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Kathryn Berenson
kwberenson@gmail.com

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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Italian Bedfellows: Tristan, Solomon & “Bestes”

Kathryn Berenson

kwberenson@gmail.com

Two surviving late fourteenth-century quilted furnishings, The Tristan Quilt in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and the Coperta Guicciardini in the National Museum of the Bargello, Florence, depict scenes from a story in the early life of Tristan, one of King Arthur’s knights. Both museums attribute the furnishings to a southern Italian atelier and link them to the Guicciardini family of Florence.¹ To date most research on the Tristan hangings ignores their origins, as if, like Athena from the head of Zeus, they burst complete. Yet the hangings represent centuries-long Italian adaptation to outside influences. This paper places the Tristan hangings in the midst of a quilting tradition that had integrated the customs, imagery, materials, legends and needlework techniques of other cultures. Production of the Tristan hangings occurred in the midst of continuing Italian appreciation for quilted chamber furnishings, many made of cotton and silk textiles imported from eastern Mediterranean ports, particularly that of Tripoli, in Syria. Moreover, the patron’s commission for these hangings drew on Italian regard for one particular Arthurian hero, Sir Tristan, to make a political statement regarding contemporary regional disputes.

Within 100 years, tales of King Arthur and his Round Table spread from their creation in eleventh-century Wales to all of Europe. The southern Italian peninsula had already absorbed a blend of Mediterranean cultures. From 1165 to the present, King Arthur salutes, the Old Testament’s Solomon judges, and a two-tailed “beastie,” or mermaid, dreamily smiles in the mosaic tile floor of the cathedral of Otranto, on the southern coast. The Greek prior Pantaleone designed the floor as a visual religious manual commingling imagery from previous eastern and western invaders. Greek, Roman, Islamic, and Byzantine occupants had already left their mark when the Normans brought King Arthur’s Matter of Britain to southern Italy. For example, the mermaid is in similar pose to one depicted in a mosaic in Ravenna’s fifth-century Byzantine Basilica of San Giovanni Evangelista and also is embroidered on footwear attributed to the island of Sicily at about the time of the Otranto mosaic.² In 1266 Angevin rule of the Kingdom of Naples brought French veneration of chivalric principles.

Throughout, small galleys from eastern Mediterranean ports transported high quality raw and spun cotton, and lengths of fine cotton textiles to Italian ports. These fragile ships hugged the southern Italian coast for protection and to trade their goods for fresh supplies. The exchange most certainly involved finished textile products, including bed chamber furnishings.

¹ The Tristan Quilt, maker unknown, inv. #1391-1904. See <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O98183/the-tristan-quilt-bed-cover-unknown/> for more images and catalog notes. For a detailed study and images of the Coperta Guicciardini, maker unknown, inv 61, see Rosanna Caterina Proto Pisani et al., eds., *The Guicciardini “Quilt”: Conservation of the Deeds of Tristan* (Florence: Edifir, 2010).

² Caterina Binetti-Vertua, *Trine e Donne Siciliane* (Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1911) 23 and Tav 5. Two-tailed mermaids appear on church portals and capitals in Italy as early as the tenth century and even today appear on the facade of the government building for the Province of Naples.

Island of Sicily household and business inventories dating to the years 1300 to 1500 document nearly 250 bedcovers and hangings made of white cotton and/or linen textiles.³ Islanders, whether rich or poor, valued their textile furnishings highly; they are among the initial items listed in most of their inventories. For example, in his testament written in 1300, Adinolfus de Guillelmo Ricio of Monte San Giuliano first bequeaths his 890 sheep and goats to his widow and children, then makes sure they will have his two “almost new” white quilts.⁴ Six white bed chamber furnishings top the list of 192 other belongings such as carpets, furniture, and articles made of gold and silver in the 1416 testament of “the magnificent dame Margarita of Vintimilio.”⁵

Most island inventories list items only by name, such as *coltra*, *coltram*, *cultra*, or *cultram*, (singular), *coltras*, *coltre* or *cultras* (plural) for bed quilts.⁶ Additional description is rarely included and when it is, its reliability depends on a notary’s knowledge. The cautious scribes of a 1334 French inventory noted two small quilts were made of fine cotton, then added, “or linen, we don’t really know, but they were white.”⁷ The date of an inventory rarely represents the age of items listed within. While dowry inventories likely include newly-made quilts, death bed testaments may refer to works acquired decades earlier or inherited from predecessors.

