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

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Summary

In the late 1540s, King Sigismund II Augustus of Poland commissioned a set of twenty figural tapestries from Brussels depicting the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses. The *Genesis* series, designed by Michiel Coxcie, was unveiled at Sigismund's wedding to Catherine of Austria, daughter of Ferdinand I, in July 1553. As the last male heir of the Jagiellon dynasty, Sigismund was a polarising figure due to his enigmatic religious convictions, his scandalous clandestine marriage to a Lithuanian noblewoman, his perceived weaknesses in statecraft, and suspicions of his absolutist inclinations. When he became sole ruler of Poland-Lithuania in 1548, Sigismund had to establish himself as a capable and powerful monarch amidst a climate of domestic and international instability. This thesis argues that the commissioning of the *Genesis* series was an attempt to convey such an image to his most influential subjects and peers, with a particular focus on the role of religion in rule. This thesis explores the question: what can the Jagiellonian *Genesis* tapestries reveal about the relationship between religion and power in Sigismund Augustus's kingship?

Among the many avenues one could take in studying Sigismund's image creation and religio-political messaging, the *Genesis* series is a relevant yet essentially untapped source. While the tapestries are recognised by leading researchers such as Thomas Campbell as one of the stand-out achievements in the medium, they have been largely neglected by anglophone scholarship. The attention they have received from Polish and foreign publications has rarely touched on their relationship to the person and politics of Sigismund Augustus. Considering that Sigismund's private and public relationship to religion remains a point of contention among historians, it is even more relevant to explore sources that shed light on this aspect of his kingship. Furthermore, studying *Genesis* through the lens of early modern Polish religious history and the Polish Reformation is an attempt to introduce more visual and material sources into a field that has been dominated by intellectual history, with a focus on texts above all.

Using an interdisciplinary historical/art historical methodology, this thesis considers both the vision of the patron and the audience's reception. On one hand, using the established approach of Campbell, Frances Yates, and other pioneers of tapestry studies, it focuses on Sigismund as a kind of author-figure for the series. A patron had input in every step of the commissioning process, and his vision was a driving force in the artists' and weavers' creations. On the other hand, this thesis treats tapestry as a space of bilateral meaning-making rather than as princely "propaganda," which has been the prevailing methodology in the most noteworthy tapestry studies to date. In fact, *Genesis* is one of the few series whose contemporary reception can be examined in depth due to the existence of an eyewitness account: an *ekphrasis* by the rhetorician Stanisław Orzechowski, who was present at the 1553 unveiling. By considering *Genesis* as a case of situational authorship, we find that the meaning of artwork is contextually dependent, differs between potential audience members, and is a collaborative effort between patron and viewer.

Adapting the various methods used by previous tapestry scholars, this thesis employs a seven-step method for a reading of (figural) tapestry:

1. The significance of the medium itself
2. The intentions behind the timing of the commission (political, religious, etc.)
3. The significance of the chosen genre in a domestic and European context
4. The materiality of the medium and its effect on reception
5. The style of the tapestries and its affective and didactic potential
6. The moral, political, and religious messages in the narrative
7. The use of symbolic iconography

Alongside Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*, the layers of this reading are based on exegetical, theological, political, literary, and artistic sources. The interweaving of historical and art historical methods is vital to this thesis: history can tell us about the political/religious contexts of commissions and the intellectual culture surrounding them, but art history reveals the impact of materiality, style, and iconography, including in the context of other artworks.

Beginning with the first step of the method, it is well-established that the medium of tapestry in the mid-sixteenth century was a signifier of magnificence, wealth, cultural capital, and princely (especially dynastic) power. This is due to its cost, its convenient portability, and its history as the highest form of court art for decades. The fact that *Genesis* was a comparatively huge set of entirely new designs (*editiones principes*) woven with silver and gold made them even more luxurious, rivalling the most expensive tapestry commissions of the Holy Roman Emperors.

The timing of the commission is just as crucial to consider. Around 1547 (the most probable estimated date of the start of the commissioning process), Sigismund was about to succeed his ailing father. A young monarch, the son of an illustrious dynasty, poised to usher in a prosperous new reign had every reason to celebrate his magnificence with such grand designs. On the other hand, *Genesis* can easily be read as an attempt to prop up an image of strength and political acumen at a time when the Polish monarchy itself was in a tenuous triangular relationship between the Church and the nobility. At this time, the Polish Reformation was reaching its zenith, the executionist movement was beginning to germinate, and Sigismund's own reputation was far from spotless.

