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

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Conclusion: "The Mind and Innate Majesty of this Greatest King"

This thesis posed the question: what can the Jagiellonian Genesis tapestries reveal about the relationship between religion and power in Sigismund Augustus's kingship? In order to answer this question, we have explored a reading of *Genesis* on multiple levels: from choice of medium to materiality and style, to story and characters, and finally to iconography. This reading considered both the potential vision of the patron and the reception of a contemporary viewer.

As outlined in the Introduction, there are several justifications for a reexamination of *Genesis* using new methodology. Firstly, while previous scholars such as Frances Yates and Thomas Campbell have extensively proven that tapestry is a crucial primary source for understanding early modern princely power and image-creation, the *Genesis* series is barely mentioned in existing studies of European tapestry. Secondly, Stanisław Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* allows us to take a reading of *Genesis* where many previous scholars have been unable to go with other sets: namely, to reception. Whether due to methodological choices or a lack of sources, many past studies of the "politics of tapestry" have taken a top-down approach, viewing tapestry as a propaganda tool imposing the messages of its patrons. This method does not consider the equally important role of the audience in meaning-making and image-creation. The method proposed in this thesis has incorporated the possible reception of the tapestries at the 1553 unveiling, thereby allowing us to see *Genesis* as a site of the negotiation of power, politics, and religion, where "authorship" and meaning-making are conceived by both the patron and the viewer.

Thirdly, while *Genesis* has been studied by Polish art historians, it also has the potential to contribute to a much-needed visual and material turn in the history of early modern Polish religion. As Campbell et al have provided the groundwork to use tapestry

as historical primary sources, this thesis has built on this to reconsider a monarch whose public and private relationship to religion remains a controversial issue among historians, and whose religious politics can be elucidated through sources of different media.

At the onset, this thesis has attempted to address two methodological problems which face any political reading of tapestry: the existence of sources about the commission and about the reception. In the case of *Genesis*, there is a relative lack of sources on the commission, but one very valuable source on the initial reception (the *ekphrasis*), which sets *Genesis* apart from other series of the period. Addressing the first issue, there is a strong case to be made for Sigismund's personal involvement in the commission, especially due to established norms of tapestry patronage, his father's direct involvement in his own commissions, and Sigismund's documented engagement with art patronage in different media. However, due to this lack of sources, this thesis has not ascribed too much "authorship" to Sigismund. According to the methodology of situational authorship, we need not seek a singular author of a work of art, but rather see the meaning of artwork as contextually dependent. In other words, based on the aforementioned arguments, we have found that Sigismund played a leading role in the conception of the *Genesis* project, but we have also considered whether his audience was likely to have interpreted the images in a singular manner, or whether a divergence of interpretations was possible. Regarding the second issue, Stanisław Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* of the unveiling has provided insight into the series's reception, while remaining cognisant of the text's generic constraints and rhetorical aims, as explored in Chapter Three.

Overall, this thesis has shown the benefits of applying an interdisciplinary methodology combining history and art history in order to fully examine the politics of a tapestry series. While history has situated the commission within the context of relevant events and literature that may have informed its creation and reception, art history has

allowed us to understand the meanings of style, iconography, and materiality. It is this interdisciplinary approach that provides the basis of the seven-step method for reading tapestry proposed in the Introduction.

1. Reading *Genesis*

According to the seven-step method, the first layer of reading *Genesis* considered the medium of tapestry itself as a pan-European signifier of magnificence, wealth, power, dynasty, and cultural capital. In Chapter One, we saw how tapestry was the luxury medium *par excellence*: its visual and material splendour combined with its portability made it an ideal choice for an itinerant court. For Sigismund, the medium also carried the weight of dynastic continuity via his parents' collection, while commissioning entirely new designs (*editiones principes*) placed *Genesis* in the highest echelon (and price bracket) of the tapestry market.

The second step of the method concerned the intentions behind the commission, especially its timing. In other words, why would Sigismund make such an expensive and grand commission at this particular moment, circa 1547? As mentioned in Chapter One, *Genesis* can be seen as emblematic of two trends simultaneously. On one hand, such a grand commission was a celebration of a new prosperous reign (a continuation of his father's relatively successful reign), a young king representing a new generation of an illustrious dynasty, and his impending nuptials to his (at the time) second wife. At the same time, *Genesis* was an attempt to convey an image of princely power at a time of relative instability for the triangular political relationship of Crown, Church, and nobility in Poland-Lithuania. At the time of his coronation as sole ruler in 1548, Sigismund was faced with the rapid rise of the Polish Reformation as well as the germinating seeds of the executionist movement among the middle and lower nobility. His reluctance to acquiesce to the nobility

