

DAVID & BATHSHEBA

Ten Early Sixteenth-Century Tapestries
from the Cluny Museum in Paris

May 14 - September 2, 1974 / The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

ON THE COVER:

Detail from *David Prepares to Attack Rabbah*

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Foreword

THE CHARTERED purpose of museums is usually worded with such dry abstraction—"to advance the general knowledge, appreciation and enjoyment of art" is the common phraseology—that we tend to forget that what museums do and do well, day in day out, is to try to budge open the doors of perception, even a crack.

Every so often we succeed in throwing them open wide, catching everyone up short: the general public, art critics, scholars, historians, even those of us who administer museums.

The showing in New York this spring of *Masterpieces of Tapestry* from the 14th to the 16th centuries was variously described as a benchmark exhibition, one of the greatest seen this century, a historic turning point in our assessment of the achievement of an entire era, an exhibition demanding much of our sensibilities and rewarding us with an enlarged experience of art.

In short, that rarest of things: a re-discovery. Henceforth, as one observer put it, the art of tapestries "will have to be given a place beside the great architectural, sculptural and pictorial monuments of the Middle Ages. . . . Such neglect will never again be possible."

Among the ninety-seven tapestries in that exhibition it was impossible not to be struck by four illustrating events in the legend of David and Bathsheba. They are among the most monumental and magnificent tapestries to have come down to us. With a bold virtuosity, they push the art of weaving seemingly to the edge of its limits as a medium, and begin to accomplish effects of color, texture, and modeling thought possible only with paint. They are indeed like a monumental fresco cycle in wool, silk, silver and gold thread. They stand not only as a high point in the art of tapestry but as a landmark in the history of world art.

Furthermore, six more of them exist! All ten, which belong to the

Musée de Cluny in Paris, have been brought together for the present *David and Bathsheba* exhibition. This is now another exhibition worked out, as part of a broad agreement covering a range of museological activities, with the Réunion des Musées Nationaux of France, including the Louvre. So fruitful indeed has been this cooperative partnership that the current *David and Bathsheba* is actually a happy offshoot of the *Masterpieces* exhibition and was un contemplated even four months ago.

We are indebted again to our colleagues at the French Ministry of Culture and at the Louvre: M. Jacques Duhamel and M. Maurice Druon, former Ministers of Culture; M. Alain Peyrefitte, Minister of Culture; M. Jean Chatelain, Directeur des Musées de France; M. Hubert Landais, Inspecteur Général des Musées, Adjoint au Directeur; M. Francis Salet, Conservateur en Chef of the Cluny Museum; M. Alain Erland-Brandenburg, Curator of the Cluny Museum, and to Mlle. Irène Bizot, Head of the Department of Exhibitions at the Louvre.

To the members of the Metropolitan's staff go my special thanks. To Philippe de Montebello, Vice-Director for Curatorial Affairs, for conceiving and overseeing the exhibition; to Jack L. Schrader, Associate Curator-in-Charge, The Cloisters, to Helmut Nickel, Curator of Arms and Armor, and to Carmen Gómez-Moreno, Curator of Medieval Art, for selecting furniture, decorative arts and armor of the same period as the tapestries, which add a palpable ambience to the exhibition. Miss Gómez-Moreno also contributed valuable information toward the catalogue entries. To Mr. Schrader are due thanks for a perceptive introduction to this catalogue, which adds significantly to our knowledge and may help unravel some puzzling scholarly questions concerning this great series of tapestries.

THOMAS HOVING, *Director*
May, 1974

Introduction

THE SET of ten tapestries known as The Story of David which the Musée de Cluny in Paris has owned since 1847 presents a magnificent and vast spectacle of visual material. Sumptuously woven in wool, silk, silver and gold threads, these huge tapestries have virtually become the standard against which early sixteenth-century tapestries woven in Brussels are to be judged. The cinematic sweep and impact of their design, the brilliance of their texture and color, and the sheer virtuosity of the weaving elevate them to a position alongside the greatest landmarks in the art of tapestry. They display all the pyrotechnics of the weaver's art that had reached for perfection almost as if the ultimate goal had been the feat of weaving these very tapestries. They are therefore also a landmark in the history of art.

The whole world knows the Old Testament story of David and Bathsheba, the story of a king led by desire to commit adultery with Bathsheba, wife of Uriah, and afterwards to compound his guilt by sending her husband to his death in battle. If this story is well known to us today, it was highly popular and often recounted and illustrated at the end of the Middle Ages when these tapestries were made.

David is, not unexpectedly, the most frequently illustrated Old Testament figure in tapestry, which celebrated him in dozens of multi-scene series. This is known from inventories describing now lost works as well as from surviving tapestries.

The theme's popularity around 1500 is not surprising, given the fact that the later Middle Ages has left an extraordinary visual record of its love for epic heroes, both pagan and Judeo-Christian, historical

and mythological. One need not even mention the explanation usually provided, that the tale of David, a king who succeeded to the throne of Saul through the intervention of God, was especially palatable to those seeking scriptural support for the doctrine of the divine right of kings.

