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The Troyes Mémoires: A Translation of a Script for a Late Medieval Choir Tapestry

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The subject of this essay is a late medieval French manuscript, comprising a set of written instructions for the iconographic program to be depicted in a set of a medieval choir tapestries. It is a rare piece of primary material that fills a gap in our understanding of how narrative programs for such tapestries were constructed. The manuscript is entitled: *Mémoires provided to painters commissioned to design the cartoons for a tapestry, destined for the collegiate church of St. Urban of Troyes, representing the legends of St. Urban and of St. Cecilia.*¹

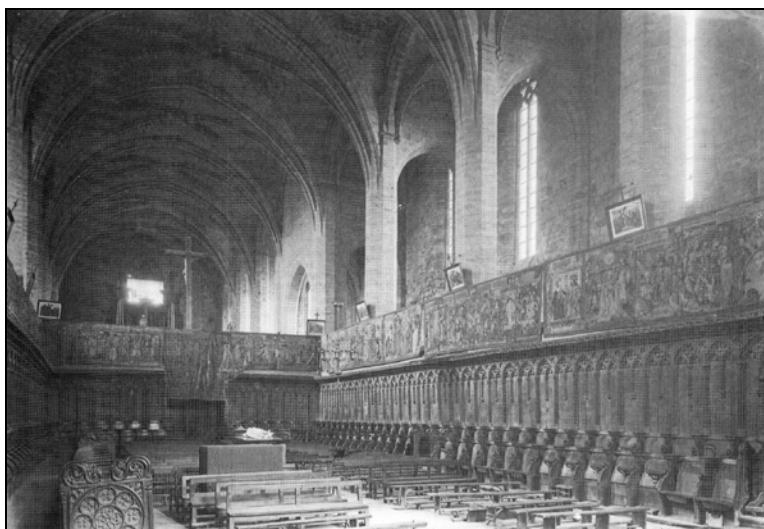


Figure 1. Choir of the abbey church St.-Robert, the Chaise-Dieu, with tapestry, *Lives of Mary and Christ* (1501-1518), above the stalls. Archives Photographiques, Collection Médiathèque de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine Centre des Monuments Nationaux, Paris), public domain. Previously published in Laura Weigert, *Weaving Sacred Stories: French Choir Tapestries and the Performance of Clerical Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2004), p. 17.

These tapestries were to have hung over the choir stalls in the church on special occasions, to honor St. Urban, the church's patron saint of the third century. It was an ambitious project and entailed a complicated interweaving of the lives of several saints and martyrs. But, for reasons unknown, these tapestries were apparently never woven and perhaps the designs themselves never executed.

What historical evidence we have about these proposed tapestries is found in the *Mémoires*, the written instructions of the church official (or officials) who imagined with astonishing precision what these tapestries were to look like and what they were to convey. That this manuscript survived at all is worth remarking. It is the only set of tapestry directives we have (and also the only complete program of written instructions for any work of narrative art from this period), and its detailed account of how image and text are to work together provides a unique

¹ Phillipe Guignard, ed., *Mémoires fournis aux peintres chargés d'exécuter les cartons d'une tapisserie destinés à la collégiale St.-Urbain de Troyes, représentant les légendes de St. Urbain et St.e Cécile* (Troyes: A. Guignard Libraire, 1851) in *Mémoires de la Société d'Agriculture, Sciences et Arts de l'Aube* 15 (1849-50): 421-534.

window onto the complex and sophisticated world of tapestry iconography, narrative and production in the middle ages.