in legislative and judicial reform or to relinquish any royal prerogatives had led to rumours of absolutist tendencies, while his public ambivalence on religious matters made him a controversial figure for Catholics and Protestants alike. Compounded by the scandals over his *vivente rege* coronation and his clandestine marriage to Barbara Radziwiłł, concerns over his fitness to rule a "nation of warriors" given his Italian humanist upbringing, his apparent preference for Vilnius over Kraków, his lack of heirs, and the religious violence engulfing the rest of the continent, Sigismund had inherited a highly precarious political situation. In short, a bold statement of princely power and ruling competence, and a political and religious agenda to unite the estates in support of the monarchy, was vital.

While all of this illuminates the domestic context of the *Genesis* commission, the third step of the method expanded the context to the international arena. *Genesis* was not commissioned in a vacuum, but as part of a thriving European tapestry market, the primary artistic stage for displays of power and image creation within the sixteenth-century ruling class. As we have already discussed the connotations of the medium itself for patrons, the most important element here is genre: in this case, biblical tapestry. Through this lens, in Chapter Two, we have seen that *Genesis* was simultaneously in dialogue with other major commissions of the time, while treading new ground. While Old Testament biblical tapestry was a very popular genre for image-creation projects among patrons, mostly due to the use of the patriarchs as exemplars of princely virtue, the stories in *Genesis* were either entirely new on the market or had at most one predecessor since the beginning of the century. In this way, Sigismund could use a recognisable and comprehensible visual-material lexicon for his messages, while showing innovation and individualism both in his stylistic preferences and in the didactic content. In comparison to many of the other most popular biblical sets on the market, the *Genesis* stories also show the first signs of one of the major elements of the series programme: the theme of nonviolence.

Having established both the domestic and international contexts for reading *Genesis*, Chapter Three introduced the final element of the series' background, the most important primary source for understanding the vision of the patron and the reception of the viewer: Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*. This text cannot be approached as a forensic eyewitness account of the unveiling, as it was a text written within an ancient generic and rhetorical tradition and with clear didactic aims, in addition to the author's personal motivations. Rather, the *ekphrasis* is a rich document of a moral and political reading of *Genesis* centred on the person of Sigismund Augustus. Establishing himself as a "tour guide" for the reader, Orzechowski uses his authorial power to canonise interpretations of the individual tapestries and of the commission as a whole. The text creates a stage for image-creation and meaning-making, focused on princely virtue (via the patriarchs and their comparisons to Sigismund's own attributes as described in the panegyric), magnificence, and Sigismund's "authorship" over the entire project, as well as moral exhortations for both the viewer and the King. Thus, Orzechowski not only immortalises his image of the tapestries, but his image of Sigismund as well. In the end, the tapestries are not the true focus of the *ekphrasis*, but Sigismund himself, with the tapestries functioning as mirrors of his power, virtue, and moral programme.

With the *ekphrasis* as our chief written source, we moved on to a close reading of the tapestries themselves, beginning with their materials and style: the fourth and fifth steps of the method. We questioned how materiality and style helped craft the overall programme of *Genesis*.

Beginning with materiality, we have found that the enormous size of the tapestries, especially in the most dramatic panoramas, and their placement in rooms closely associated with the king's person clearly conveyed the magnificence of the commission, and presented a tangible material gap between the wealth of the Crown and the other estates. This nod

toward royal supremacy supported the allusions toward patrimonial rule in the narrative. Moreover, the floor-to-ceiling tapestries that completely covered the walls and windows of the chambers created an artificial, insulated environment in which sound was muffled, light was dimmed, and the dimensions of physical space were muddled. With all of this combined, the viewer was fully surrounded by the world of *Genesis*, dropped into a different time and place. This immersive biblical environment allowed the viewer to contemplate the messages of the tapestries more deeply, and perhaps even have a spiritual experience. As the provider of this experience, Sigismund placed himself in a highly privileged position as one who could transform secular space into sacred space and give his subjects the means to connect with the divine.

