2007

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AN ANALYSIS OF THE WARS OF THE ROMANI, A FLEMISH TAPESTRY FROM
THE LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

By

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BFA, Pacific Northwest College of Art, Portland, Oregon, 1996

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Arts
in Art History

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT
May 2007

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Manuela Well-Off-Man
Montana Museum of Art & Culture
Among the treasures of the Montana Museum of Art and Culture is a lovely and elaborate work of art entitled *Wars of the Romani*, a Flemish tapestry woven in the last third of the 16th century. It is a large weaving, 10’ x 15’, portraying two armies intertwined in merciless combat. The specific subject matter of *Wars of the Romani* is unknown, but a standard displaying the Roman eagle held aloft in the background indicates the presence of the Roman legions. The tapestry displays rushing horsemen mounted on vigorous horses, marching spearmen, and supine warriors, imagery common to Flemish battle tapestries from the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Framing the battle scene is a grotesque style border composed of gods placed within whimsical filigree architectural pavilions interwoven with fanciful decoration and mythical beasts. *Wars of the Romani’s* Mannerist battle scene offers a view into the pictorial trends of the late Renaissance and displays the energy of the tumultuous era in which it was woven.
Among the treasures of the Montana Museum of Art and Culture is a lovely and elaborate work of art entitled *Wars of the Romani*, a Flemish tapestry woven in the last third of the 16th century. It is a large weaving, 10’ x 15’, portraying two armies intertwined in merciless combat. The specific subject matter of *Wars of the Romani* is unknown, but a standard displaying the Roman eagle held aloft in the background indicates the presence of the Roman legions. The tapestry displays rushing horsemen mounted on vigorous horses, marching spearmen, and supine warriors, imagery common to Flemish battle tapestries from the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Framing the battle scene is a grotesque style border composed of gods placed within whimsical filigree architectural pavilions interwoven with fanciful decoration and mythical beasts. *Wars of the Romani*’s Mannerist battle scene offers a view into the pictorial trends of the late Renaissance and displays the energy of the tumultuous era in which it was woven.
Wars of the Romani, Flemish tapestry c. 1575, Montana Museum of Art and Culture.
Tapestry

The art historical significance of *Wars of the Romani* becomes evident when one examines the important role tapestry played in the Low Countries during the Renaissance, both economically and socially. Before delving into the iconographic and formal qualities of *Wars of the Romani*, it is important to explain what tapestries are and describe the important role tapestry manufacturing played in the Flemish economy.

Tapestries are artistic, hand made fabrics produced by interweaving colored threads in a prepared warp, using a bobbin. These threads were mostly made from wool, but also made from costly materials such as silk, gold and silver. The warp is completely covered by the weft, and it is the weft which determines the colors and designs. Tapestries were woven on two types of loom, the high-warp and the low-warp. The low-warp was the loom of preference in the Low Countries, while the French preferred the high-warp looms. In any case, the difference between the two looms’ end result is slight to invisible. To capture the image, weavers placed cartoons, executed to scale, behind the threads.

Cartoons were designed by members of the painter’s guild, which had secured the exclusive rights to design of the figurative parts of tapestries. According to Guy Delmarcel, a dispute arose in Brussels in 1476 in which “the painters accused the weavers of having cartoons (patterns on paper) painted by tradesmen from outside the guild, and taking bread out of the mouths of established members of the craft.”¹ In a compromise, tapestry workers retained the freedom to add their own flora and fauna.

Ensuring that professionally trained painters handled the design of figures may have led to the improvement in the quality of Flemish tapestry in the latter quarter of the

15th century. “The human forms acquired new volume under the heavy drape of their robes . . . the light and dark tones alternate, producing an effect of depth previously unknown in tapestry. The flesh tints of hands and faces were produced in subtle nuances.” ² These designers demanded very high prices. For example, Jacob Jordaens (1593 – 1678), received eight guilders a square ell, meaning that the price of the cartoon for *The Riding School With Large Horses* amounted to 800 guilders.³

Tapestry weaving was quite difficult, requiring great technical skill to render the imagery in a painterly manner. Often, specialists were hired specifically to weave the heads and garments. Completing a tapestry progressed slowly due to the fine thread count, the numerous colors, and the variety of design within the image. Up to seven weavers would work at the same loom, but the grandest of tapestries still required months to complete. For example,

“To make a set of tapestries in which each piece was some 3.5 meters high, several looms of that width were needed. About three weavers could work on each loom at the same time. For a not too complicated drawing it can be assumed that each weaver could produce some seventy running centimeters per month. With an average width of perhaps . . . five meters, this meant about seven months work for these weavers, or twenty-one man months. And if the whole set consisted of six or seven tapestries, this easily works out at 126 to 147 months of work.”⁴

Combining the cost of the cartoons, with the costs of the skilled labor and the materials led to a very expensive work of art.

Despite their costliness, the output and trade in tapestries was considerable throughout the late middle ages and the Renaissance. The most important center of the

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³The guilder was the Flemish version of the ducat, which was equivalent to 3.5 grams of gold. A general estimate, according to Francis Turner in his paper “Money and Exchange Rates in 1632,” is that a guilder at the beginning of the 17th century was worth approximately $36. Therefore, 800 guilders would equal approximately $28,800.
⁴Ibid., 14.
tapestry trade in Europe was in the southern Netherlands, where tens of thousands of workers were employed and high profits enjoyed. The tapestry industry existed in many Flemish towns, especially in the basin of the Scheldt River: Tournai, Lille, Oudenaarde, Ghent, Enghien, Brussels, Louvain, Mechlin, St. Trond, Herentals, Antwerp, as well as Arras, Bruges, and other towns. By 1500, Brussels had become the center for the production of high quality tapestries, with Antwerp the center of trade. Great tapestry workshops run by important figures such as Pieter Van Aelst, Pieter de Pannemaker, Van der Moyen, Jan van Tieghem, and Frans Geubels, contributed to the unprecedented vigor and wealth of the tapestry trade.

While Brussels was the capital of tapestry production, Antwerp was the heart of tapestry’s international trading and export. In 1554 the “Tapissierspand” or “Tapestry-Makers Hall” was inaugurated, a trading hall specifically for tapestries. Space was rented for tapestry merchants to sell their wares and the sale of tapestries was not allowed anywhere else in the city. “The trade was stimulated by the major international banking houses, especially German and Portuguese, which had been operating in Antwerp for more than half a century.”5 These banks would have been on hand for the financing of opulent tapestry sets for Europe’s elites. Antwerp shipped completed tapestries to Paris, Lisbon, Cadiz, Frankfurt, Vienna, Hamburg, London, and other great capitals.