The action in this set of tapestries is not restricted solely to David's involvement with Bathsheba, but rather represents basically the sequence of events described in chapters XI and XII of the Second Book of Samuel, and includes one episode from chapter VI: *The Ark of God Is Brought to Jerusalem*. It is not certain why this extraneous event is inserted at the beginning of the series, unless it is to establish, for purposes of the narrative, David's estrangement from his wife Michal as a motivation for his later conduct. She appears in the scene, observing David's behavior with disapproval.

In at least one case and possibly another, it is not sufficiently clear in which position a tapestry is meant to appear in the sequence, owing to a lack of accompanying information about, or an ambiguity in, the actions of the figures. It is probable that the second tapestry, which at times in the past was shown as the fifth piece, has now been correctly identified as *David Sends His Army Against the Children of Ammon*, and therefore it is shown as second in the series. However an ambiguity remains with the tapestry known as *David Prepares to Attack Rabbah*, which could fall into either the third or the eighth position, depending on whether the figure in the lower left corner is actually Uriah (which seems unlikely in spite of the inscription on his

breastplate), and whether the initial or the final attack on Rabbah is intended. For the purposes of this exhibition, the eighth position has been chosen.

Also, it is impossible to say for certain whether the original set contained more than the ten that have come down to us. Other episodes might have been incorporated with other material in a now missing tapestry meant to immediately precede one of the tapestries hung here as the second, third and fourth. There is a greater likelihood of this having been the case after one notices that the fifth tapestry, *Bathsheba Comes to David to Become His Wife*, which is the only one in the series composed in strictly symmetrical fashion, would then occupy a more logical and probable center position in the set (provided of course, that the placement of *David Prepares to Attack Rabbah* in the eighth position is acceptable). All of the action to either side of *Bathsheba Comes to David to Become His Wife* moves laterally, and in the case of the first four tapestries the motion is predominantly toward the right. Conversely, the sweep of the action, reading backward from the tenth tapestry, is from right to left, and in the case of *David Prepares to Attack Rabbah* the action is interpreted in an unusual composition which dramatically winds back to the left.

It would seem, then, that the artist or artists who designed the series may have created the designs as a totality with an eye to a balanced visual effect of the whole. And it would also seem that the number of tapestries in the original set was eleven, or at least an odd number.

This Story of David series extols the virtues of low-warp weaving on the horizontal loom, a technique that gained ascendancy over high-warp weaving during the fifteenth century. Brussels, capital of the Duchy of Brabant, was one of the early promoters of this type of weaving whereby the composition of the design is reversed in the

process, and it was Brussels that took the lead in the art of tapestry at the end of the fifteenth century. At that time, Brussels tapestry cartoonists and weavers succumbed to the powerful influence of Flemish panel painting which then was still enjoying its Golden Age.

Members of the painters' guild of Brussels actually acquired the right to execute the cartoons for tapestries by successfully bringing a legal suit against the Brussels tapestry weavers in 1476. Subsequently, the composition as a whole and the figural designs for a tapestry were the prerogative of painters inscribed in the guild, while the weavers were given free license only for minor details.

Painterly perspective devices allow the disposition of the planes in registers or the opening up of distant vistas in *The Story of David*. The painter's concern for placing figures variously within architectural and landscape surroundings for both a realistic and changing effect is evident throughout the series. Painting-like, too, is the modeling of the faces and hands of figures through light and shade which enhances their lifelike, organic qualities. A painterly expressiveness is achieved by employing a diversity of attitudes and a variety of expressions for the innumerable figures depicted, which are the peers of those seen in contemporary panel paintings.

Tapestry here has, in fact, reached the point of absorbing as much influence from painting as is possible without jeopardizing its integrity as tapestry—tapestry, that is, as it came to be understood during the fifteenth century in such great series as *The Trojan Wars*, *The Lady with the Unicorn*, and *The Hunt of the Unicorn*. It fulfills the double function originally given it, which is to serve as an enhancement to the wall surface in such a way that it partakes of the wall fabric, like fresco, and at the same time serves to eliminate the bleakness and bareness inherent in walls.

The Brussels artist who perhaps best understood this function, and who was a prolific designer of tapestries, was Jan van Roome, an

artist associated with the court of Margaret of Austria, regent of the Netherlands during the minority of her nephew, the future Charles V. Van Roome does not appear to have practiced the art of panel painting, as did many more famous contemporary members of his guild, but he did accept a number of important commissions to execute designs. Scholars have generally agreed in attributing to him the designs for *The Story of David*, and in fact a drawing (in the Corcoran Gallery in Washington) which corresponds to the third hanging, *Bathsheba Is Invited to the Palace*, has also been ascribed to him. This drawing and the corresponding tapestry depict an architectural screen similar in design to one we know was commissioned from van Roome for the old ducal palace at Brussels about 1509–1510. This coincidence is the basis both for attributing the designs for the series to van Roome and for assigning them the date 1510–1515.

The Story of David is courtly art at its highest. Indeed courts of the time, including Margaret of Austria's, were among the most elegant the world has ever seen. Every element of the design of this grand set speaks of the wealth and eclectic taste of courtly society—the ornate architecture, the sumptuous costumes of supple and abundant fabrics, the expensive armor. The set was almost surely a royal commission, so courtly are the subjects and so authoritative is the weaving.