As for the style of the central scenes of *Genesis*, namely mannerism, we have again found support for an image-creation and didactic programme. As the court style *par excellence* of the period, mannerism was a clear signifier of wealth, worldliness, eliteness, and cultural capital. One of the main attributes of mannerism is its "excesses," many of which we see in the tapestries, including excesses in the scale and scope of the landscapes and in the amount and size of bodies. All of this creates the sense of an epic narrative with monumental implications, again encouraging audience participation in its content. However, the "excesses" of *Genesis* do not threaten to upset the intricate equilibrium in composition, as they are counterweighted by symmetry and a visual balance between order and chaos. This dichotomy, also dominant in the narrative content, is perhaps the most visible and thematically relevant aspect of the tapestries' style. It also has significant political and theological implications, as it evokes cosmic harmony. Just as God never abandons the faithful on earth, even in moments of chaos, so too does the King hold sway over his kingdom and ensure its wellbeing.

However, an important question that has arisen when considering the "excesses" of *Genesis* is the extent to which the overpowering visuals would have occluded the narrative and didactic content. The answer to this can be found if one considers the vividness and affective power as an example of the classical rhetorical tool of *enargeia*, a concept very similar to the *maniera* of mannerism as described by Vasari. In the tradition of the ancient and mediaeval sermons as well as Renaissance sacral art, we have found textual and visual *enargeia* used not to distract from important messages, but to reinforce them by encouraging the audience to connect on an emotional and individual level, to imagine themselves in the world of the Bible. In other words, the tapestries' *enargeia* had the potential to strengthen the didactic content. This is precisely the phenomenon on which Orzechowski focuses throughout his *ekphrasis*. He connects his lush descriptions of the tapestries' *enargeic* content to his moral and theological interpretations of the artworks, which he calls the "images that teach."[617] Thus, through *enargeia*, the viewer could connect more deeply and personally to the "teachings" of *Genesis*, and, by proxy, to the patron and progenitor of these teachings.

While the Netherlandish grotesque borders may seem to disrupt the tapestries' immersive and *enargeic* potential, a stylistic analysis has revealed that they, too, can be read as a part of the visual and didactic programme. Like mannerism, Netherlandish grotesque was a signifier of wealth and cultural capital, with the added benefit of the style's novelty and foreign trendiness. Thus, *Genesis* was literally framed in the symbols of magnificence.

While the borders do visually interrupt the immersion of the world of *Genesis*, they support the overall thematic content. They are not separate from the narrative; rather, the

[617] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.

relationship between the figural scenes and borders is that of *ergon* and *parergon*, in Kantian terms. As was the common approach in the early modern period, ornament interfaces with the main content. Most notably, the borders depict many "excesses," especially in the amount of mythological deities, creatures, and greenery, while keeping everything contained in the strapwork. This is an echo of the overarching order versus chaos motif. However, while chaos in the figural scenes is negative, always associated with violence and destruction, the borders show a more positive side of chaos, associated with fertility and abundance. Thus, Sigismund wielded the lush imagery of grotesque ornament to convey magnificence while maintaining control over the commission's didactic project. Moreover, the framing of sacred scenes in profane borders means that the theological and exegetical content of Genesis is unable to overshadow its political and image-creation work. All are at play in tandem. There is a constant visual reminder of the central presence of secular power and its inseparable relationship to religion.

All in all, a reading of the mannerist and grotesque elements of *Genesis* has revealed that, as immersive and visually overpowering as the tapestries were, their didactic content centred on Sigismund's persona and messages has still emerged as a central focus, supported through the power of *enargeia*.

The next layer of reading *Genesis*, elucidated in the sixth step of the method, took us from the visual content to the narrative content: specifically, its religious and political messages in relation to the patron and his programme for kingship. Again, we have relied on Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* and the inscriptions as crucial sources, while also considering a variety of other relevant secondary texts: exegetical, theological, political, and literary works circulating throughout Poland and the wider "republic of letters" with which both Sigismund and his audience would have been familiar. Using these texts, we have built on the foundations laid by Orzechowski, but have been able to go beyond the generic confines

of *ekphrasis* and reveal more of the possible theological and political messages in *Genesis*. Chapter Five introduced a triadic model for reading the didactic content of *Genesis*, which considered:

1. The Old Testament patriarchs as avatars and exemplars for Sigismund, particularly in terms of the princely virtues they displayed;
2. The moral messages for the patron, the viewer, and all of Sigismund's subjects;
3. Sigismund's religious and political agenda as expressed in the *Genesis* episodes.

Depending on the individual viewer's perspective, one or more (or all) of these were at play simultaneously.