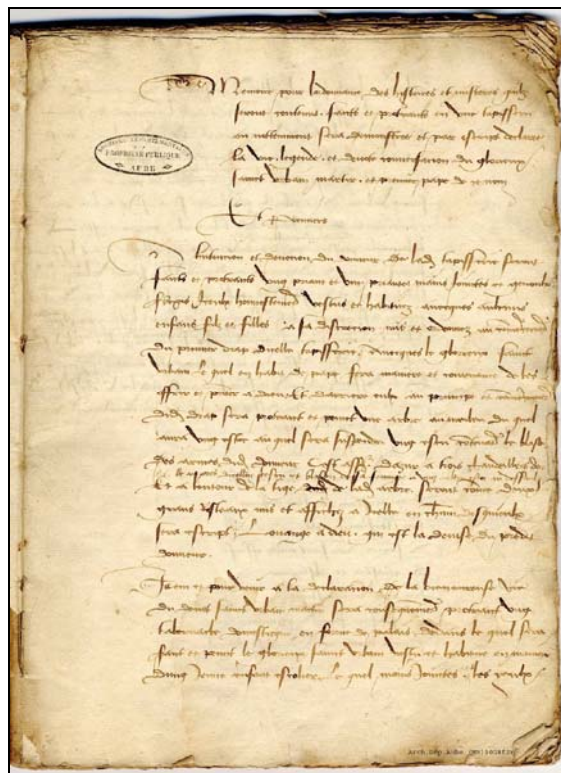


Figure 2. Troyes Mémoires, 1 recto. Permission of Aube Conseil Générale, France.

The original document is in Departmental Archives in Troyes, France, and consists of a codex of forty pages. In addition, a copy of the original manuscript was made and divided into six separate codices, one for each separate tapestry panel. Five of these, for tapestry panels two through six, are extant. These codices, also on paper, were very likely prepared for a group of artists meant to carry out the designs. The manuscript and copies, while not dated, are believed to be from around the turn of the fifteenth century.

For three hundred and fifty years, the *Mémoires* lay in obscurity until the archivist Philippe Guignard published a transcription of the hand written manuscript as a monograph in 1849. In transcribing the *Mémoires*, Guignard meticulously noted the minor variations that occur in the five codices and identified the Latin sources used in the composition of the narrative. This transcription, co-ordinated page by page with the original, is the basis for a translation I have prepared for publication by the University of Notre Dame Press.²

The *Mémoires* call for the legends of St. Urban and his sacred company to be portrayed in a set of tapestries, divided into twenty-two *hystoires*, which in turn are divided into two or three *mystères*. Because these two terms indicate the main compositional strategy used by the author, I have chosen to leave *hystoire* and *mystère* in the original French. However, it is useful to define the terms contextually.

² Tina Kane, trans. and ed., *The Troyes Mémoires Directives for a Medieval Choir Tapestry Depicting the Life and Sacred Company of St. Urban and St. Cecilia* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, forthcoming).

The primary definition of *hystoire* at the time was “tableau” or “picture.” A secondary meaning was “statue,” while a third was “dramatic representation.” Both “picture” and “statue” refer to visual artistic compositions, while “dramatic representation” points to a literary genre. Thus, we could say that *hystoire* denotes a dramatic visual representation of a story or a history. During the period the *Mémoires* were composed, the word *hystoire* would have designated a specific unit of visual narrative that, eventually, went out of usage as styles, tastes and technologies changed. (The same would hold true of *mystère*.)

Mistère, like our word “mystery,” is usually defined as “a hidden meaning,” with a secondary definition of “a ceremony” (usually sacred). A good example of a *mistère*, from the 15th century, is when a particular king is miraculously cured of an ailment. And here we can see one of the derivations of the English word “mystery,” as something difficult to understand—bearing in mind, as well, the reference to medieval guild drama (as in mystery play cycles). Thus, *mistère*, in the context of a *hystoire*, carries the extended sense of a sacred mystery.

Most of the *hystoires* and *mystères* described in the *Mémoires* were to be portrayed in “tabernacles”. The meaning of tabernacle, as it is used here, is close to the canopied niches we find in the stone walls of churches. In the St. Urban *Mémoires*, instructions are given for the portrayal of sixty-four named characters. These include, among others, St. Urban, St. Cecilia, her husband Valerian, and their sacred company, as well as their adversaries, the Roman Provost Almachius and his subordinates. In addition there are family members, St. Urban’s clergy, and a host of unnamed characters, including Christians and pagans, paupers, members of the nobility, torturers, henchmen, executioners, swordsmen, angels, and a devil.