It is possible that the Cluny tapestries were one of seven sets of the same subject owned by Henry VIII of England (one of these consisted of eleven pieces, another of ten), especially since, as tradition holds it, they later belonged to the Duke of York. In point of fact, however, Margaret of Austria is another candidate for the original ownership, along with Francis I, emperor of France.

J. L. SCHRADER
Associate Curator-in-Charge
The Cloisters



1 The Ark of God Is Brought to Jerusalem

The story of David's illicit love for Bathsheba and of his vengeful war against the children of Ammon is told in the Second Book of Samuel, and it is perhaps Samuel himself we see on the left, looking out upon the action from his study. He may be the standing figure, dictating his account of the events, or he may be the seated figure, reading from the book as he composes it. The quatrain beneath this scene summarizes the action to follow:

*ducitur archa, sternitur osa,
rex david hosti bella paratque;
obsidet urbe plebs animosa,
bersabee se fonte lavatque.*

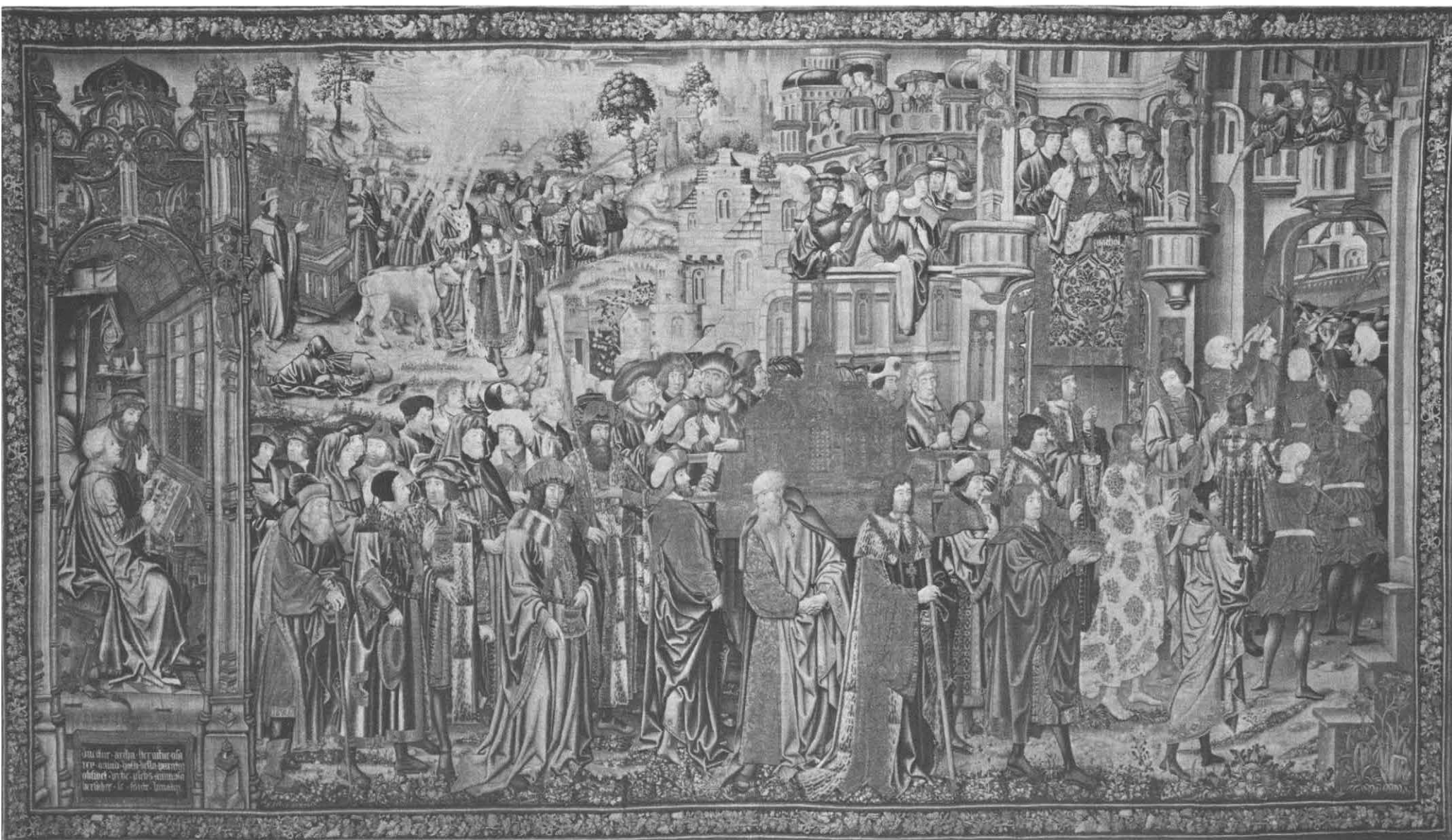
*(The ark is led, Uzzah killed,
King David prepares war against the enemy;
The city is besieged by a brave army,
Bathsheba washes herself at the fountain.)*

Two events occur in the main part of the tapestry. At the upper left the ark of God, taken from the Philistines, rests upon the cart made for it while "the house of Israel" plays "on all manner of instruments." Many of those rejoicing at God's favor are not yet aware of the fate that has overtaken Uzzah, who "put forth his hand to the ark . . . and took hold of it: for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah, and God smote him for his error." His harp stilled, David wonders fearfully, "How shall the ark of the Lord come to me?"