This golden age of Flemish tapestry lasted for at least a hundred years, until war erupted across the Low Countries towards the end of the 16th century, when the armies of the Duke of Alba marched across the Flemish countryside, deployed to quell the Protestant uprisings in the Low Countries. Alba’s presence ushered in the Eighty Years War between the Netherlands and Spain which fatally and permanently disrupted the

5 Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 117—118.
tapestry trade in the region. The *Tapijsterspand* was looted during the Spanish Fury of 1576 unpaid Spanish troops sacked Antwerp, killing 7,000 people and burning a third of the city to the ground.

**Current Documentation on Wars of the Romani**

The existing documentation on *Wars of the Romani* consists merely of the following: a receipt provided to Josephine P. Bay⁶ listing the five items she donated to what was then the Montana State University, including the tapestry entitled *Wars of the Romani*, and dated December 19, 1957; a short correspondence in 1988 between Dennis Kern, the University of Montana’s gallery director, and Debra Kraak, the assistant curator of textiles and costumes at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Kern had been offered assistance by the MFA in identifying the *Wars of the Romani* as well as two other tapestries donated by Ms. Bay. In her return correspondence, Ms. Kraak admits that the identity and subject matter of *Wars of the Romani* was difficult to track down, and that she could not discover where it was made, only suggesting maybe the town of Oudenaarde and asserting that it does not appear to have been made in a Brussels workshop. To this day, this is the Museum’s only professional opinion as to the origins of *Wars of the Romani*.⁷

I disagree with the statement that *Wars of the Romani* is from an Oudenaarde workshop. Tapestries woven in Oudenaarde, though charming and elegant, lacked the sophistication and opulence of the works created in the high-end Brussels workshops.

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⁶ Josephine Bay was a very wealthy Wall Street business woman and philanthropist.
Under cursory examination, *Wars of the Romani* has many stylistic qualities that resemble Oudenaarde tapestries from the late 16th century. The features of the warriors seem rather crude, and fine detail is lacking overall. But having the piece professionally photographed revealed a more vibrantly colored and less stiffly rendered tapestry than I initially believed. Some of the figures may appear so crude as a result of wear and tear, fading, and the distortion created by the surface of the tapestry losing its integrity over the centuries. I am certain that a complete cleaning and restoration will reveal even more. Furthermore, the foreground warriors are quite adeptly rendered, with accurate anatomy, dramatic postures, and even the veins in the flesh carefully modeled, adding emotional
intensity to their suffering. This is in contrast to the much more stiffly presented Oudenaarde figures. In addition, my review of Oudenaarde tapestries has yet to turn up a border design closely related to those designed in the workshop of Frans Geubel’s, the probable source of *Wars of the Romani’s* border, as I will discuss in detail below. However, a tapestry from the town of Enghien has a border remarkably similar to *Wars of the Romani’s*.

The town of Enghien, located between Brussels and Tournai, had a flourishing tapestry trade during the latter half of the sixteenth century. Its quality of design and weaving also achieved a high level of excellence at this time. In fact, in 1559, when accused of trying to pass off Enghien tapestries as Brussels works, a local by the name of Hellinck responded that Enghien tapestries were just as good as the capital’s. Delmarcel
comments on the similarity between many figurative Enghien tapestries of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century and those of Brussels.

“Models and even border designs were taken over from Brussels in their entirety, and the origin of the tapestries is indicated only by the town marks. These borrowings were probably the result of too small a number of local cartoon painters, who were unable to cope with the demand of the Enghien workshops, which were mainly export oriented.”

Delmarcel also notes that the 1589 tapestry *Hunting Tapestry with the Arms of Croy-Lalaing* was apparently made with re-used cartoons already employed by Frans Geubels.\(^8\)

The workshop that produced *Hunting Scene* is unknown, but a tapestry entitled *Life of Abraham*, from the workshop of Filips van der Cammen, and woven c. 1575 bears many noteworthy similarities with *Wars of the Romani*. The rectangular form of the tapestry, the grotesque border design with animal allegories, the same symbolic figures and pairs of gods, and even the strange burning stepped altar centrally located in the top border are found in both *Wars of the Romani* and *Life of Abraham*. Also, the representation of trees along the horizon and the plant life in the foreground show a common design. Delmarcel refers to Van der Cammen’s *Abraham* set as a prime example of borrowings from Brussels.\(^9\) It is likely that these designs originated in Frans Geubels’ workshop as I will discuss in detail below. In any case, locating the workshop of origin of Renaissance tapestries is quite difficult due to the scarcity of documentation.

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\(^8\) Delmarcel, *Flemish Tapestry*, 173.

\(^9\) Ibid., 176.
Identifying Tapestries

Due to the high expense of producing a set of tapestries and the length of time required, many transactions were not conducted between the client and the master weaver or owner of the workshop. Instead negotiations were mostly accomplished through the mediation of financiers acting as middlemen called “factors.” Both the manufacturers and middlemen in the Southern Netherlands were “always independent individuals working as private entrepreneurs. The phenomenon of a state workshop . . . never occurred in the Netherlands. This largely explains why so little documentary evidence of the activities of these workshops has survived.”

State bureaucrats keeping an eye on royal tapestry works, such as the Gobelins in Paris, would have carefully noted everything in writing for the administration, providing surviving documentation.

Also, tapestry weaving in the Renaissance was a collective art. The cartoons were produced by specialist painters who, except for the most important painters of the era, remain anonymous. The cartoons for the subject matter were generally re-used to weave new editions, sometimes even for generations with the borders adapted for current fashions. “Workshops often owned the exclusive rights to such drawings . . . whole borders, or sometimes part of them, were switched and reused from one composition to another and from one workshop to the next.” In addition, tapestry designers and their cartoons were quite mobile, and once Brussels had established the popularity of certain motifs, dissemination of imagery to workshops across the Low Countries happened quickly.

\[10^\text{Delmarcel, Flemish Tapestry, 16.}\]
\[11\] \text{Ibid., 20.}\]
Considering this endless variation on themes and styles in Flemish tapestry, absent documentation, there are two means of attempting to make a tapestry attribution. First, by identifying the weaver’s mark, a rare and fortuitous occurrence for reasons I will discuss below. The second means is by carefully comparing the border design of the tapestry with the border design belonging to an already identified workshop. When using this method, the border in question must be identical to the already attributed border.

