

Format de citation

Walker, Rose: Rezension über: Manuel Castiñeiras González, *The Creation Tapestry*, Girona: Cathedral of Girona, 2011, in: *Medievalia. Revista d'Estudis Medievals*, 15 (2012), S. 472-474, DOI: 10.15463/rec.1189724225



copyright

Cet article peut être téléchargé et/ou imprimé à des fins privées. Toute autre reproduction ou représentation, intégrale ou substantielle de son contenu, doit faire l'objet d'une autorisation (§§ 44a-63a UrhG / German Copyright Act).

MANUEL CASTIÑEIRAS, *The Creation Tapestry*, Girona: Cathedral of Girona, 114 pp., 134 ill., ISBN: 978-84-930063-3-4; *El Tapís de la Creació*, Girona: Catedral de Girona, 114 pp., 134 ill., ISBN: 978-84-930063-0-3.

The Creation Tapestry, as is it popularly known, is one of the finest witnesses to the textile medium to have survived from the High Middle Ages. It still has the power to mesmerize and enchant as a museum exhibit, which suggests that it also had a dramatic effect in its own time. As medievalists we study many fine but empty buildings, and it is easy to forget that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries they were often enveloped in rich fabrics. Today textiles and metalwork tend to be pigeon-holed and even dismissed as decorative arts, but to judge from inventories fabrics, especially silk, alongside gold and silver objects, were the items of highest value in their own day. Manuel Castiñeiras has thus done us a great service in bringing together new research, both his and that of others, on this unique liturgical embroidery and providing a generous number of illustrations to elucidate the arguments. The Creation Tapestry may not be woven in silk and gold but it makes up for that with its wealth of iconographic detail and strong design.

This compact, and affordable, book is divided into four chapters. The first introductory chapter outlines the physical and technical characteristics of the tapestry and its life as an object in Girona with its historiography. Chapter two brings in comparative material: other embroideries, wall hangings and altar cloths from a similar period, as well as considering the role of women in the execution of embroidery and signed works from eleventh and twelfth-century Catalunya. Chapter three analyses the complexities of the iconographic programme, whilst chapter four builds on the prior material to suggest functions and consequent meanings for the display of the tapestry in its historical context.

Two diagrammatic analyses of the structure of the tapestry enable the reader to understand the physical and iconographic structure of the tapestry. The centre is occupied by a medallion of Christ-Logos. Around this a much larger circle, divided into eight unequal segments, displays the Creation of the World. The transition from circle to rectangle is managed by the placing of a personification of one of the four cardinal winds at each corner. The lower section of the centre of the tapestry contains the narrative of the *inventio* of the Holy Cross. It is likely that the outer border originally comprised thirty-two panels: the four rivers of paradise above the four winds; on the upper row *Annus* between the four seasons, Samson and Abel; to the sides the months, the Day of the Sun and the Day of the Moon, whilst it is argued that the lower row might have once featured Days of the planets with Orion and Hercules. The survival of tapestry is remarkable and a credit to Girona Cathedral. Even so there has been some damage and restora-

tion to the tapestry that now measures 358 x 450 cm but originally would have been about 480 x 540 cm on the basis of recent technical analysis by Carmen Masdeu and Luz Morata. It was embroidered with long needles on a red *chevron* of fine wool. The embroiderers used woollen thread and bleached linen fibre in green, yellow, red, burnt earth, blue and white to depict the figures. Thicker cord stitches, often in black thread, outline figures that are filled with flat stem stitch in a technique typical of needlework painting. At every stage *tituli*, either on a white ground or in white, define the scenes. The overall effect shows great feeling for colour contrasts and the movement that they can create, and the excellent photographs in this book enable the reader to appreciate all these technical details even to the level of individual stitches.