Quilting patterns, when mentioned in inventories from modest island households, are simple: almond or oval shapes, checkerboards, and pine cones. Values, when mentioned in these household inventories, are low. Of the few island inventories from affluent island households, one dated 1323 names two fine white coltre listed between a gold crown encrusted with sapphires and pearls and a gilded silver casket, all belonging to the very wealthy James I, Aragon king of the island.⁸ It seems safe to presume the king’s bed covers held intricate stitching. Other inventories from wealthy households describe white bed furnishings made of fine materials or assign high appraisals to them, traits that intimate they held fairly complex needlework. Two descriptions of coltre support that view, one citing “dense white stitching,” another that literally translates as “worked with a lot of work.”⁹ Count Francesco Ventimiglia, one of the most influential men on the island, spent lavishly on his daughters’ dowries. At a time when the

³ Genevieve Bresc-Bautier and Henri Bresc, *Une maison de mots: Inventaires de boutiques, d’ateliers et de châteaux de Sicile XIII–XV siècles* (Palermo: Associazione Mediterranea, 2014), 1: 77-78.

⁴ Bresc-Bautier and Bresc, *Maison de mots*, 2: 367, item 5.

⁵ Bresc-Bautier and Bresc, *Maison de mots*, 3: 691, fol. 59v, items 1-4, 8, 9.

⁶ Bresc-Bautier and Bresc, *Maison des mots*, 1: xxiv-xxv.

⁷ Leopold Delisle, “Inventaire des biens trouvés en l’hôtel de Quatremares après l’arrestation de Jeanne de Valois, 1334,” *Actes Normands de la chambre des comptes sous Philippe de Valois 1328-1350* (Rouen: 1871), 101-102.

⁸ Francisco Martorell y Trabal, “Inventari dels bens de la cambra reyal en temps du Jaume II (1323),” in *Anuari de l’Institut d’Estudis Catalans* (Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans, 1912), 562. As king of the island of Sicily he was known as James I. Married to Blanche, daughter of King Charles II of Naples, he had access to works of ateliers in both Naples and Tripoli, as will be discussed later in this paper.

⁹ Bresc-Bautier and Bresc, *Maison des mots*, 2: 482, fol. 17r, item 1; 485, fol. 107r, item 4.

average value of white dowry quilts was 10 florins, the value of one white coltra stitched with rosettes in Euphimia's dowry, dated 1375, was 100 florins and another three appraised at 50 florins each.¹⁰ Twelve years later the value of Aleonora Ventimiglia's seven white coltre totaled 560 florins (four valued at 100 florins each).¹¹ According to the transcript of the original, the notary described Euphimia's less costly quilts as worked with *butunetos* and *butonos* that could refer to small embroidered knots. However, these italicized words may be versions of the Latin *buctoni* and *buctonum*, defined as small tunnels, which would suggest needlework filled with cording or rolls of batting.¹² The notary of Aleonora's dowry describes her three more expensive coltre as *laborate ad buctunchellos* or worked with small tunnels, a more specific reference to corded work.¹³

The origin of these numerous white quilts, whether modest or magnificent, is obscure. Early Islamic introduction of cotton cultivation and modest-scale processing (carding, dyeing, and weaving) on the island of Sicily was successful enough that Norman rulers assumed authority over it when they arrived in the eleventh-century. However, island raw cotton was of such low quality that most of it was exported and production was small.¹⁴ The island had no quilting guilds and the earliest record found by this author of a professional quilter on the island is dated 1507.¹⁵ Only two island coltre listings imply local needlework: one that describes a quilt as cut but not sewn, the other that describes a quilt as unfinished.¹⁶ Another inventory lists two quilts associated with Catalonia, also ruled by the House of Aragon.¹⁷ By 1312 several towns charged tolls for transport of quilted garments and furnishings, but it is unclear whether the tolls applied to domestic or imported work or both.¹⁸ The only evidence that coltre recorded in these households were stitched on the island comes from the large number of them listed in inventories. Although quantity of listings is persuasive, the only justifiable conclusion is that white coltre, including those worked with complex motifs, were accessible to island

¹⁰ Ibid., 511-12, fols. 166v, items 3-6.

¹¹ Ibid. 568, fol. 50r, items 4-8.

¹² Bress-Bautier and Bress, *Maison de mots*, 6: 1626, 1628.

¹³ Ibid., 1628.

¹⁴ Maureen Fennell Mazzaoui, *The Italian Cotton Industry in the Later Middle Ages, 1100-1600* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 26-27.

¹⁵ Stephan R. Epstein, "The textile industry and the foreign cloth trade in late medieval Sicily (1300-1500): a 'colonial relationship?'" *Journal of Medieval History* (Amsterdam: Elsevier Science Publishers, 1989), 167; Enrico Mauceri, "Inventari inediti dei secoli XV e XVI," *Archivio Storico per la Sicilia Orientale* Anno XII- Fascicolo II-I (Catania: 1915), 106.

¹⁶ Bress-Bautier and Bress, *Maison de mots*, 2: 441, fol. 93r, item 11; 2: 559, fol. 6v, item 83. These pieces could have been imported from Syria or Spain.

¹⁷ Ibid., 507, fol. 95r, item 1: "cultras de tela alba decem, de quibus due sunt incutulecte catalani, super quibus dicta testatrix habet recipere ab eodem catalano."