The Town and Weaver’s Marks

By the end of the 15th century the art of weaving was being pushed to its technical limits as weavers attempted to approach the refinement of Flemish panel painting. Patrons expected every weft thread of these tapestries to have been dyed before hand, and that every centimeter of the pictorial area was entirely created by the skill of the weaver. However, tapestry cartoons had become so finely detailed, that the practice of afsetten, ("off-setting") the addition of color to certain parts of the tapestry after it was woven, had become a serious problem. In addition, Brussels weavers had gained such a high reputation that attempts were made to pass off tapestries from other towns as Brussels’ work. To combat these two issues,

“The Brussels city magistrates issued an ordinance on May 16, 1528 requiring that two marks were to be woven into every tapestry larger than six ells (about six yards), after it had been inspected: the first was the monogram of the weaver or producer responsible for it, and second that of the city of Brussels, a red shield with a capital B on each side (Brabant, Brussels).”12

These marks were recorded in a registry that was destroyed in a fire in 1690.

12 Delmarcel, Flemish Tapestry, 115.
The Brussels ordinance was not sufficient to counter deception in manufacturing, therefore, in May of 1544, the Emperor Charles V handed down an imperial edict applying to the entire tapestry industry of the Low Countries requiring that all weavers in the Netherlands mark their tapestries with both a town mark and a weaver’s mark, to ensure honesty in trading. Today, few tapestries with marks survive. The town mark was generally woven into the lowest part of the outer border, close to the floor, therefore subject to wear and tear leading to gradual obliteration.

Thanks to careful research, tapestries can, on the grounds of their marks, be attributed to workshops in the towns of Brussels, Enghien, Bruges, Antwerp, Oudenaarde, and Geraardsbergen. However, the interpretation of weaver’s marks has proven difficult. With the advent of the 1544 ordinance, all weavers were required to register their official mark, but these registries have disappeared, and only incomplete and occasional lists and documents remain. “The search through the archives of the sixteenth century has delivered a large number of names of weavers and dealers, but hardly any pieces can be related to these names because most weaver’s marks were extremely cryptic signs such as a star, a heart, or a lily.”13 When initials are provided as the weaver’s mark, they often match the initials of more than one weaver. Also, there is information about the precise nature of tapestry production for only the most famous of weavers and dealers. Therefore, identifying workshops through weaver’s marks can be hypothetical.

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Borders

*Wars of the Romani* lacks the city’s and weaver’s marks, but the tapestry’s border bears many similarities with borders designed in the workshop of Frans Geubels’, an important Brussels weaver working from 1551 to 1577. Imagery common to *Wars of the Romani* and the piece from Geubels’ workshop includes pairs of gods, symbolic figures, and animal allegories organized in the decorative style called “grotesque.” This particular style of grotesque border was also used by other Brussels workshops in the latter third of the sixteenth century, including the shops of Michael Coxcie, Frans Gheeteels, and Cornelis Tons, as well as the Enghien workshop of Filips van der Cammen. This is useful for dating *Wars of the Romani* to circa 1575, as these workshops were producing these border styles from the 1560s through the 1580s.

As touched on above, Geubels’ workshop seems the likely source of the cartoons for the borders. Frans Geubels’ workshop was quite famous and produced tapestries of the highest quality. His series on *Romulus and Remus* from the 1560s included silk, silver, and gold thread, suggesting that it was made specially to order, and its figures, draperies and scenery are woven with a care, skill, and sophistication not present in *Wars of the Romani*.

The addition of borders to tapestries as a finishing touch became an established practice beginning circa 1500. Throughout the 16th century, the taste for particular border types, usually originating in the most sophisticated Brussels workshops, set the tone for the rest of the Low Country weaving centers, leading to countless variants on popular styles. A border style particularly popular in the last half of the 16th century was called the “grotesque” style.
Grotesque Style

The border of Wars of the Romani displays the grotesque style popularized by the Raphael school in the first half of the 16th century. This ornamental style was inspired by the discovery in Rome of Nero’s Domus Aurea, or Golden House, in 1493. “The interior walls and ceilings of these underground rooms, known as grotte, were painted in a light and playful manner previously unknown to those familiar only with the formal grammar of Classical ornament derived from more accessible antique ruins.” Rooms and ceilings were covered with an interlocking arrangement of compartments containing mythological or allegorical scenes, or subdivided into areas dominated by a single compartment with the remaining space filled with a variety of motifs, symmetrically organized but otherwise unrelated either by scale or subject-matter. Whimsical decoration, graceful miniature figures, birds, fantastic animals, and plants were brought together to form flowing curves and fluttering movement.

Other motifs included elegant strings of pearls and ribbons; festoons surrounding medallions and small painted panels; and composite beings in metamorphosis.

This play of fantasy and appeal to the senses captured the imagination of Renaissance artists and revived the medieval taste for the fanciful and the monstrous, and soon after its discovery, classical grotesque ornament was copied and disseminated.

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throughout Europe by the drawings and engravings of Italian artists. However, many Renaissance artists were uncomfortable with the loose organization of unconnected elements so they imposed a structure that enabled them to use the motifs in a more orderly manner. Designers developed a vertical format based on the pilaster and traditional candelabrum type of framework, with individual motifs placed one above the other and connected by a central axis, a method ideal for the design of tapestry borders. Earlier tapestry border styles consisting simply of garlands of flowers and fruit give way to ribbon and scroll work, masks, hermae, human figures, and architectural elements.

The tapestry workshop of Frans Geubels skillfully applied the grotesque style to the border imagery surrounding many of the tapestry series they produced. One such series, entitled *The Story of Tobit and Tobias*, probably woven between 1560 and 1575, bears grotesque borders strikingly similar to that of *Wars of the Romani*. Though *Wars of the Romani’s* border appears less skillfully executed, comparing the imagery of the two borders suggests that Frans Geubel’s workshop may have been the source of *Wars of the Romani’s* border’s cartoon.

*Tobit and Anna Taken into Exile in Nineveh*, in the collection of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, is one tapestry from the set of *The Story of Tobit and Tobias*. This tapestry displays three weaver’s marks that identify it with the Brussels workshop of Frans Geubel: the mark identified with Geubels workshop, the Brussel’s town mark, and another unidentifiable mark consisting of the initials “NDW,” referring to a weaver called the NDW Master. Both *Romani* and *Tobit and Anna* are surrounded by richly ornamented
Tobit and Anna, Flemish tapestry c. 1575, workshop of Frans Geubels, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.
borders on a cream-colored ground and, in typical grotesque style, divided into compartments by representations of pergolas and arches supported by hermes and caryatids. The compartments contain mythological pairs of gods, symbolic figures, and animal allegories, alternating with vases of flowers, arrangements of fruit, foliage, and grotesques in the form of incense burners, sphinxes, and satyrs. The allegorical figures and pairs of gods, as well as their placement within the border, are nearly identical, with minor design variations, in both tapestries. In the lower right corner stands Jupiter with his scepter and thunderbolt. Seated before him is his wife, Juno, with her attributes, a scepter and a peacock. In the lower left corner their son Vulcan shoulders a hammer—in Romani he also clasps a pair of tongs—while in front of him sits his wife Venus, with Cupid leaning against her lap. Slightly above the center of the left border a female figure holds aloft a sword in her right hand—in Romani she also holds a set of scales—while across the tapestry scene, standing in the right border is a female figure with a palm-branch and scales on which a laurel wreath
and an unidentified object – absent in Romani—are placed. In the center of the lower horizontal border, both tapestries hold representations of a female figure seated at a balustrade. Crowned with a wreath of oranges and holding a cornucopia and a basket of fruit, she personifies Abundance. In the Tobit tapestry, Abundance also resides in the top horizontal border, whereas within Romanis the pergola frames a series of steps, flanked by two large birds, leading to a grotesque altar beneath an arch, supported by two mythological beasts and topped by a large flame. These mythological and allegorical figures alternate with allegorical representations of animals accompanied by text-banderoles in the Tobit piece. I will discuss the meaning of the animal allegories below.