Castiñeiras provides a judicious selection of comparative material which comes to focus on the Seu d'Urgell Embroidery that has been in London since 1904 at the Victoria & Albert Museum. This acquisition is particularly interesting when combined with the information that we are given in the introductory chapter on the early publication of the tapestry by Juan Facundo Riaño y Montero. From 1870 he was responsible for the acquisition of Spanish antiquities at the South Kensington Museum (now the V&A), but the tapestry stayed in Girona cathedral where it may well have been since its creation. Although there is evidence for both men and women working on embroidery in the Middle Ages, the indications from Catalunya point to women as the makers of the Creation Tapestry, and probably women from a monastery such as Sant Daniel in Girona. Indeed the 'ME FECIT' of a woman called Maria on the stole of Saint Narcissus at Sant Feliu de Girona, dated here to the mid-eleventh century, suggests an established embroidery tradition in Girona that would make sense of a piece as accomplished as the Creation Tapestry.

As someone who has researched and published extensively on the 'Calendar culture' of the monastery of Ripoll, Castiñeiras is well placed to tackle the iconographic peculiarities of the tapestry. His in-depth analysis of this Wheel of Creation and the Border of Time convincingly ties the intellectual inspiration of the tapestry to astronomical observations and time calculations that appear in particular manuscripts from Ripoll connected with the monk Oliva. He leaves us with no doubt that this vision of the World has "strong classical, Carolingian and Byzantine roots, typical of a great *scriptorium*, monastic or cathedral library" such as Ripoll or perhaps Sant Feliu de Girona.

The large questions concern the function and meaning of the Embroidery. In particular, is it a wall-hanging, ceiling canopy or a giant carpet? As Castiñeiras points out, the size, shape, weight, material and lack of fixings make it most likely that the Creation Tapestry is a carpet and was made to be placed on a floor. The

dimensions of the presbytery of the old Romanesque cathedral, as established by Marc Sureda, show that it would have fitted comfortably before the high altar. The alternative proposal, that the carpet or hanging was displayed in the upper galilee chapel of the Holy Cross, seems, as Castiñeiras says, unlikely. It is more logical to see the relics moving to the high altar for feasts relating to the Holy Cross. In the presbytery position the tapestry is compared to the Cosmati pavement at Westminster Abbey that Paul Binski has linked with the 1272 coronation of Edward I. This in turn enables Castiñeiras to propose a liturgical and princely context for the tapestry, in particular the confirmation of fifteen-year-old Ramon Berenguer III as sole ruler of Barcelona in 1097. It would be helpful if we knew more about the arrival and use of the relics of the Holy Cross and the Holy Thorn in Girona and whether they were associated with the burial of the young Count's father, Ramon Berenguer II, in the western part of the cathedral. If there were such a connexion the two narratives of the central part of the tapestry would have even greater synthesis.

Catalonian history of the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries lacks contemporary chronicles and has to be constructed from archival records and later, often literary, sources. Thus the details of the historical context cannot be more than circumstantial and the precise nature of the events of 1097 is disputed. Yet I think that Castiñeiras's instinct regarding the meaning of the tapestry is good and that the visual evidence supports it. The notably young Christ at the centre of the tapestry, designated as *rex fortis*, fits with the idea that the tapestry was made for a ceremony to mark the beginning of the sole rule of the young Ramon Berenguer. The overall theme of the tapestry: the quintessential beginning and promise of an ordered and fertile future would likewise suit such an occasion. Castiñeiras also argues for a major role for the new Count's mother, Mafalda of Apulia, in the patronage of the tapestry. She remarried in 1086 after the murder of her husband and went to live in Narbonne, but she returned to Girona in 1105 and was buried at the monastery of Sant Daniel. Despite her apparent absence around 1097 the visual evidence again supports Castiñeiras's argument. The lower part of the tapestry depicts the narrative of the *inventio* of the True Cross and its main protagonist the Empress Helena and possibly her son, the Emperor Constantine. If the tapestry was presenting both Christ and Constantine as antitypes for Ramon Berenguer III, the inclusion of Helena might indeed have been intended to reference Mafalda.

It is particularly welcome, despite the few typological errors, that the Cathedral has decided to publish this book in English as well as in Catalan.

Rose Walker
University of London
 rose.walker@courtauld.ac.uk