Based on this triadic model and using both the *ekphrasis* and supplementary texts, several macro-themes have emerged from a reading of the narrative content of *Genesis*. First, we have seen a clear image forming of the patron himself. Through the virtues and deeds of the patriarchs, we are faced with a strong, independent leader with divinely-bestowed power, the metaphorical father of a nation. Indeed, the image of the Pentateuchal patriarchs as a quasi-dynastic lineage and the context of Genesis as the "book of the generations of Adam" is especially noteworthy, as it allowed Sigismund to tap into dynastic themes. In this way, he could gesture toward the concerns about his lack of an heir and draw on his own illustrious lineage (especially comparisons with his father, which we have already seen on a material level with the choice of the tapestry medium itself). In a metaphorical sense, Sigismund placed himself within the genealogy of the patriarchs themselves, a "dynasty" of chosen men of God and great earthly leaders, with Sigismund as their successor, blessed with the same virtues and granted the same proximity to God.

Like the patriarchs, the model for Sigismund found in the tapestries is a philosopher-king, a dual wielder of wisdom and power, a secular and confessional peacekeeper who uses erudition, piety, righteousness, and justice to lead his people through turbulent times. In addition, like Adam the First Farmer and Noah the First Vintner, the king must practise metaphorical "husbandry" over his own moral health and that of his kingdom. Notably, these virtues were all established staples of both Polish and wider European models for kingship, and can be found in other sixteenth century biblical sets mentioned in Chapter Two. Thus, we have once again seen Sigismund drawing on similar lexica to those of his princely peers: not only in terms of medium and genre, but narrative and messages as well. However, based on contemporary Polish discourse on kingship as well as the specific political and religious backdrop of the commission, these virtues were also particularly pertinent for a monarch in Sigismund's somewhat-precarious position to highlight.

On the other hand, the tapestries contrast this image of the ideal ruler with the deadly sins of pride, wrath, and spiritual sloth (especially in loss of faith and despair) that are the downfall of earthly leaders who abuse their God-given power, and of their subjects by proxy. If one approaches *Genesis* not as a series but as a cycle, as proposed in Chapter Five, the princely virtues of the patriarchs appear to be enduring fixtures for any godly leader, based in God's unchanging design for his earthly representatives. If mankind is destined for a recurring cycle of sin and redemption, death and rebirth, cataclysm and renewal, then kings must look to these biblical ur-models for guidance and inspiration.

Having crafted this model of a "most Christian prince" for himself, Sigismund could use the tapestries to convey how he viewed his role in statecraft. There are evident nods toward patrimonial rule, which is in keeping not only with contemporary treatises written for Sigismund (especially Modrzewski's *De Republica*) but also with Sigismund's own

actions in the first years of his reign, and the ensuing critiques of his absolutist tendencies from his opponents. On the other hand, the centring of "covenant moments" across the *Genesis* episodes mirrors the king's need to form political "covenants," in Modrzewski's words, with his subjects and neighbours, regardless of creed.

The tapestries propose that faith and trust in God, along with strong independent leadership, is the only way to ensure order in chaos, a dichotomy echoed from the stylistic reading and one that has emerged as perhaps the foremost macro-theme of *Genesis*. From Sigismund's perspective, this would have been the most important and expedient message to communicate to his viewer: to imagine the king in patriarchal terms, as he has presented himself through patriarchal avatars in the tapestries.

As a result of the established order that such a monarch could provide, the kingdom will be under the dual protection of God and king. In fact, the king is presented, via his patriarchal exemplars, as a divinely-ordained ruler, the earthly representative of God with a direct connection to him, tasked with maintaining equilibrium in the kingdom. Therefore, the viewer is exhorted to have faith and trust both in the monarch and in the God he serves. As a result, the kingdom will emerge from turbulent times as a kind of new chosen people, and will be blessed with renewal, abundance, prosperity, and peace.

The message of nonviolence and the goal of peace and stability above all is paramount to the *Genesis* project. Across the series, violence is shown as the direct result of disorder, imbalance, immorality, and loss of faith. Violence is not triumphant; rather, it is the harbinger of a nation's downfall. The one outlier in this regard is *The Battle of the Amalekites*, the only example of military action by a patriarch in the series, which ends in a victory for Moses. However, according to the biblical story, the Israelites battled the Amalekites after the latter staged an unprovoked attack on them, framing the violence in

the tapestry as self-defence. The patriarchs, then, are never presented as the aggressors in warfare.[618]

Through his proximity to God, the king, like the patriarchs, is the holder of great wisdom and knowledge of the divine. He is, in this sense, both a secular and a spiritual (perhaps even ecclesiastical) leader. In this vein, much of the theological and moral content of the tapestries centres around themes applicable both to the monarch and to his people. We have seen, for example, the theme of repentance from sin and the promise of redemption. In *Genesis*, this applies just as much to the "chosen people" *en masse* as to the patriarchs, who all have their moments of fallibility and subsequent reparation. We have also seen the overarching promise of a merciful, omnipotent, and omnipresent God, who never abandons his children even in their darkest hour, and is the ultimate source of order and balance. Finally, we have found the exhortation to, in Augustinian terms, keep one's eyes on the City of God rather than the City of Man, both in holy ruling and in holy living.