This large cast is compiled by the author primarily from several authoritative Latin texts, the most important of which is: Vincent of Beauvais’s *Mirror of History*.³ *The Acts of St. Urban* are also quoted extensively.⁴ It is from these texts that the images derive their authority; moreover, the texts are quoted in Latin extensively and reverently throughout.

Although the characters are many and the subject matter complex, the instructions are well organized. First, there is an outline of what is to be shown in each *hystoire*; then instructions are given as to how to portray it; and finally, the Latin text from which the narrative and images derive is quoted.

Once the *Mémoires* were composed and written down, they must have been carefully checked before a copy of each of the six sections was made and given to the painters who would then draw the preparatory models, or sketches, for the cartoons. We know this because there are numerous additions in these copies not included in the original. These additions generally provide more detailed instructions to the painter or emphasize (or clarify) a particular point or feature to be represented. In addition, that these copies were intended for separate painters is supported by the specifying of such things as where one tapestry panel should join clearly and legibly with the next, or where it will be placed overall.

³ Belvacensis Vincentii, *Speculum historiale* [*Mirror of History*], Argentinae Joannes Mentelin, 1473-76. Tom. 2, Lib. 12 Cap., 22-23.

⁴ Manuscript no. 1171, from the Public Library of Troyes. Vitae et miracula SS. [Lives and Miracles of the Saints] and Constitutiones novellae [New Laws]. This manuscript begins with the Passio S. Urbani, Papae et martyri [The Passion of Saint Urban, Pope and Martyr] which covers thirty double pages followed by Responsoria cum antiphonis de S. Urbano. This manuscript was consulted for variants in the Latin by Guignard in his transcription.

The finished St Urban tapestries would have been exhibited above the choir in the church of St. Urban. On feast days the tapestries would have been brought out and used as part of the liturgical celebrations performed in the church. Laura Weigert, in her study of the use of choir tapestries, *Weaving Sacred Stories*, explains:

*These tapestries were reserved for the celebration of high feast days, which were dramatic visual, aural, and olfactory events. On these days, the chapter of clerics and its officials took their assigned places in the choir. Textiles, golden reliquaries, and candles transformed this space by colors and lights...In many churches, the preparations for these days included unrolling and hanging immense scrolls of tapestry along the rows of stalls.*⁵

The placement of such tapestries was important. In the *Mémoires*, the copies made for the different painters at times even specify exactly which scene is to hang over which particular seat in the choir. For example, in the memorandum to the artist at the end of the third tapestry panel we find the instruction, "This present panel will cover the place where Monsieur the Dean sits." This stipulation reminds us that these stories were also used to support the authority of the clergy through association with the sacred texts illustrated.

The tapestries would have been about 1.5 meters (or 4 feet 5 inches) high, by 43 meters (or 130 feet) long. Such a large art work was necessary to depict the full story. To provide an idea of the narrative cycle contained in the written manuscript, here is what Philippe Guignard writes in the introduction to his 1849 publication.⁶

The Mémoires, on which the cartoons of the tapestry of St. Urban would have been executed, are arranged in twenty-two histoires divided into six separate sections, or draps [panels]. First the donor, his wife, and children are seen. St. Urban presents them to God. Then St. Urban's childhood opens the series of tableaux, followed by his early preaching, his coronation, and his generosity to the Roman Church. His zeal in converting pagans after succeeding to the papacy leads naturally to the episode of the conversion of St. Cecilia.

The baptism of Valerian, the crowns of lilies and roses brought by an angel, the meeting with Tiburcius, are among the scenes touched by a gracious and elegant naïveté. St. Urban reappears exercising his papal duties. His persecution is planned in spite of the peaceful wishes of Alexander Severus, won over by his mother Mamaea's prayers.

First, St. Valerian and his brother are persecuted. Then St. Cecilia herself is taken to be tortured. St. Urban buries her virginal body. This pious act brings him back to the forefront. He is abducted during his retreat and is brought before Almachius. He converts his jailer, destroys Jupiter's temple, and dies at the hands of the executioner. The Christians bury him with the bodies of the martyrs, slain at the same time as he because of the constancy of their faith.