Later, with the Lord's blessing, "David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the trumpet." The entry into Jerusalem takes place in the foreground. David has set aside his crown, removed his shoes, and clad himself in a simple tunic, the better to leap and dance before the Lord. His wife, Michal, looking down on the spectacle, despises David. Afterward, Samuel tells us, she bitterly reproved the king and, as a consequence, "Michal the daughter of Saul had no child unto the day of her death."

Several of the figures in the procession will reappear in the later tapestries, notably the old man seen against the near side of the ark, who is probably the prophet Nathan.





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2 David Sends His Army Against the Children of Ammon

Hanun, the king of the Ammonites, grievously misinterpreted David's show of kindness toward him and subjected his messengers to humiliation, shaving off one half of their beards, cutting off their garments "in the middle, even to the buttocks," and sending them away "greatly ashamed." In retaliation, David sent "Joab, and all the host of the mighty men" against the Ammonites. Here, while trumpets sound and the host assembles in the distance, David instructs his commander, Joab, identifiable by the inscription across the dandelion plant near his foot. David's device of rays or flames, seen on Joab's lance, appears also in the later tapestries.





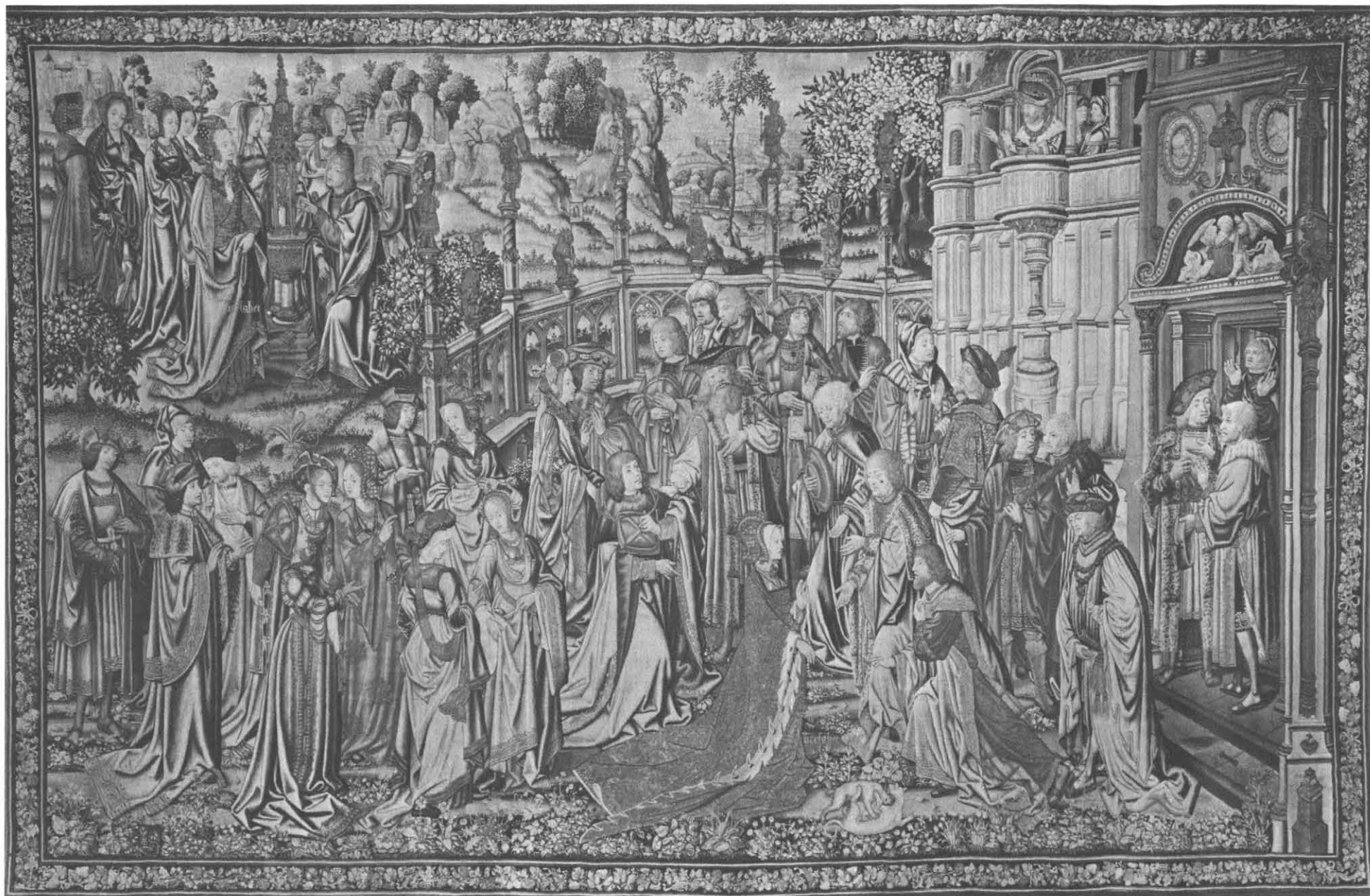
3 Bathsheba Is Invited to the Palace

While his soldiers went forth against the Ammonites, “David tarried still at Jerusalem” and “in an evening-tide . . . he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.” She was Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite. “And David sent messengers and took her.” Unlike most medieval and Renaissance representations of this scene, this tapestry shows Bathsheba fully dressed; however, a statuette of a nude woman appears in the center of the fountain.

