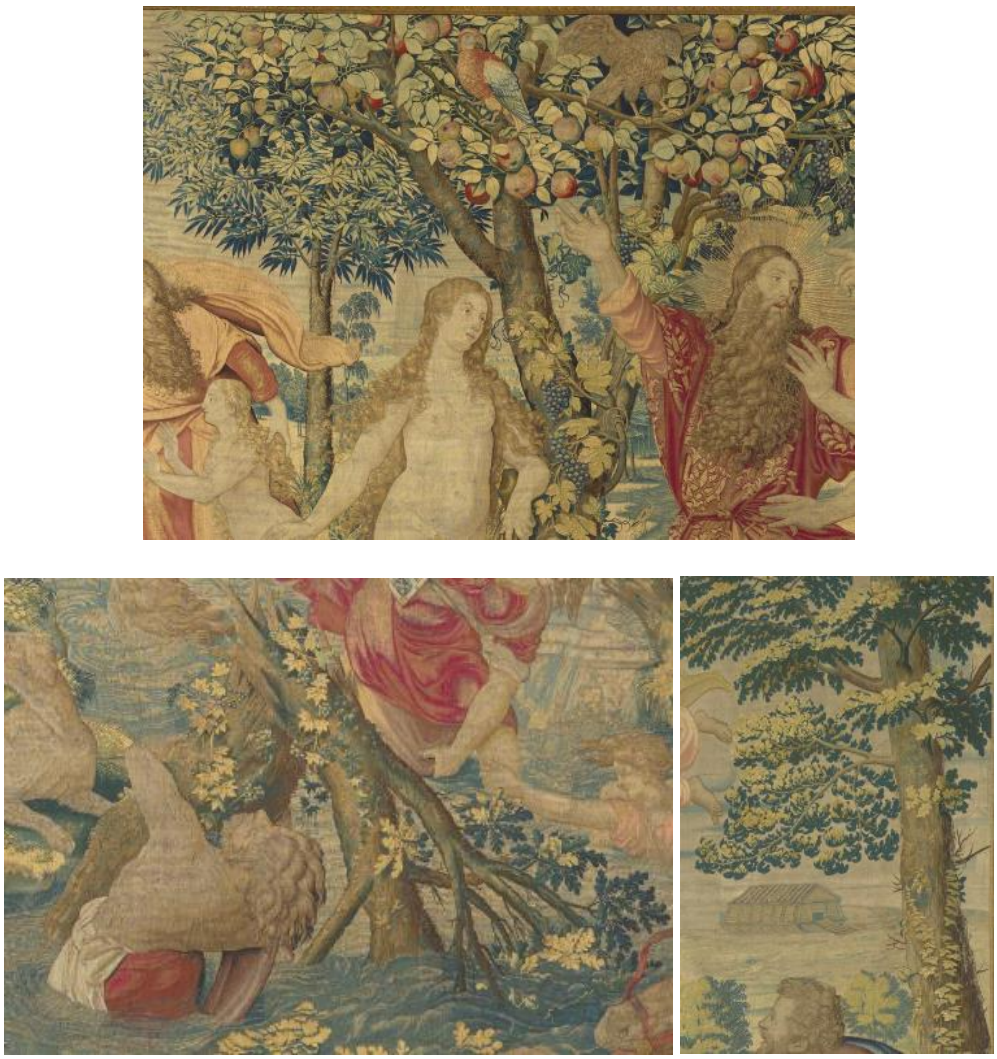

Fig. 111 The tree in *Paradise Bliss* (top), *The Flood* (bottom left), and *God Blesses Noah's Family* (bottom right).

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.