The allegorical female figures in the vertical borders invited various interpretations from the Rijksmuseum. The figure in the left border of the Tobit piece was originally thought to personify War, and the figure on the right Peace which would complement the war-like subject matter of Wars of the Romani. However, the figure on the
left is more likely Justice, particularly since Justice was often represented in the 16th century with a sword held aloft as her sole attribute. The palm-branch and laurel wreath in the *Tobit* tapestry identify the right-hand figure as Victory, but *Romani* lacks the laurel wreath. In addition, her scales, usually Justice’s attribute, are at variance with traditional iconography.15

In addition to the gods and symbolic figures, animal allegories are also present in both *Tobit’s* and *Romani’s* borders. The portrayal of animal allegories in tapestry borders was not uncommon in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and can be seen in the works of such Brussels weavers as Michael Coxcie and Frans Gheeteels.

**Animal Allegories**

The meaning and origin of the allegorical representations of animals probably dates back to tracts on the animal kingdom from late antiquity. The stork with a wiggling snake in its beak in the *Tobit* tapestry, for example, is based on a passage in Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis* in which Pliny relates that the stork was such an important exterminator of snakes that harming it was punishable by death. The tortoise and snake with the small plant, portrayed in both *Tobit* and *Romanis*, probably refer to Pliny’s frequent recommendation of wild oregano as an antidote to snake venom.

**Animal Allegories and Medieval Bestiaries**

The banderoles accompanying the animal allegories in *Tobit* provide a descriptive text, but *Romani*, inexplicably, provides the banderoles but not the text. Other tapestries with similar schemes from the workshops of Geubels, Coxcie, Gheeteel, and the Enghien

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weaver Van der Cammen each contain text within the banderoles accompanying the
animal allegories. It seems hard to believe that the weaving of letters would be anymore
difficult than the other imagery within a tapestry. Unless the text wore away over the
centuries, or was left unfinished for some unknown reason, why the text is absent remains
a mystery. However, Romani’s animal allegories can be traced to the bestiaries popular in
the Low Countries and throughout Europe in the middle ages.

There was a distinctly spiritual and even mystical aspect to the animal lore of the
Middle Ages. In the Christian west, it was commonly believed that the natural world had
been arranged by God to provide a source of instruction to humanity. This idea was based
on biblical verses such as this one from the book of Job:

But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds of the air, and they will tell you; or speak to the
earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish of the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the
hand of the Lord has done this? In his hand is the life of every creature and the breath of all mankind. (Job
12:7-10). 16

Animals had been written about for centuries before the Christian era, but Christianity
took these ancient natural histories and turned them into religious allegories. For
example, “as the pelican revives her dead young after three days with her own blood, so
Christ ‘revived’ humanity with his blood after three days in the grave,” and, “as the eagle
rejects any of its young that cannot stare unflinching into the sun, so God will reject any
sinners who cannot bear his divine light.”

The first known text to reinterpret the classical natural histories was the
Physiologus, written in Greek in Alexandria in the second or third century CE. This
collection of animal lore briefly describes an animal and continues with a Christian

allegorical interpretation. The *Physiologus* was quite popular and was translated into most of the major languages of Europe, and was one of the most widely-distributed books in Europe after the Bible. The original *Physiologus* text, describing less than fifty animals, continued to evolve, accumulating more beasts and additional moral interpretations. These volumes were called “bestiaries.”

The bestiary manuscripts were usually illustrated, sometimes lavishly. The pictures in bestiaries served as a visual language for the illiterate public, who knew the stories from sermons and would remember the moral teaching when they saw the beast depicted, appearing not only in the bestiaries themselves, but in manuscripts of all kinds; and carved in stone in churches and monasteries, both inside and out, carved in wood on decorated furniture; painted on walls, worked into mosaics; and woven into tapestries.

A large number of bestiary manuscripts were written in Latin, the common language of medieval scholars and clerics, with many more written in languages such as French. The Latin bestiary was primarily a product of England, though a few were produced elsewhere, particularly in France. Their authors or compilers are unknown, but there are several distinct groups or "families" of manuscripts. In France, several vernacular verse bestiaries appeared, in various dialects of what is now French, and in these the author usually left his name. Gervaise wrote his *Bestiaire* in the Norman French dialect around the beginning of the thirteenth century, as did Guillaume le Clerc, and Philippe de Thaon wrote his in the Anglo-Norman dialect around 1121. In the early thirteenth century Pierre de Beauvais wrote two versions of a prose French *Bestiaire* that were quite popular.\(^{17}\)

\(^{17}\) Badke, *The Medieval Bestiary.*
Artists and scholars in the Low Countries, ideally situated in a commerce oriented economy between such bestiary producing areas as France, England and Germany, would probably have been familiar with a range of bestiaries, but Flemish monastics also produced many bestiaries of their own. One of the most famous bestiaries written in the Netherlands was *Der Naturen Bloeme* (“the flower of nature”) by Jacob van Maerlant, a famous 13th century Flemish poet. *Der Naturen Bloeme* is a modified translation into Middle Dutch of the *Liber de Natura Rerum*, written in the middle of the thirteenth century by Thomas de Cantimpré, a Flemish scholar who lived from 1201 to 1272. The manuscript contains descriptions, and often illustrations, of hundreds of beasts, birds and...

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18 The *Liber de natura rerum* was written around the years 1230-1245. In this enormous encyclopedia, Thomas compiled the natural history knowledge of his time, including what would now be called anthropology, zoology, botany, mineralogy, astronomy, astrology, and meteorology. His intent was to create a text that would serve as an introduction to "natural sciences" for the use of preachers and other ecclesiastics.
fish, many of which are imaginary or not identifiable. Maerlant's original manuscript is lost but many copies were produced.