Such is the rudimentary outline of the tapestry of St. Urban, which is further embellished by thousands of details that I cannot enumerate here. All of the scenes are foreseen and everything is designed in advance and carefully specified. Eight lines, clearly written in regular meter and rhyme, give a résumé of each of the twenty-two episodes.

⁵ Laura Weigert, *Weaving Sacred Stories: French Choir Tapestries and the Performance of Clerical Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004): 1.

⁶ Kane, *Mémoires*. Introduction by Philippe Guignard.

Guignard adds: “To follow the various sections of such a long and complicated story as the life of St. Urban without getting lost in the details, the author of the *Mémoires* had to have a feeling for what I would call reliefs. I do not know if anyone today could trace the canvas of such a vast composition in one single gesture so naturally and with such ease.” Of course, this was written many years prior to the appearance of modern film. However, it does suggest a prefiguration of the ability required by a contemporary *auteur* as she or he composes a screenplay for a film.

The *Mémoires*, in a similar fashion to a film script, are very specific about some details and silent about others, much as a modern film script today leaves certain aspects of the design program to the producer. Eliza Haun notes, in her essay, “Woven and Spliced: An Exploration of the Legacy of Tapestry as seen in Silent Film”:

The mistères [of the tapestry Mémoires] can almost be seen as directions for a tableau similar to and serving the same function as modern stage directions. It is fascinating to note that centuries later, screenwriters employ almost this exact technique. Screenplays themselves contain very few of the details we find in film. The texts film makers have to work with are a strict account of what basic action is to happen. Camera angles including close-ups or wide shots can be suggested through the mention of something that could not be seen without them (text on a page of a newspaper for example,) but details including facial expressions, reactions, and subtle movement—basically anything that dictates something other than the basic action and positioning of the characters—none of that is there.⁷

Given the nature of the information provided in the tapestry script, one of the many intriguing questions suggested by the Troyes manuscript is precisely how the painters of the cartoon (or *petit patron*) proceeded to translate words into images, once they had been handed the finished *Mémoires*. To gain some insight into the process, I engaged the services of the Australian artist and illustrator, Mark Fox, and—providing him with a section of the translated manuscript—asked him to follow the written instructions as closely as possible in composing images from them. The specific scenes he was given were from the instructions for the second tapestry panel. To provide a context, here is a general outline of the action in this panel, which begins with the fifth *histoire* (the first four *histoires* were portrayed in the first tapestry panel).

Fifth histoire: St. Cecilia prays to preserve her virginity; her marriage with Valerian; she urges him to enter into a life of chastity with her; he consents. Sixth hist.: Valerian goes to find St. Urban in his refuge; an old man appears to him; St. Urban baptizes him; he returns to St. Cecilia. Seventh hist.: An angel places crowns of lilies and roses on his and St. Cecilia's heads; Tiburcius, Valerian's brother is amazed at the fragrance from these crowns, invisible to him; St. Cecilia and her husband instruct him in the true faith. Eighth hist.: All three go to find St. Urban; he baptizes Tiburcius; St. Cecilia and Valerian distribute alms.

Here follows the excerpt (minus the Latin tags) which I gave the artist, along with two of his interpretative drawings.

To demonstrate all this, and represent it in this fifth hystoire [beginning the second panel] a very fine tabernacle will be represented [and portrayed], shaped like a palatial

⁷ Eliza Haun, “Woven and Spliced: An Exploration of the Legacy of Tapestry as seen in Silent Film” (Unpublished paper, Vassar College, 2006).

home. St. Cecilia will be in this tabernacle, above, in a place apart, becomingly dressed and arrayed, like a girl of the nobility [and of noble lineage]. She will be kneeling, and