In the first of the two scenes here, Bathsheba, attended by ladies-in-waiting, receives the king’s messengers, one of whom, kneeling, proffers his master’s *billet-doux*. In the central scene Bathsheba and her retinue approach the palace. While courtiers greet her—some of them apparently already gossiping—David looks on from a balcony. Four lion-statues on the balustrade behind the group carry banners that spell the king’s name.

It is this scene for which we have a drawing attributed to Jan van Roome.





4 The Adultery of David and Bathsheba; Uriah Is Sent to His Death



Much of the story is compressed into five scenes here. The king's tryst takes place in a chamber at the upper left. Below, in the doorway of his palace, David receives the obeisance of Uriah, whom he has summoned from the siege at Rabbah, ostensibly to learn how the war is progressing. Contrary to David's expectation, Uriah has slept the night at the king's door. "Camest thou not from thy journey?" David inquires. "Why then did thou not go down unto thy house?" "The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in tents," Uriah replies, "and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord are encamped in the open fields; shall I then go into my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As thou livest, and as my soul liveth, I will not do this thing." David tries again to entice Uriah to enter his own house, even making him drunk to overcome his obstinacy. Failing again, David dispatches a fateful order to Joab. In the central scene he hands Bathsheba's husband the letter that will end his life: "Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die." Next, to the right of the palace, Uriah takes leave of his faithless wife, who is with child by the king. Then, in the far distance, we perceive that David's wish is granted: Uriah perishes of a lance-thrust before the towers of Rabbah.



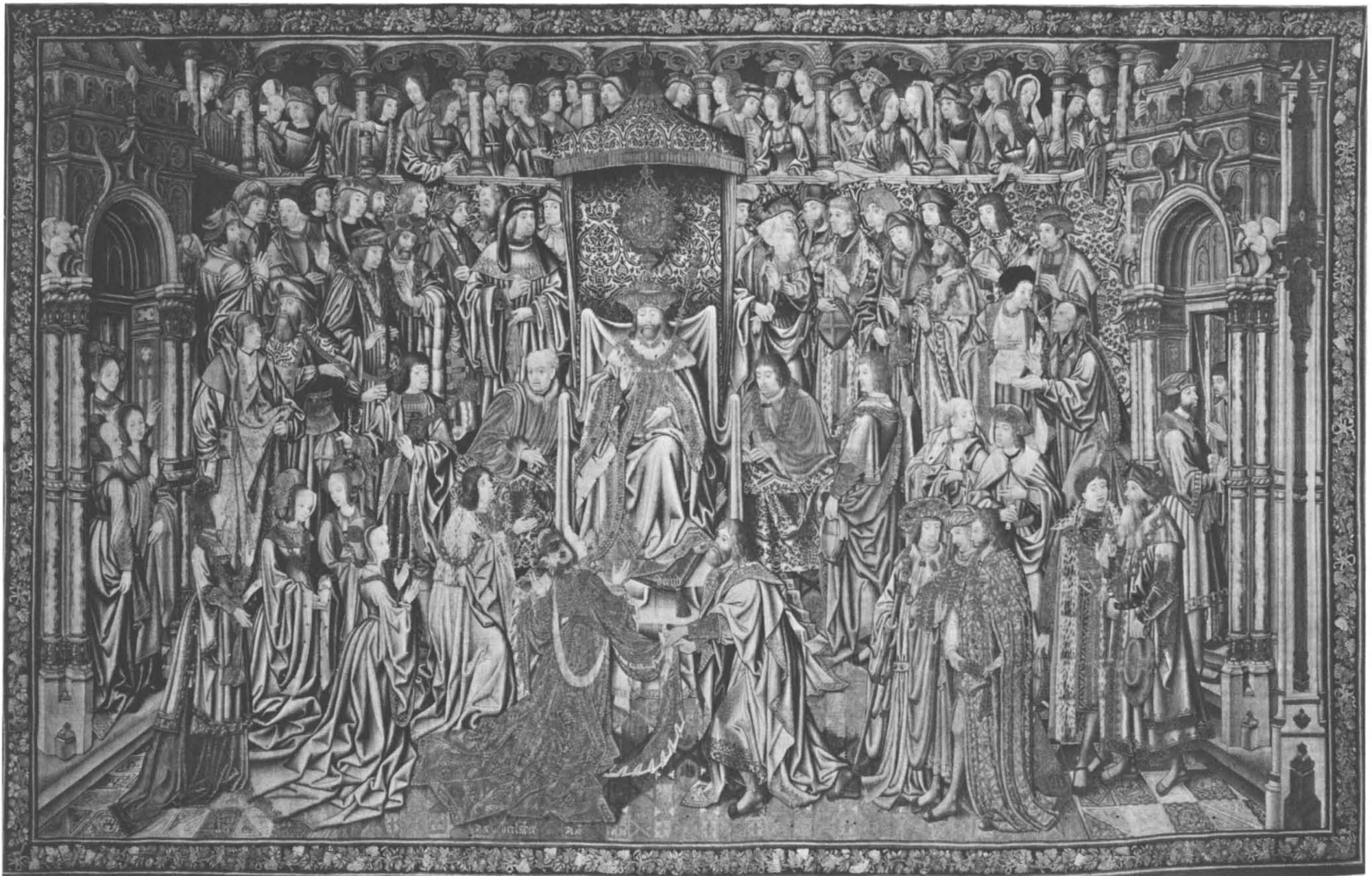


5 Bathsheba Comes to David to Become His Wife

“When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she mourned for her husband. And when the mourning was past, David sent and fetched her to his house, and she became his wife, and bare him a son.”