In sum, this is the image and agenda that Sigismund projected through the narrative content of the tapestries. Depending on their background and perspectives, the individual viewer may have picked up on some of these allusions and not others. Regardless, these messages about princely virtue, Christian kingship, religious politics, and morality permeated the entire *Genesis* narrative, across all of its protagonists and episodes, and could be supported by common understandings of the Book of Genesis based on widely-read texts. Therefore, it is highly likely that the viewer would have grasped the overall didactic and moral programme.

[618] As this tapestry and the rest of the *Moses* set have been lost, it is impossible to offer any more commentary on how *The Battle of the Amalekites* frames violence, and how this may impact the overall message of nonviolence.

However, this leaves one aspect of *Genesis* unexplored, the seventh and final step of the method: the potential symbolism in its iconography, and whether this iconography would have bolstered or undermined the themes of the commission as discussed in the previous six steps.

Based on the early modern propensity toward image-thinking and the popularity of symbols, emblems, and hieroglyphs within the humanist episteme that was prevalent at Wawel, we have seen that the viewer of Genesis would have picked up on at least some examples of symbolism within the bodies, flora, and fauna of the tapestries. However, more so than in any other previous level of the reading, we must remember that Sigismund is unlikely to have had significant input into such minute details as the poses of certain figures or the inclusion of symbolic animals. Therefore, we have primarily considered the viewer's perspective in reading the iconography. We have also noted that there was no unified iconographic lexicon in the Renaissance: symbols had varying meanings in various contexts, and interpretations of certain symbols may have varied from viewer to viewer, adding a further level of nuance to an iconographic reading.

In general, the monumental bodies of the patriarchs, modelled on Greco-Roman sculpture and *cinquecento* sacral art, are most likely to have been read as signifiers of heroism, *gravitas*, power, princely virtue, and moral strength, all of which reflect onto Sigismund. As discussed in Chapter Six, the viewer may have been familiar with these references, for example, through the popular prints circulating across Europe, or, for the many who had studied in Italy, through seeing these works in person. We have contrasted the bodies of Sigismund's avatars with the unstable and chaotic bodies of the antagonists and background characters, which convey frailty, moral failing, and disharmony. This echoes the order versus chaos dichotomy found in the narrative and stylistic content. In addition, the Raphaelan influences in the physicality and physiognomy would have struck

a stylistic contrast with the older tapestries from his parents' collection, forming a visual parallel with the accession of a new king, the start of a new era for Poland, a son outside of his father's shadow. The numerous references to Raphael's *Acts of the Apostles* cartoons in particular would have drawn a parallel with the "Flemishess" of other great tapestry sets inspired by these cartoons in the collections of the most renowned patrons. Thus, we have found yet another element supporting the magnificence and splendour of the commission, and of Sigismund by proxy.

Readings of the natural symbolism in *Genesis* have revealed further links to the meta-themes of the commission. Much like the fantastical beasts in the borders, the diverse fauna furthers the magnificence project by creating an abundant and exotic menagerie of God's creation, albeit one that never overtakes the narrative (figural) content of the scenes. Also similarly to the borders, these animals could maintain control over the didactic project by bolstering the messages of the tapestries, all under the guise of visual splendour. In the animals, we have found highlights of the princely virtues extolled by the patriarchs, underscores of the moral warnings in certain episodes, some possible subtle political and theological messages, and even the symbols of the Polish Crown. Despite the possible divergent meanings attributed to certain creatures, such as the recurrent lion and owl, there are no instances where a symbol could inject a subversive meaning, one that could complicate or contradict the message of the individual scene or the commission as a whole. Rather, the fact that many of these symbols could be interpreted differently encouraged deeper audience engagement with the artworks. They could serve as conversation pieces and eye-catching points of interest, gateways through which the audience could ponder the tapestry in terms of its moral, political, or theological content. While the natural symbols are the "supporting cast" of the figural scenes, they do not distract the viewer but redirect their attention toward the most important overarching themes.