Also, graphic art, in both prints and book illustration, had become a virtual Antwerp monopoly during the sixteenth century. Heironymous Cock’s publishing house, Aux Quatre Vents (At the Sign of the Four Winds) was one of the most famous producers, but other publishers included, “Galle who started as an engraver for Cock; Crispin de Passe of Utrecht; Dominicus Custos of Antwerp; the Sadelers of Antwerp and Brussels. Concurrently with the growth of Cock’s shop Christophe Plantin in the same city was rising to become the greatest European book publisher.”19 The incredibly dynamic and successful publishing shops of the Low Countries probably produced copies of bestiaries or disseminated their images after converting them into woodcuts, or better yet, engravings, an especially vital source of inspiration for Flemish tapestry designers.

An English bestiary I have consulted, called the Aberdeen Bestiary, is typical of the times. It combines the early natural histories of Pliny and Isidore of Seville with lavish illustrations and moralizing text. Using this bestiary, as well as Pliny’s and Isidore’s commentaries, I will offer some possible interpretations of Wars of the Romani’s animal allegories.

The Hedgehog

The *Aberdeen Bestiary* states, “The hedgehog is covered in prickles. From this it gets its name, because it bristles, when it is enclosed in its prickles and is protected by them on all sides against attack. For as soon as it senses anything, it first bristles then, rolling itself into a ball, regains its courage behind its armor.”

Snake and Tortoise

The tortoise and snake with the herb between them probably refer to Pliny’s frequent recommendation of wild oregano as an antidote to snake venom. "The Tortoise, having eaten a serpent, dispels the poison by eating the herb Oregano." The depiction is captioned in *Tobit* with NE.CONTAGIA.LEDANT (so that touching will do no harm).

Lizard gazing into the Sun

According to Isidore of Seville in his *Etymologies*, “The lizard (lacertus) is so called because it has arms. As it ages it goes blind; as a cure it goes to an opening in a wall that faces east and looks at the sun, and gets light. (Etymologies, Book 12, 4:34, 37)"

The Crow and Its Child

The Aberdeen Bestiary states, “Let men learn from the crow's example and its sense of duty, to love their children. Crows follow their young in flight, escorting them attentively; they feed them anxiously in case they weaken. A very long time passes before they give up their responsibility for feeding their offspring.”

The Hyena

The Aberdeen Bestiary states, “There is an animal called the hyena, which inhabits the tombs of the dead and feeds on their bodies. Its nature is that it is sometimes male, sometimes female, and it is therefore an unclean animal. Solinus recounts many marvelous things about the hyena. First, it stalks the sheepfolds of shepherds and circles their houses by night, and by listening carefully learns their speech, so that it can imitate the human voice, in order to fall on any man whom it has lured out at night.”

The Goat

The Aberdeen Bestiary states, “The fact that the goat has very sharp eyesight, sees everything and recognizes things from a long way off, signifies our Lord, who is the lord of all knowing and God.”

The Phoenix

The Aberdeen Bestiary states, “The phoenix is a bird of Arabia, so called either because its coloring is Phoenician purple, or because there is only one of its kind in the whole world. It lives for upwards of five hundred years, and when it observes that it has grown old, it erects a funeral pyre for itself from small branches of aromatic plants, and having turned to face the rays of the sun, beating its wings, it deliberately fans the flames for itself and is consumed in the fire. But on the ninth day after that, the bird rises from its own ashes. Our Lord Jesus Christ displays the features of this bird, saying: 'I have the power to lay down my life and to take it again' (see John, 10:18). If, therefore, the phoenix has the power to destroy and revive itself, why do fools grow angry at the word of God, who is the true son of God, who says: 'I have the power to lay down my life and to take it again'? Let this bird teach us, therefore, by its own example to believe in the resurrection of the body; lacking both an example to follow and any sense of reason, it reinvests itself with

the very signs of resurrection, showing without doubt that birds exist as an example to man, not man as an example to the birds.” 25

The Stag

A wounded stag with an arrow in its chest captioned in *Tobit* with MEVM.INMEDICABILE (my wound is incurable) is depicted in both *Tobit* and *Romani*, though in *Tobit* the stag stands while in *Romani* it lays on its belly. The *Romani* stag of course lacks accompanying text. The stag is another beast that battles and devours poisonous serpents, and with the correct antidote it can expel the killing arrows. From the *Aberdeen Bestiary*: “Deer are the enemies of snakes; when they feel weighed down with weakness, they draw snakes from their holes with the breath of their noses and, overcoming the fatal nature of their venom, eat them and are restored. They have shown the value of the herb dittany, for after feeding on it, they shake out the arrows which have lodged in them.” 26

The Cock and Lion

Pliny the Elder writes in his *Natural History*,

“Cocks carry themselves so proudly that even the noble lion is afraid of them.” (Natural History, Book 10, 24-25). 27

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Wars of the Romani's animal allegories may be purely decorative, but they also may enhance the battle scene’s martial aspects. For example, the hedgehog and the tortoise imply a bristling and well-armored defense, while the cock and lion suggest bravery against a fearsome foe, qualities necessary when engaged in combat. In the war torn Low Countries at the end of the sixteenth century, such allegories would probably not have been lost on the denizens of the Low Countries. Furthermore, the tapestry shopper would have been very familiar with battle scenes with a classical orientation like that portrayed in Wars of the Romani as these were plentiful in the latter third of the sixteenth century.

The Subject Matter of Wars of the Romani

Tapestry cycles devoted to Roman and classical history were quite common during the 16th century. Some examples from Brussels workshops are The Life of Scipio by the weaver Cornelis Tons, The History of Hannibal by Corenelis de Ronde, and the History of the Romans and the Sabines by Nicolaas van Orley. Each of these weavers produced works during the last third of the sixteenth century. These also continue a textual tradition common to tapestry creation and design.

Renaissance princes often surrounded themselves with tapestries displaying the exploits of great leaders from antiquity in order to associate their own reigns with those of illustrious biblical, mythological, and historical rulers. Like the bestiaries, sources for these stories often came from medieval interpretations of classical texts by authors such as Livy and Homer, drawing on the adventures of great generals such as Caesar and Scipio, or virtuous knights such as Hector.
A text written at the end of the thirteenth century entitled *Gesta Romanirum*, or *Deeds of the Romans*, was quite popular throughout the middle ages. Compiled by unknown medieval scholars, *Deeds of the Romans* consists of a series of short, moralizing stories gathered from Roman tales and, like the bestiaries, given Christian themes. One tale, *Of the Sin of Pride*, was the narrative source for a tapestry woven for the Duke Philip of Burgundy in the 1450s entitled *Caesar Crossing the Rubicon*. In it, a large phantom rises from the Rubicon to block Caesar’s advance, demanding “Caesar, if your purpose be the welfare of the state—pass on; but if not, beware how you advance another step.” Caesar replies, “I have long fought for, and am still prepared to undergo every hardship in defense of Rome; of which I take the gods who I worship to be my witnesses.”