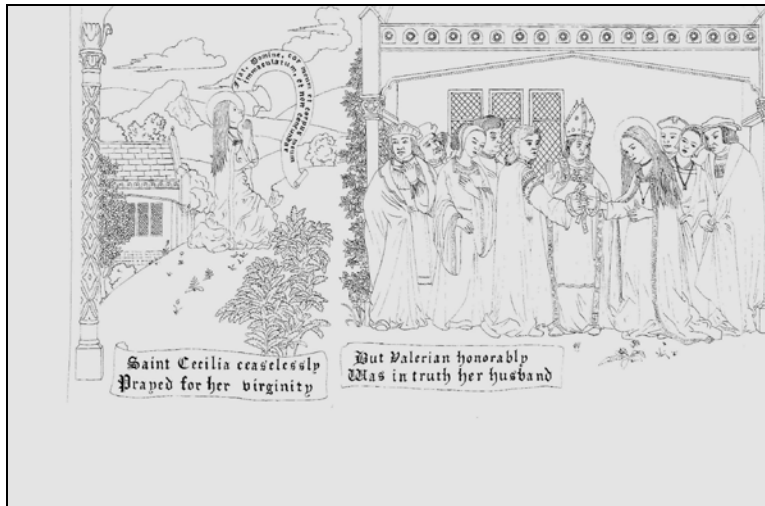


Figure 3. The first two *mistères* of the fifth *hystoire* of the Life of St. Urban and St. Cecilia (Mark Fox illustration, with permission of the artist).

hands joined [and eyes looking to heaven], to fully [represent and] demonstrate the narrative [and contents] of what is written [and related in the volumes of history books of the leading earlier cited historiographers and] in the legend of the said St. Cecilia, which says: “Cecilia, born of a noble Roman family and nurtured in the faith of Christ, prayed day and night for the Lord to preserve her virginity.” From St. Cecilia’s mouth will emerge a large scroll on which will be written: “Lord, let my heart and my body be unstained, and let me not be confounded. In this same tabernacle, in the principal *mistère*, will be portrayed how she was married to Valerian [her husband]. For this, St. Cecilia and Valerian, her [said] husband, will be becomingly dressed and arrayed, as [befitting] husband and wife. With them will be a bishop [dressed and adorned in pontifical robes] who by gesture [and countenance] will be marrying them. They, [bishop, husband and wife], will be accompanied by others, as at a wedding ceremony. In another place, apart from the tabernacle, a bedchamber with a beautifully decorated bed will be represented [and portrayed], where St. Cecilia shall be [similarly again portrayed] dressed [and adorned] like a bride, with an angel near her. She will be in the act of admonishing and exhorting her husband Valerian to preserve her virginity [just as it is said]. He [Valerian] will [seem to] restrain himself, representing what Vincent Gale describes of this St. [Cecilia] in his *Mirror of History*, in the twenty-second chapter of this book: “Cecilia, was betrothed to a young man called Valerian. As the day of the wedding approached, she appealed to her betrothed in her bedchamber: ‘I have an angel of God as my lover, etc.’ Finally: ‘If he senses in the least that you presume to violate my chastity, he will be severely angry with you, etc.’ Then, Valerian, seized with fear through the will of God, said: ‘If you want me to believe what you say, show me that angel, and I will do as you ask.’” For this reason, it might be good, if possible, for a scroll to come from St. Cecilia’s mouth, on which is written: “I have an angel of God as my lover, who guards my body with extreme zeal. From Valerian’s mouth will likewise emerge another scroll, on which will be, in response: “If you want me to believe what you say, show me that angel, and I shall do what you ask.”