In sum, at all levels of reading *Genesis* from medium and materiality to style, narrative, and iconography, we have found a cohesive didactic programme, one that can be expressed using the triadic model of image-creation, political/religious programme, and moral messages. This entire programme, based in the historical context of the commission, is in direct dialogue with Polish and European models of kingship, the intellectual and theological topos of Christian humanism, and the overall religious and political milieu of Sigismund's early reign. Whether in the vision of the patron or through the eyes of the audience, Sigismund's person and agenda has remained a central focus. All threads lead back to him, and to the bond between religion and power in his kingship.

Audience interpretation may have varied on certain details, such as the meanings of individual symbols or the most prominent moral messages of the stories. However, there are no elements that had the potential to destabilise the overall coherent programme. Nor is it necessary to assume that every viewer must have read *Genesis* according to the seven-step method outlined in this thesis in order to grasp the "full" meaning. Those with an above-average knowledge of Italian art, for example, may have found more interpretive substance in the Raphaelan bodies, while those with a robust exegetical education may have uncovered more of the moral exhortations in the patriarchs' stories. Even a viewer who gave the tapestries a cursory overview or sought no deeper meaning in the content would have understood the overarching project of magnificence and the crafting of Christian kingship through biblical imagery. As a tapestry commission the size of *Genesis* was, first and foremost, an exercise in crafting magnificence, even such a surface-level impression meant that a sizable piece of the image-creation "work" of the tapestries was a success.

On the other hand, a viewer who went beyond this reading in even one aspect (for example, exegesis or natural symbolism) would have grasped a more nuanced level of the project, one that suggested the precise kinds of princely virtues and political, religious, and

moral messages that the tapestries conveyed. Many of the series' initial viewers would have fallen in this category, considering both the level of education of social elites who would have been present at the wedding, as well as the context of the unveiling, a guided tour. Although the amount of guests and the atmosphere of a wedding celebration may have hindered the deepest of analyses, we have evidence that guests such as Orzechowski had the time and space to craft their own interpretations of the images before them upon only one viewing.

Because each level of a reading of *Genesis* reinforces the same image of Sigismund, the same political and religious themes, and the same morals, any level of interpretation would have achieved a similar result. For example, Orzechowski's reading in the *ekphrasis* based on Sigismund's magnificence, princely virtues, and the morals of the biblical stories would be complemented but not complicated by an analysis focusing on the style, or the iconography, or the contemporary political allusions. Peeling back each subsequent layer of *Genesis*, we have found new material that deepens and strengthens the themes and the image of Sigismund, but never material that problematises them. Thus, we can understand *Genesis* as a *speculum principis* for the patron, in the same way that Orzechowski did in his *ekphrasis*. Reading the series brings us closer, in his words, to "the mind and innate majesty of this greatest king, which can best be perceived through his commissions."[619]

2. Recommendations for Further Study

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this study was not merely to use historical context to better understand the *Genesis* tapestries, rather to use the tapestries to better understand Sigismund and how he perceived his own reign in relation to religion. This raises the question: does a close reading of *Genesis* provide any new insight into Sigismund

[619] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy,* 51.

as a historical figure, especially in terms of religious politics, that can be carried forward in further research?

Although Sigismund's personal piety was not a focus of this thesis, *Genesis* does seem to support the view held by a minority of historians that Sigismund's commitment to tolerance was not just a result of pragmatism but also of some level of personal conviction. On one hand, for a man so notoriously secretive about his beliefs, it is unlikely that *Genesis* was intended as an individual *credo*. On the other hand, there are elements of the tapestries' theological content which cannot be extricated from what we know of Sigismund's own religiosity. These are, most notably, the irenic overtones of the entire project, such as the insistence on peace and redemption amidst violence and discord. The theme of lineage and genealogy discussed in Chapter Five may also be applicable in this regard. As Alexandra Walsham has argued, the common sixteenth-century reading of the Book of Genesis as a book of generations was often used as an extended metaphor for the entire family of believers, whose lineage of faith could be traced back to Adam.[620] In the context of *Genesis,* the visual chronicle of the generations of Adam is a nod toward the spiritual blood-ties of all Christians through their common ancestry and common foundations in the akinetic elements of their faith. All of these irenic elements are aligned both with Sigismund's religious policies and the personal convictions he expressed. As other scholars have argued, there was certainly an element of political and financial pragmatism to his irenicism: specifically, to avoid alienating any powerful faction or risk further destabilisation of the decentralised monarchy. However, considering that we find these same themes in a commission so closely linked to his own persona, Sigismund's own faith may not have been far removed from his religious politics.

[620] Walsham, *Generations,* 42.