David has chosen to receive Bathsheba before his full court, rather than circumspectly. The occasion is splendid indeed, but the postures of some of the courtiers—especially of those crowded on the balcony—suggest that some of the comment would not fall pleasantly on the king’s ear. Bathsheba is presented to David by the same bearded courtier who welcomed her on her first visit to the palace. Beyond the archway at the right a white-haired man in simple raiment raises his eyes toward heaven. Presumably he is the prophet Nathan asking God for enlightenment. “The thing that David had done,” we are told, “displeased the Lord.”





6 Nathan Reproaches David, Who Acknowledges His Sins



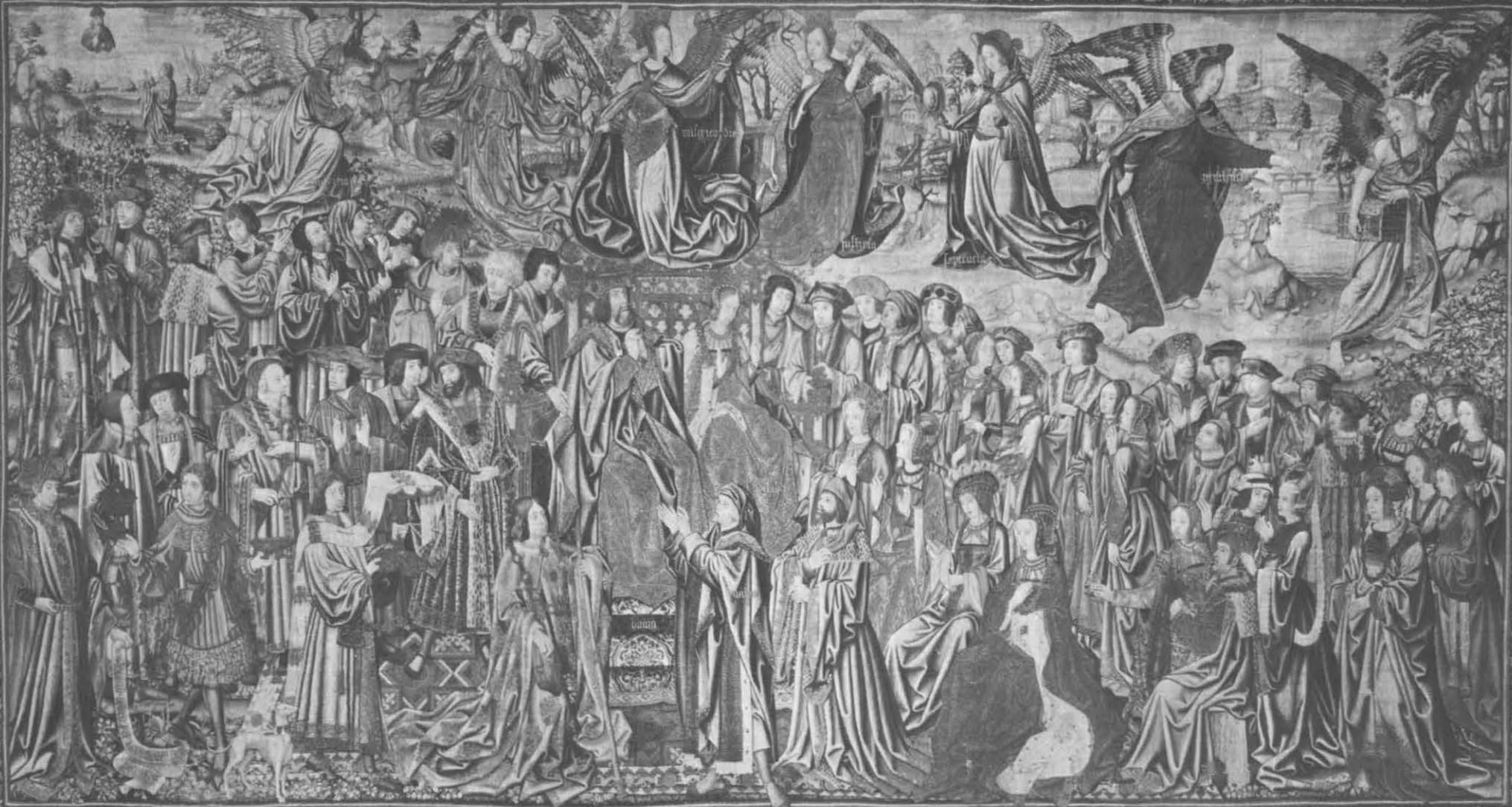
In the upper left corner the Lord appears to Nathan, directing him to confront the king of Israel with his wrongdoing. This Nathan does with his parable of the rich man who had “exceeding many flocks and herds” and yet selfishly sacrificed the poor man’s “one little ewe-lamb” that “grew up together with him . . . and was unto him as a daughter.” David is incensed. “As the Lord liveth, the man that has done this thing shall surely die,” he tells Nathan. “And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” To which Nathan responds: “Thou art the man.” The prophet’s censure, couched in the words of the Lord, is delivered before the full court, with Bathsheba enthroned beside the king. “I have sinned against the Lord,” David confesses, and above his head we see winged figures personifying Contrition, God’s Wrath, Mercy, Justice, Wisdom, Penance, and Lechery—the last being driven from the scene by Penance.