![Caesar Crossing the Rubicon from The Life of Caesar, circa 1460, Historisches Museum, Berne.](image)

The Christian moral to the story is that the Rubicon signifies baptism, by which mankind re-enters a state of blessedness. The ensuing civil war between Pompeii

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and Caesar is a possible theme for Wars of the Romani, and would certainly reflect the wars raging in the Low Countries at the time. Also, textual sources in tapestry, in addition to lending the gravity of high art, often enhanced the propagandistic role that tapestry played during the Renaissance.

The Importance of Text in Renaissance Artworks

The great Renaissance humanist and theorist Leon Battista Alberti addressed the issue of text based artworks in his 1436 treatise on painting entitled Della Pittura, in which he concluded that, “The greatest work of the painter is the istoria.” 29 Istoria is the subject matter presented to the viewer, the word meaning literally “history.” Pictures employing subject matter sanctioned by time and tradition, especially multi-figured compositions, are called “history paintings.” “The artist does not so much invent subjects, but reinterprets those that are well known, and he does it in such a way as to elevate and touch the viewer.” 30 Painting was to be a noble pursuit, and the artist had to be well educated. Art was not simply a craft and the artist was not a humble craftsman. Alberti defended the status of the artist by pointing out the esteem in which artists were held by the ancient Greeks. “Because they wished their sons to be well educated, taught them painting along with geometry and music . . . for the art of painting has always been worthy of liberal minds and noble souls.” 31

Tapestry design was monopolized by the painters’ guild, so it is safe to assume that artists were not interested in simply creating decorative and pleasurable wall hangings, but rather works that projected the depth and gravity of high art. Tapestries had

30 Ibid., 62.
31 Ibid., 63.
never been intended as mere beautiful objects, but, like Renaissance frescos and paintings, were elaborate works of art involving complex iconographic schemes and skillful craftsmanship often serving propagandistic purposes.

It is true that tapestries served a practical purpose. These elaborate weavings had replaced silk brocade and embroidered hangings as wall covering in castles and patrician houses, turning bare rooms into elegant colorful interiors. Displays of several episodes of one theme in a series were referred to as “chambers.” There were door pieces designed to cover doorways, and window pieces specifically woven to be hung around or over windows. Tapestries also carried out a civic role as they were brought outside and hung along roads or suspended from windows for religious festivals, processions, joyous entries, and holidays. Within churches, tapestry’s color and elegance was combined with biblical iconography to lend magnificence to the ceremonies and used to divide large rooms into smaller sections, or to shut off the apse or choir. The convenience and portability of tapestry allowed traveling princes and nobles to pack chambers of tapestries along with their mobile households to create a sense of familiarity as they moved from fiefdom to fiefdom. In the field, princely tents were hung with many tapestries during the hunt or military campaigns to enliven the setting as well as to enhance the nobleman’s lofty identity.

Princes and other nobles selected subject matter that was carefully crafted to enhance their personal glory when commissioning tapestries. Armorial tapestries displayed the nobleman’s coat of arms while mythological subjects such as The Siege of Troy, or the semi-mythical exploits of Alexander and Caesar connected the nobleman to these illustrious conquerors from antiquity. During a nobleman’s joyous entry, chambers
of tapestries displaying the prince’s victories added dignity and magnificence to the pompous and carefully orchestrated ceremonies.

*Wars of the Romani*, while a large and beautiful tapestry, does not fall into the category of one of these extraordinarily opulent masterpieces, but it is worth discussing one of these series to further clarify the point that the presence of some sort of guiding text, possibly propagandistic, is behind *Romani’s* imagery. *The History of Gideon*, commissioned by Philip the Bold, is a textbook example of such a propaganda scheme, and also an example of how tapestry enhances a rulers overall projection of power and majesty.

The Dukes of Burgundy were masters at creating theatrical court ceremony to enhance their grandeur, and elevated the use of tapestries as propaganda to new levels of sophistication. Given tapestry’s physical beauty, scale (and thus visibility), portability, and flexibility of placement, tapestries were an ideal medium for the grandiose court ceremonies of the itinerant Burgundian court.

“Essential to the success of these various ceremonies was the carefully planned display of art publicizing specific conceits, such as those equating the Burgundian Dukes with Alexander the Great and other ancient prototypes, or representing them as perfect princes ruling over a terrestrial paradise.”

*The History of Gideon* was commissioned to enhance major ducal pageants as well as for use as the official tapestries of the *Toison d’Or*, the Order of the Golden Fleece, the chivalric brotherhood Philip had established in 1430.

The biblical hero Gideon, along with the Greek hero Jason, was the patron of the Order of the Golden Fleece, a knightly brotherhood established to defend Christendom.

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The iconographic scheme of the tapestry series closely followed the biblical tale found in
the Book of Judges, chapters 6 – 8, in which Gideon, guided by the miracle of the fleece,
overthrows the Israelites’ Midianite oppressors with an elite army of 300 warriors. Out of
respect, the Israelites then elect Gideon and his heirs as lifelong rulers. Philip the Good
viewed Gideon as a model for his own reign, because Gideon was an ideal and dynastic
ruler, selected by the grace of God and the will of the people, just like the Dukes of
Burgundy.

Duke Philip commissioned the series in 1449, hiring the town of Arras’ leading
artist Baudouin de Bailleul, as well as the weavers Robert Dary and Jehan de l-Ortie from
Tournai. Taking four years to complete, the series measured some 5.6 meters high, and
collectively the eight pieces reached 98 meters in length. Woven with Venetian gold and
silver threads, plus finest silks, these tapestries were without a doubt magnificent. The
Duke also took the unusual step of buying the cartoons to ensure that the series would
never be duplicated.

In 1456, *The History of Gideon* was first publicly displayed at the chapter meeting
of the Order of the Golden Fleece held at the Binnenhof in The Hague, and for the next
century, was exhibited at all of the brotherhood’s assemblies. The artistic programs at the
chapter meetings were designed to stress the magnificence and piety of the brotherhood
and especially to be witnessed and reported on by foreign envoys and dignitaries. A
Milanese ambassador, attending one of these meetings, remarked that, “The banquet hall
was completely hung with tapestries of cloth of gold, as above, marvelous works
depicting the whole story of how the golden fleece was sent down from heaven to Gideon as a sign that he was to undertake the salvation of the people of Israel.”

The tapestries also served the Duke in more public settings. In 1461, Duke Philip helped crown Louis XI as King of France, and during their joint triumphal entry at Rheims, the magnificence of Philip eclipsed that of the young king. Parisians flocked to the pavilion of Philip where he displayed many splendid and beautiful art objects. “Among these riches there were two things that were shown publicly and that the Parisians were able neither to recover from nor to get enough of. The first was the tapestry of Gideon, the richest on the earth at this time and richer than all the others of the world in the past. It surpasses these as much in richness as by its work. And it is so large that scarcely any hall in the world is able to contain it all.”