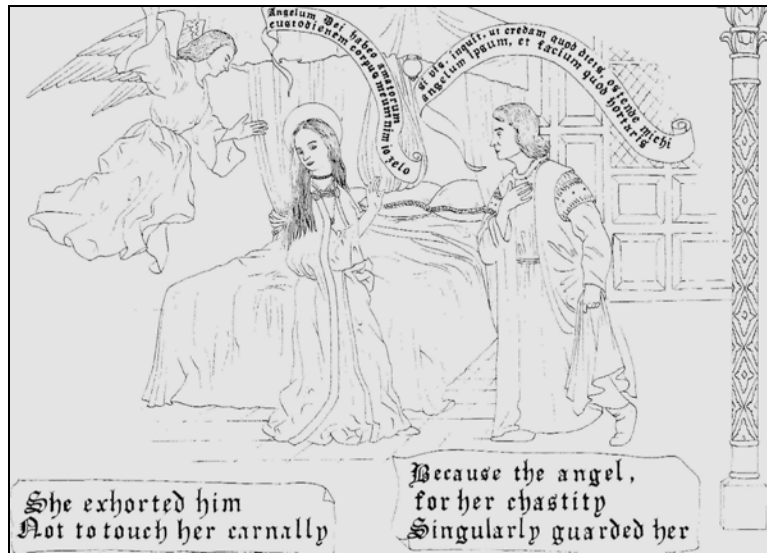


Figure 4. The third *mistère* in the fifth *hystoire* of the Lives of St. Urban and St. Cecilia.
(MarkFox illustration, with permission of the artist).

And beneath these three *mistères*, united and organized in one *hystoire*, will be the following lines, referring to what is written above:

Verse

St. Cecilia ceaselessly

Prayed for her virginity.

But Valerian, honorably,

Was her husband truly.

She exhorted him

Not to touch her carnally,

Because the angel with her,

Guarded her chastity singularly.⁸

Are Mark Fox's drawings similar to those that might have been done from the original *Mémoires*? It is impossible to know for certain. But we can see that the requisite details and structure have been closely adhered to. (Now, we simply need a weaver to complete the process.)

In his monograph, in addition to the presenting the *Mémoires*, Guignard includes a transcription of a second document, excerpted from the account books of another Church in Troyes, the Church of the Madaleine. This material dates from earlier in the fifteenth century and lists all the payments made over a five-year period (from 1425 to 1430) for the production of a set of choir tapestries depicting the life of Mary Magdalene. This unusual primary material provides an intriguing look at the successive stages involved in the manufacture of tapestry.

The first payments recorded are to Brother Didier, a Jacobin Friar, for the written directive to the painters. Then successive payments are made to the illuminators and painters, and the

⁸ Kane, *Mémoires*.

weavers. Along the way we meet some wonderful characters and discover many interesting items, such as payments to Poinssète, the seamstress, for bed sheets (*draps du lit*) to be sewn together for the full scale cartoons, or money paid for the wine Brother Didier (the author) drinks with Thibaut Climent (the *tapissier*) while discussing the life of Mary Magdalene over dinner.

This document, which I have included as an appendix in my book, is another gem for tapestry historians. It is valuable primary material, indicating the successive stages in the production of a fifteenth-century choir tapestry (no longer extant). In it, we learn that Brother Didier delivered a written *hystoire* (rendered as *istoire* in the manuscript) to the painters, who turned it into a *petit patron* (a small sketch or model). This, in turn, was enlarged by the painters to a *patron* (a full scale tapestry cartoon), painted on strips of heavy cloth sewn together by the seamstress. The finished *patrons* for each tapestry section were then taken to the workshop of the weavers, where the tapestries were woven. When complete, the set was hung on metal hooks above the choir stalls of the church. While this is only a bare outline of the whole undertaking, what we gain from the Account Books is not just a summary of the different steps involved in making a tapestry from beginning to end, but, more importantly, a vivid sense of the individuals involved and the material culture in which the entire process was imbedded. As each item, or payment, is accounted for, the complexity of the enterprise is underscored and the social relations between the clerics and the local artisans are glimpsed—as it were—between the lines.

In summary, we can say that the Troyes *Mémoires*, in conjunction with the Account Books of the Church of the Madeleine, help fill an important gap in our knowledge of how written iconographic programs were created, and how tapestries depicting narrative cycles were designed and produced in the middle ages. The *Mémoires*, in particular, shed light on a stage in the process of artistic creation about which very little is known. Whether such documents were common, but not valued sufficiently to be preserved for posterity, remains a mystery.