Nathan foretells that David himself will not die (“The Lord . . . hath put away thy sin”) but that his child shall surely die.

In the left corner a man holds a scroll reading:

David a Deo per Natam correptus penitet.

(Through Nathan, God made abject David regret.)



7

The Child Dies; David Ends His Fast; He Is Summoned to Rabbah



This tapestry, like the fourth, presents five scenes. At the upper left David is at his *prie-dieu* when two whispering servants approach with the doleful news that Nathan's prophecy has been fulfilled. "Then," says Samuel, "David arose . . . and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped." Below, we see David entering the temple. In the center background, attended by Bathsheba and others, David breaks his fast of seven days, causing his servants to inquire: "What thing is this that thou hast done? Thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread." To which David replies: "While the child was yet alive, I fasted. . . . But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me."

Thereafter, Samuel tells us, David "comforted Bathsheba his wife . . . and lay with her" and begot the son who would be named Solomon and would be loved by the Lord.

Next, word comes from Joab that the campaign against Rabbah is nearly at an end: "Now therefore gather the rest of the people together, and encamp against the city, and take it: lest I take the city, and it be called after my name." In the foreground a messenger presents Joab's letter to the king. At the upper right, accompanied by knights, David sets forth.



8 David Prepares to Attack Rabbah

“And David gathered all the people together, and went to Rabbah, and fought against it, and took it.”

In the distance, at the right, is the doomed city of the children of Ammon. David seems not to be present among his warriors, unless he is the figure with lowered visor, well back in the group at the left, upon whom several important-looking horsemen converge. A standard-bearer rides before him with the device we saw in the second and seventh tapestries, and a bearded lancer close by resembles the Joab of the tenth tapestry—but there are no inscriptions to tell us more than this. A second standard-bearer, in the foreground, rides a horse whose caparison is figured with the letter A.

Only one of the many men here looks out of the tapestry at the viewer: the beardless, youthful-looking, and obviously important knight in the left corner. The inscription embroidered on his breastplate identifies him as “Urias.” This is mysterious. Several possibilities suggest themselves. The tapestry may actually show one of the earlier assaults on Rabbah, while Uriah was yet alive—in which case the discrepancy in the man’s physical appearance needs accounting for. Again, the inscription—the only such inscription in this particular tapestry—may well be a later and mistaken addition. For one thing, the silver of its letters appears less tarnished than the silver of other inscriptions in the tapestries. For another, the style of the lettering is not quite the same as in the other tapestries. Furthermore, in the first and tenth tapestries there are letters woven in gold beneath the embroidered inscriptions, but there is no such under-weaving here, suggesting that the “Urias” was not in the original plan.