Accounts of the time rate Philip the Good’s tapestry series as one of the most expensive and admired artistic projects of the period, but tragically, *The History of Gideon* disappeared in 1794 while being transported along with other Golden Fleece objects to Vienna. *The History of Gideon* was a propagandistic success, for the tapestries successfully placed the association of Duke Philip with Gideon in public consciousness, according to the extraordinary number of contemporary references to tapestry set.

In this manner, the wise Dukes of Burgundy refined the use of tapestry, and their innovations served as the model for the use and display of tapestries for many later rulers, most notably the Habsburgs. The formal compositions and figural representations found in tapestries would also continue to evolve throughout the Renaissance as ideas from Italy found fertile ground in the tapestry markets of the north.

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33 Smith, “Portable Propaganda—Tapestries as Princely Metaphors at the Courts of Philip the Good and Charles the Bold,” 124.
Wars of the Romani

According to Guy Delmarcel, tapestries displaying battle scenes without accompanying text or identifiable iconic characters were common towards the end of the 16th century. But even though Wars of the Romani lacks explanatory text, it is still a fine example of Flemish tapestry from this time period, offering many insights into the design qualities of such works. Certain pairings of combatants may have been duplicated from tapestries woven in earlier times, or borrowed from high Renaissance Italian works brought to the attention of Flemish designers by imported engravings or the sketches of colleagues that had traveled to Italy. In addition, a close examination of Wars of the Romani reveals that its grotesque style border and large, heroic figures in the foreground show the powerful influence of Raphael’s tapestry series The Acts of the Apostles, while its chaotic, complex composition and almost

Dueling warriors from Caesar Crossing the Rubicon, circa 1450

The Battle of Ten Nudes, Antonio del Pollaiuolo, c. 1470
medieval stacking of figures confirms the dominant international art style of the time: Mannerism. In addition, the overall arrangement of figures reflects a design language common in many battle scene tapestries from the end of the sixteenth century. The foreground of Wars of the Romani shows two action sequences, one of a retreating horseman, the other a dramatic duel, both of which are quite similar to certain portrayals found in the much older Caesar Crossing the Rubicon, woven in the mid 15th century. In both tapestries, a knight on horseback gallops away from the advancing army while he twists backwards in the saddle to deliver a blow. Below him, a fatal duel takes place as one soldier leans aggressively over his fallen opponent and clutches his neck, sword raised for brutal dispatch. Two other familiar motifs are visible in the tapestry. The action swirls around two swordfighting foot soldiers, the left-hand warrior steps forward boldly with falchion raised above his head to deliver a killing blow while he attempts to shove aside the shield of the right-hand warrior, protectively raised, his sword also ready to strike, his legwork dancingly active. These two clashing footmen recall Antonio del Pollaiuolo engraving from the 1470s entitled Battle of Ten Nudes, which displays five combats disposed in a variety of poses and movements. Beyond them, even further back in the composition, two distant, fighting figures on horseback call to mind Leonardo’s legendary cartoon for the Battle of Anghiari, prepared circa 1503, which has survived only through copies, the most famous rendered by Peter Paul Rubens. In both images, two figures, one viewed from the front, the other from the back, are dramatically engaged mono a mono, falchions raised high in mirror image to deliver powerful blows, warhorses breast to breast and rearing.
Also, the heavy musculature and dramatic poses of the fallen warriors in *Wars of the Romani’s* foreground mirrors the figural designs introduced to the Netherlands by the innovative and grand tapestry series *The Acts of the Apostles*. Raphael’s designs contained life-size figures placed in clearly defined perspectival settings with the borders of the tapestry used as a frame through which a realistically portrayed moment of physical or emotional drama was viewed. This synthesis provided a richly textured and dramatic style of design ideally suited to the tapestry medium. As such, it was to form the basis of the narrative and structural technique that dominated high-quality Netherlandish tapestry design for the next 50 years, supplanting the late medieval style of the Northern Renaissance with its lithe, graceful figures placed in highly stylized settings.

**Raphael’s *The Acts of the Apostles***

*The Acts of the Apostles* consists of ten tapestries commissioned by Pope Leo X in 1515 that were woven in Brussels from cartoons designed by the High Renaissance master Raphael Sanzio. The iconographic program was designed to complement the
grand fresco cycles of the Sistine Chapel, and conceived by Raphael and his workshop as vast woven frescos with life-size figures interacting in fully-realized, illusionistic settings. When completed by the Brussels workshop of Pieter van Aelst, the tapestries were widely praised by dignitaries from across Europe for their surpassing beauty. “The scale, drama, artistry, and status of Raphael’s achievement took tapestry design in a wholly new direction”34 fundamentally altering the subsequent development of Netherlandish tapestry design. Through engraved and woven copies, The Acts effectively promoted the Italian Renaissance style in northern Europe, influencing the future designs of great Flemish tapestry designers such as Bernaert van Orley.

Raphael’s tapestries would join the works of some of the greatest artists of the Renaissance in the first chapel of Christendom: the Sistine. The upper walls were already decorated with the series *The Lives of Christ and Moses*, painted by the Renaissance masters Perugino, Botticelli, Signorelli, and Ghirlandaio. The ceiling held Michelangelo’s groundbreaking iconographic program of Sibyls, Prophets, and scenes from the Book of Genesis. Inventories of the time show that 47 tapestries were already in use in the Sistine Chapel, but these tapestries probably lacked the uniformity and visual impact of a large and elaborate series. For this reason, Pope Leo X, the Medici pope descended from a line of great patrons, continued the noble tradition of commissioning ornate, custom-made tapestries. To do so, he went to the most talented and beloved artist in Rome at the time, Raphael.

Raphael was at the height of his career when he received the commission to design the tapestry series *The Acts of the Apostles*. Stylistically, he had abandoned the emotional restraint of his earlier works that showed the hand of his master Perugino for
The Miraculous Draft of Fishes from The Acts of the Apostles
the greater drama and movement found in Leonardo’s work, and the greater gravity and larger forms in the paintings of Fra Bartolommeo. Summoned to Rome by Pope Julius II in 1508 to decorate the papal apartments, in no time Raphael was held in great esteem and granted positions of great trust and authority. He was appointed one of the three architects of St. Peter’s, after Bramante’s death, responsible for the decorative regime of the Papal Apartments, and supervised and documented the excavation and reuse of ancient materials in Rome. His oversight of these excavations added to Raphael’s awareness of antique forms evident in his mature work, especially the use of architectural settings and the grotesques of Nero’s *Domus Aurea*. In order to cope with his endless workload in a timely manner, Raphael developed a workshop of highly skilled artists.