Moreover, the theological depth of *Genesis* and its function as one of Sigismund's primary tools of image-creation stands in contrast to the popular notion that Sigismund was disinterested in religion, with a piety that was tepid at best. The (relatively) theologically neutral ground of *Genesis* does not make a claim either for Sigismund's innate Catholicism or tacit Protestantism. However, it does make a strong claim both for the centrality of religion not just in his politics but in his desired image as a ruler, based on the models of Christian kingship he sought to emulate.

While Christianity in general was a core facet of Sigismund's princely persona, we need not see Sigismund's relationship to the Catholic Church as an institution and its doctrines as any less complex or murky than the general Polish populace's at this time. As Polish religious historians have consistently shown, the previous national myth of early modern Poland as a bulwark of Roman Catholicism is not based in historical reality. In its "Golden Age," Poland-Lithuania was a heterodox polity, a theatre of religious diversity where confessional boundaries were murky and malleable. In this light, Sigismund's religiosity is anything but controversial, and he need not be remembered as an anomaly in a lineage of devout Catholic kings. Rather, he is an apt reflection of a country whose religious milieu was anything but homogenous at the time: like the polity he ruled, he was a complex figure who grappled with faith both publicly and privately, and whose religiosity cannot be neatly pigeon-holed into one confession. Thus, as studies on interreligious relations and multi-confessionalism enjoy popularity in early modern Polish historical scholarship, it is worth reexamining Sigismund's role as one of the foremost players in the trajectory of the Polish Reformation, a crucial figure in understanding the nuances of early modern Polish kingship and religion.

Diverging from the dominance of textual studies in this historiographic field, it is also necessary to embark on more interdisciplinary research into early modern Polish

religion. While the Polish Reformation experienced its "religious turn" several decades ago, it is now time for a visual and material turn. Some avenues for future study may be the art collections of other important figures in the Reformation, such as bishops and noble patrons of Reformed churches, as well as more work on liturgical materials, devotionalia, and illuminations in manuscripts of various confessions.

This study has also argued that the *Genesis* tapestries were in need of a more thorough analysis through the lens of the "politics of tapestry," as Thomas Campbell previously applied to Henry VIII's collection. The discussion of *Genesis* must be historically contextualised and refocused to centre Sigismund as both an author-figure and the main subject. Moreover, the highly-relevant religious angle for Sigismund's crafting of kingship cannot be ignored. This study's other interventions into existing scholarship have included examinations of materiality, iconography, the choice of subjects, and the interpellation of the viewer through both style and narrative. However, the scope of this thesis has excluded any discussion of the tapestries' use after 1553, either by Sigismund or his successors. This is potentially fertile ground for a reexamination of the didactic content of *Genesis* in the eyes of the viewers and the subsequent owners in very different contexts of display, stretching as far as the late eighteenth century.[621]

Furthermore, this thesis has only discussed twenty (fifteen surviving) tapestries from Sigismund's collection, of which nearly one hundred and forty pieces remain. The next logical step would be to embark on a closer reading of the *Tower of Babel* tapestries, the addition to *Genesis* delivered several years later, as well as the verdures and grotesques. According to several scholars such as Magdalena Piwocka and Carmen Cramer Niekrasz,

[621] Some groundwork in this regard has already been laid by Maria Hennel-Bernasikowa in "Arrasy Zygmunta Augusta świadkiem królewskich uroczystości," in *Theatrum Ceremoniale,* 245-254, but more work (especially from the viewer's POV) remains to be done.

the extant Jagiellonian tapestries can and should be read as one cohesive decorative programme for the king's residence.[622] This theory should be tested on both a visual and a thematic level. This would also open the question of whether the original *Genesis* pieces take on any different meanings in the context of the entire collection.

In general, further research on the Jagiellonian collection, especially in anglophone publications, would give these tapestries their rightful place amongst the heavily studied series in western Europe. This would also contribute to the larger project of ending the ghettoisation of Central-Eastern Europe in anglophone early modern history and art history, which newer generations of scholars are working to remedy.