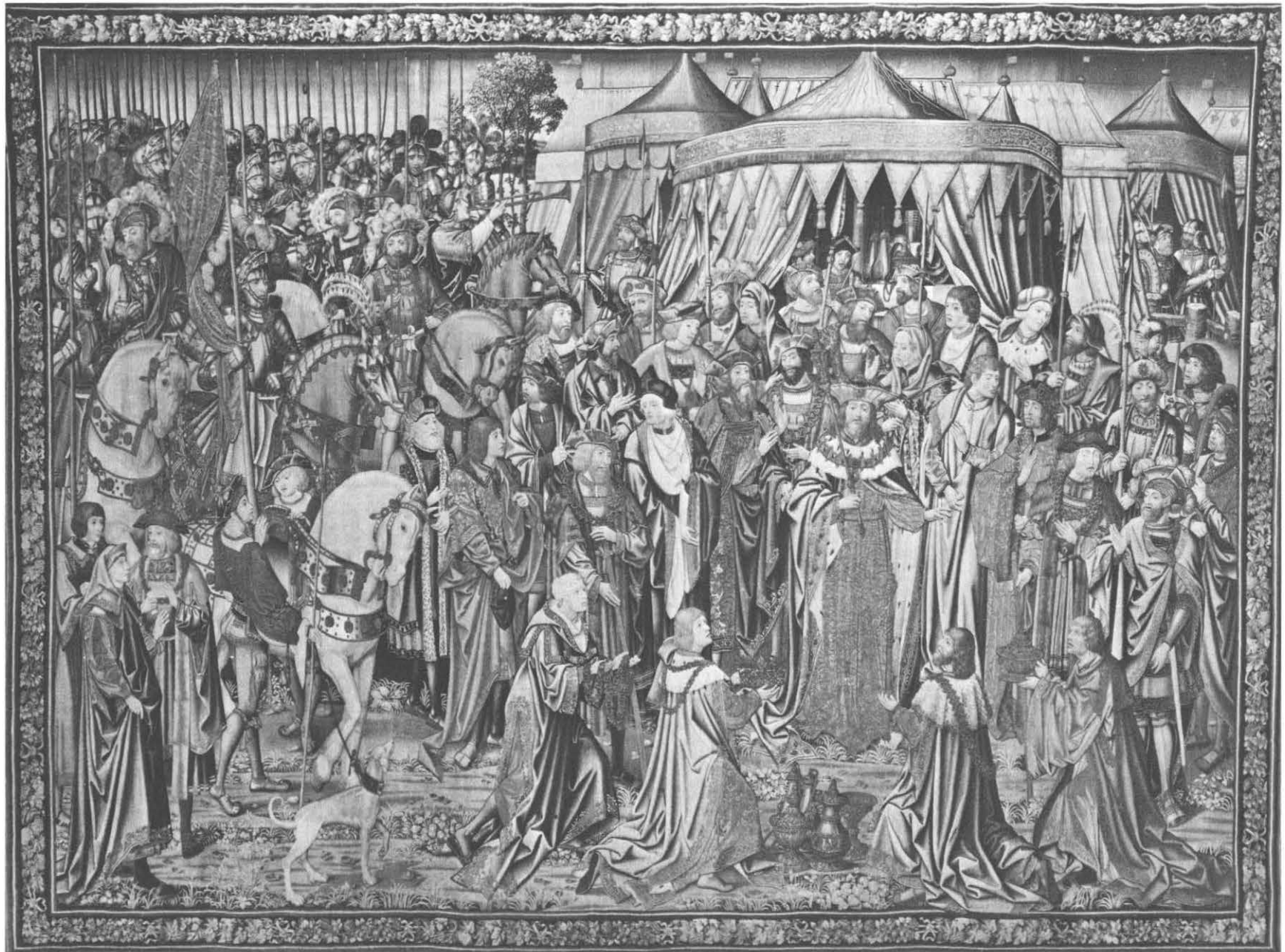


9 David Is Presented with the King's Treasures

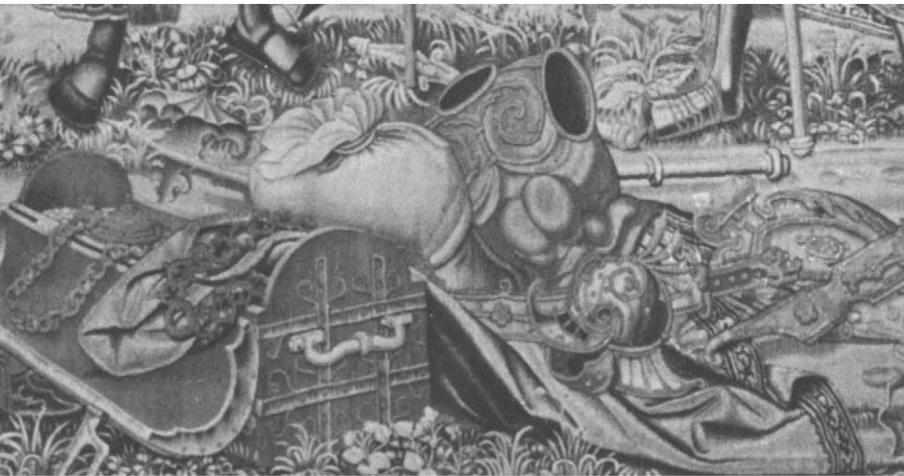
Following the fall of Rabbah, David "brought forth the spoil of the city in great abundance." Here he stands before the tents of his camp, scepter in hand, and contemplates the offerings of his followers. They include the vanquished king's crown, "the weight whereof was a talent of gold with the precious stones." This crown was set on David's head.

Back a little, near the blaring trumpets, the bearer of David's standard looks rather like the one in the foreground of the preceding tapestry.





10 Joab Receives the Booty of Rabbah



In the background, smoke darkens the sky above the burning city, suggesting the horrors described in Samuel's narrative: "The people that were therein" were put "under saws and under harrows of iron, and under axes of iron" and made to pass "through the brick-kiln." Thus did David do "unto all the cities of the children of Ammon."

In the foreground Joab surveys the treasures that are being brought to him: caskets of jewels, pieces of fine armor, bags of gold—even a framed picture. Now the long war is over, and Joab wears civilian garb and carries a staff, not a sword. He has aged considerably since we saw him in the second tapestry.

Here Samuel ends the story, saying: "So David and all the people returned unto Jerusalem."

To the right we again see a domestic interior. The author of the book, or the reader of it, closes the cover. Below, a quatrain summarizes what we have seen:

*Bersabee parit candid regi
prolem; nata obit; fraudat uriam;
res est, Nathan ait, dissona legi:
Rabbath vi tenuit vastat et illam.*

*(Fair Bathsheba bore the king's son;
It died soon after birth; Uriah was betrayed;
This deed, says Nathan, is contrary to the law;
Having taken Rabbah by force, he devastates it.)*