*The Acts of the Apostle’s* designs and cartoons were developed during this period of constant creativity. The cartoons, completed by the last half of 1515, were prepared in body color on paper with considerable care, with the paint applied thickly in contrast to the transparent washes traditional in Netherlandish production. Raphael’s interpretation of *The Acts* required the Netherlandish weavers to reproduce a design conceived in terms of volume and space, pushing the Flemish artisans to the limits of their ability in pursuit of an inspired vision. In High Renaissance manner, Raphael’s monumental, sober design does not distract from the text in any way. The drama is communicated by expansive rhetorical gestures, and emotions expressed with open mouths and outstretched arms.

Antonio de Beatis, the secretary of Cardinal Luigi d’Aragona who traveled to Brussels in July 1517, visited the workshop of Pieter van Aelst where the tapestries were being woven:

“Here . . . Pope Leo is having made sixteen pieces of tapestry, it is said for the Chapel of Sixtus which is in the Apostolic Palace in Rome, for the most part of silk and gold: the
price is two thousand gold ducats apiece. We were on the spot to see them in progress, and one piece of the story of the Donation of the Keys, which is very fine, we saw complete.”

Van Aelst was a leading merchant and entrepreneur in the Brussels tapestry industry at this time, his clients including the Habsburg court and the king of England.

The success of the weavers in reproducing Raphael’s designs shows the sophistication of the Brussels tapestry industry, especially their incredible skill at representing different tactile and painterly effects. According to Vasari: “This work was executed so marvelously, that it arouses astonishment in whoever beholds it, wondering how it could have been possible to weave the hair and beards in such detail, and to give softness to the flesh with mere threads: and it is truly rather a miracle than the work of human art, seeing that in these tapestries are animals, water, and buildings, all made in such a way they seem to be not woven, but really wrought with the brush.” The entire set may have cost as much as 16,000 ducats—more than five times the sum Julius II paid Michelangelo for the Sistine ceiling—an enormous financial commitment. This discussion of Raphael’s Acts of the Apostles shows the innovative power of this Renaissance master, but it also serves to reinforce the importance of tapestry during the Renaissance. While some High Renaissance characteristics remain, by the time of the weaving of Wars of the Romani, Raphael’s High Renaissance clarity and harmony had given way to Mannerist experimentalism and fancy.

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36 Ibid., 201.
Mannerism

Mannerism appealed to a courtly, international audience, eventually becoming a uniform and universally European movement—the first great international style since Gothic. The spread of centralized kingships throughout Western Europe and the fashion of the intellectually interested and artistically ambitious court households ensured Mannerism’s dissemination.  

A highly refined style, Mannerism emphasized grace, variety, and virtuoso display at the expense of content, clarity, and unity. Mannerist compositions disturbed the harmony of classicism that was so painstakingly developed throughout the Quattrocento: uniformity of scene, coherence of composition, and a consistent logic of space created through perspective and proportion. Mannerism fragmented High Renaissance structure allowing different spatial values and standards. Often, motifs of secondary significance to the real subject were prominent, so it is possible that the iconic moment in Wars of the Romani is hidden somewhere in the background or some obscure part of the composition. Figures twist in impossible contortions, enhancing their tormented circumstances. Classical harmony, horizontal stability, visual clarity, and scientific logic are lost in Romani’s diagonals, vortices, and serpentine organization. Mannerism’s swirling, playful and complex compositional style and emotional exaggeration serves the design of tapestry battle scenes well.

Late Sixteenth Century Battle Scenes

According to Delmarcel, historical battle scenes were common at the end of the sixteenth century. “This kind of military set was highly popular in the later sixteenth century—could this be a result of the wars in which the whole of Europe was immersed at the time?” Delmarcel also mentions that many of these series are hard to identify today due to a lack of inscriptions and clear themes, as is the case with Wars of the Romani. However, the style of Wars of the Romani definitely mirrors other battle scenes from this era, further supporting a production date of circa 1575.

Battle scenes from the end of the sixteenth century seem to have a unifying figural vocabulary, and Wars of the Romani displays some of these common recurring figures as well. The sprawling, supine figures of fallen warriors, the warrior with legs apart grasping his spear, the figure on the ground raising himself on one arm with one leg twisted under him, and the collapsed horse with head raised. Similar martial background elements include squares of marching infantry, rearing cavalry with curving falchions raised high, flapping pennants and banners, and rows of pikes thrust skyward in the background. Tapestries from Brussels workshops that display these elements include The Death of Goliath, Scipio Rescuing His Father at the Battle of Ticinus, The Battle of Philippi, The Trojan Horse, and The Battle

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38 Delmarcel, Flemish Tapestry, 138.
of Alexander and Porus, each dating from the late sixteenth century. This again emphasizes how the imagery of Wars of the Romani follows the trendsetting of the Brussels workshops.

![The Battle of Alexander, Brussels tapestry, late 16th century, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.](image)

**Conclusion**

In Wars of the Romani, pikemen, swordsmen, and cavalry clash together, creating a chaotic eddy of hand to hand combats, advancing soldiers, and rearing horses. The color scheme, faded from age, seems arbitrary rather than uniform as do the assignments of classical armor, shields, spears, and swords, providing no clue as to which side is which as the armies merge in combat. The trumpeters sound their horns to call attention to the waving banners used to transmit commands in battle, but the banners themselves are

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blank, rather than emblazoned with battalion crests. The eagle standard, the symbol of Roman power and glory common to all legions, rises above a cohort of advancing soldiers. Though enigmatic, the exciting imagery of *Wars of the Romani* captures the energy of a war-torn time.

Importantly, *Wars of the Romani* is a fine example of tapestry from the late sixteenth century and mirrors many of the trends set by the high-end Brussels tapestry works. It continues the figural advancements developed throughout the quattrocento introduced to Flemish tapestry by the great Raphael. The design for its grotesque border, a style also pioneered by the Raphael school, consisting of pairs of gods, symbolic figures, animal allegories, and interwoven floral and wrought iron arrangements more than likely originated in the workshop of the famous weaver Frans Geubels. Its Mannerist battle scene displays supine warriors, a fallen steed with head raised, rows of pikes, and slashing swords in a style consistent with the visual vocabulary also developed in the Brussels workshops. *Wars of the Romani*’s classicism also suggests the textual grounding mandatory in artworks of the Renaissance, informing the viewer that some important story is at work here. Above all, *Wars of the Romani* serves both as a window into the culture and history of the troubled late sixteenth century and as a reminder to us of the important function tapestry fulfilled throughout the Renaissance.
Bibliography