For international historical and art historical scholarship, this thesis has argued that the methodology of the "politics of tapestry" must be reinvigorated, albeit in an updated form. While the questions asked by Thomas Campbell and his contemporaries about the role of Renaissance tapestry as princely propaganda have been satisfyingly answered, we must alter and expand the discussion to consider court tapestry as a stage for the negotiation of power, a nexus for patrons to make meaning, define kingship, and convey an agenda, all in dialogue with the interpretations of their viewers. Indeed, although Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* is a rarity in its length, descriptiveness, and affective rhetoric, I have mentioned in the Introduction that it is not the only surviving document on tapestry reception by viewers. In particular, I would encourage further study on the Madrid manuscript describing the iconography of the *Seven Deadly Sins*, as well as the other sources mentioned by Campbell (see footnote 25) from eyewitnesses to the collections of the Habsburgs, Valois, and Henry VIII. Even beyond these examples, it is crucial for tapestry researchers

[622] Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 406; Niekrasz, "Woven Theatres," 3, 29, 109.

to seek out such documents so that we may give proper consideration to the reactions of contemporary audiences, not just the programmes of the artists and patrons.

The seven-step method proposed in the Introduction is a possible way of examining meaning-making while avoiding the pitfalls of the top-down, "propaganda-centric" approach, considering the many material, stylistic, narrative, and iconographic levels of reading tapestry. This thesis has posited that all of these levels are relevant in reaching a full understanding of a tapestry's didactic power. Moreover, as stated previously, this methodology is necessarily interdisciplinary. A study of tapestry in its fullest scope cannot ignore its historical context or its art historical significance.

For example, this method could certainly be applied to the aforementioned *Tower of Babel* tapestries, albeit with a different body of supporting sources. The case of *Babel* is significantly more opaque than the rest of *Genesis*, however: we have no dates for the start of the commission or its delivery, no *ekphrasis* to guide us, little in the way of natural symbolism, and much fewer references to the Babel story in contemporary political and theological literature than to the patriarchs covered in this thesis. On the other hand, *Babel* shares the same material and stylistic DNA as the rest of *Genesis*, and its story opens up new discussions about the nature of Christian kingship. Similarly to the story of Cain, *Babel* presents a kind of reverse *speculum principis,* a tragedy of princely virtues in the negative. Considering the relevance of the Babel story in Reformation literature, the tapestries' most potent commentary may be on the religio-political landscape of Poland and, like the Noah set, the role of the king in a time of interconfessional strife. There would also be room for a reexamination of the concept of tyranny introduced in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, as Nimrod, the antagonist of *Babel*, is explicitly named a *tyrannus* in the inscriptions.

On the other hand, the seven-step method used in this thesis was developed specifically for figural tapestries. If we were to study the non-figural Jagiellonian tapestries (especially the verdures and grotesques), it would be necessary to assess whether all of these steps would still apply, or would need to be amended on a generic basis. For example, the sixth step would need to focus less on narrative and characterisation, and more on allusions to mythology, folklore, natural history, emblemata, etc., while the seventh step (iconography) would play a more dominant role.

In general, as we reconsider the politics of tapestry, we should first look to regions that have been largely ignored by previous studies. Poland-Lithuania is one of these, but many European collections have fallen to the wayside in favour of the Habsburg collections, which remain the dominant focus. In addition to reexamining lesser-known French and Italian collections, there is significant work to be done on Renaissance tapestry in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. Naturally, there is also a great need to expand these studies beyond Europe, although scholarship on tapestries from other continents may need an amended methodology to reflect the cultural and historical contexts of these regions.

One of the most fruitful avenues of study for new tapestry scholarship may be comparative research between collections, of which very few exist. Such studies could reveal the material, narrative, stylistic, and iconographic elements of the medium that were part of the overall tapestry language of kingship, and which elements were particular to a certain patron. This would give us more insight into the agency of rulers in crafting a unique vision for their commissions based on their personal image, agenda, and domestic context, versus adhering to the norms of European tapestry patronage and engaging in dialogue with their peers. Based on this study of *Genesis,* it appears that the trans-continental language of court tapestry is just as important in reading a series as individual or regional specificity, but this is a topic that requires further investigation.

Imbuing new tapestry studies with a religious angle could also be productive. In the past, Thomas Campbell has made convincing claims about Henry VIII's biblical tapestries as message-boards for his religious agenda when splitting from Rome and crafting the Church of England. *Genesis* reinforces the idea that biblical tapestries can be representative of the inextricable link between kingship and religion in the eyes of both rulers and their subjects. This link has been thoroughly studied in both historical and art historical studies on early modern kingship, albeit rarely using the tapestry medium. Based on these two examples of prominent biblical tapestry sets, it is worth reexamining biblical sets from other courts to reach a fuller understanding of the relationship between religion and power for early modern rulers. As *Genesis* shows us, these textiles can provide multi-layered insight into their patrons and the milieux in which they were displayed. Early modern tapestries are not only magnificent works of art, but rich historical sources for examining contemporary politics, theology, and the very nature of kingship.