Meanwhile, on the continent, the biblical genre was enjoying immense popularity among princely patrons, especially for its potential to convey thinly-veiled political and theological messages through ubiquitous stories and characters. *Genesis* is unique in that it featured stories rarely or never covered in other tapestry sets at the time, while still using familiar generic and narrative lexica.

When embarking on a reading of *Genesis*, arguably the most important primary source is the *ekphrasis*. While all of its generic and rhetorical constraints must be kept in mind, as

well as the author's personal motivations, this is a rich text that combines a moral interpretation of *Genesis* with a portrait of the patron. Orzechowski focuses on the princely virtues of the patriarchs, the morals of the parables for the king and his subjects, the magnificence of the textiles themselves, and how all of these reflect Sigismund's "spirit and mind" as the deviser of the project.

On a material level, *Genesis* astounds the viewer with its size, a manifestation of royal supremacy. Moreover, its strategic original placement in rooms associated with the king's body natural and body politic solidify the connection between patron and art. The tapestries created an artificial environment allowing the viewer to be surrounded by the world of *Genesis*, in which they could more deeply contemplate the messages contained therein—messages that, in large part, pertained to Sigismund's person and agenda.

The mannerist style of *Genesis* was the court style *par excellence*, a visual language of princely power. In addition, the "excesses" of size, emotion, physicality, and dynamism in mannerism have profound affective potential for the viewer, perhaps even allowing them to connect with the content on a more emotional and personal level through the use of *enargeia*. Crucially, these "excesses" never descend into a chaos that could overwhelm the narrative. This introduces us to the motif of order versus chaos throughout *Genesis*, maintained here through symmetry and compositional balance. This gestures both toward the protection of God over the faithful, as well as a king over his subjects in turbulent times. The Netherlandish grotesque style of the borders can be read in a similar vein: they represent worldliness and cultural capital as a novel and expensive form of ornament, but also support the didactic content of the main scenes. In the borders, we find "excesses" in the mythological beings and beasts, all kept in check by the strapwork, as well as symbolic references to the stories they frame.

The narrative reading of *Genesis* is based on a triadic model, comprising the patriarchs as exemplars for Sigismund, the moral messages, and the political/religious agenda. Certain elements may have been more apparent than others depending on the viewer's background. Overall, *Genesis* presents Sigismund as a strong monarch and "father" of a nation who rules with princely virtue, and keeps peace amidst chaos. It exhorts the viewer to have faith both in God and their king, who should be both a spiritual and secular leader. The virtues *Genesis* promotes, such as strength, wisdom, piety, moral temperance, and especially faith, were all part of Polish and European models for kingship, and were expedient for Sigismund to reference in his circumstances. Reading *Genesis* as a cycle of recurring motifs presents its model for Christian kingship as an unchanging and divinely-ordained fixture for rulers throughout the ages, as relevant for Moses as for Sigismund.

Finally, the iconography of *Genesis* adds nuance to but ultimately supports this narrative reading. The early modern tendency toward visual thinking meant that contemporary viewers of *Genesis* would have picked up on some of the conspicuous symbolism placed throughout, although Sigismund himself is unlikely to have had much input into these minute details. The protagonists' bodies, based on Greco-Roman sculpture, are signifiers

of *gravitas*, heroism, and moral and physical strength—naturally, intended as a reflection on Sigismund. Although there was no codified symbolic lexicon in the Renaissance, the most common meanings attributed to the flora and fauna found in *Genesis* support the messages contained therein, particularly princely virtues and moral exhortations. There are no instances where a diverging interpretation of a symbol could contradict the scene's messaging; rather, the symbols could be conversation pieces encouraging deeper engagement with the tapestries.

All of these layers of reading *Genesis* create a unified programme centred on Sigismund's image-creation as a Christian prince and his approach to political and religious rule in his early reign. Regardless of whether a viewer was more drawn to one level of interpretation or another, or which message stood out more than others, the overall programme of magnificence and imagining Christian kingship in a mid-sixteenth-century Polish context remained cohesive and comprehensible. *Genesis*, then, should be read as a mirror for Sigismund.

Looking forward, the findings of this thesis argue for a return to studies of the “politics of tapestry,” albeit with an increased focus on reception. We can and should use tapestry to delve deeper into the images that monarchs wished to project, and how these were received by their subjects and peers. This thesis also shows the need for more visual and material culture studies within Polish Reformation history. Finally, it argues that religion was a crucial part of Sigismund's image and politics, and calls for more scholarly reconsideration of his central place within the religious history of the period.