¹⁸ Epstein, "The textile industry," 156, citing *Gli atti della città di Palermo dal 1311 al 1410*, Fedele Pollaci, Nuccio Pollaci, and Domenico Gnoffo, eds. (Palermo: 1892), 327.

householders. Theoretically, household members and local needlewomen, who were paid by the piece, could have made the bed furnishings, but it is likely that not a few of them and most of the more luxurious versions came from elsewhere.

A 1392 document recorded on the island of Sicily points to a foreign source. In that year officers confiscated the opulent goods of Manfredi of Aragon (in prison for treason) then delivered his *cultram ad portam de Tripuli* to the bed chamber of the queen.¹⁹ Tripoli refers to the city on the coast of Syria (now part of Lebanon). Translation of the Latin preposition *ad* can be “of,” to indicate that the port of Tripoli was depicted on the quilt - which would be peculiar. Or *ad* can mean “from,” to indicate the quilt was acquired or even made in the port. This second interpretation is supported by the 1434 purchase order Alphonse V, then king of Aragon and the island of Sicily, sent from Catalonia to Tripoli for a quilted furnishing.²⁰ Eleven other inventory descriptions offer a third possibility. The notary of a 1426 inventory writes that a white quilt is *laboratam, ut vulgariter dicitur* or worked, as is commonly said “*a la porta di Tripuli*.”²¹ The word *vulgariter* confirms that quilted needlework associated with Tripoli is well-known. However, use of the phrase “*a la*” is again ambiguous; it could mean the stitching was worked (*laboratum*) in the Syrian port or that islanders imitated the style associated with imported models. Two inventories, dated 1492 and 1508, that describe coltre worked “*a porta di Tripuli*” are similarly vague about the origin of production.²² Only one listing signals what distinguishes Tripolitanian quilting. A 1446 island inventory describes a quilt as filled with fleur-de-lis and other motifs “*sublivatum a porta di Tripuli*,” the word *sublivatum* seems to be an attempt in rudimentary Latin to indicate these motifs were raised in relief by an inner layer of batting.²³

Only wealthy consumers could afford coltre associated with Tripoli. The 1426 inventory mentioned above cites a value of 65 florins; a 1491 inventory values a new work at 100 florins, again suggesting that these quilts held complex stitching.²⁴ The 13 documented Tripoli-associated works mark continuing foreign influence on taste for interior decor on the island of Sicily. Thus far this author has found no written references to Tripoli in quilted works documented on the Italian mainland or elsewhere in Europe. Perhaps mainland notaries either did not know the geographic origin of a quilted furnishing or considered its origin irrelevant.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Silvestri, “Sullo Stato e sulla riforma della legislazione dei pubblici archive in Italia,” in *Rivista Sicula di Scienze, letteratura ed arti VIII* (Palermo, 1872), 243.

²⁰ Bresp-Bautier and Bresp, *Maison de mots*, 1: 78 n126, citing Arxiu de la Corona d’Aragó, *Cancellaria* 2891, fol. 64v, dated 3 Jan 1434.

²¹ Bresp-Bautier and Bresp, *Maison de mots*, 3: 801, fol. 136v, item 7.

²² Bresp-Bautier and Bresp, *Maison de mots*, 1: 78; Mauceri, “Inventari inediti dei secoli XV e XVI,” 106, 107n1.

²³ Bresp-Bautier and Bresp, *Maison de mots*, 4: 1164, fol. 321r, item 30. In Latin *sub* means under and *laborum*, often appearing as *lavorum* in medieval inventories, means worked, see *The Latin Companion* https://www.dl.cambridgescp.com/sites/www.cambridgescp.com/files/legacy_root_files/singles/ukdic3/index.html.

²⁴ Bresp-Bautier and Bresp, *Maison de mots*, 3: 801, fol. 136v, item 7; Mauceri, “Inventari inediti dei secoli XV e XVI,” 111.

In his 1913 article about the Tristan hangings, Italian medievalist Pio Rajna concludes that a 1386 Florentine inventory listing of “a Sicilian [quilt or hanging] showing heraldic arms” referred to needlework produced on the island of Sicily.²⁵ That single citation, along with claims of a nineteenth-century island quilting tradition, induced subsequent textile historians to claim that the Tristan hangings were produced in an island atelier.²⁶ However, after the Aragonese captured the island in the late 1290s, a papal treaty renamed it Trinacria and Angevin King Charles II retained the title “Kingdom of Sicily” for his mainland realm.²⁷ Neither Rajna nor later scholars distinguish between Sicily, the island, and Sicily, the mainland kingdom, when considering the 1386 citation. Yet the figured chamber furnishing Rajna cites was as, or even more, likely to have originated within the kingdom than on the island. At present, most modern scholars avoid confusion by titling the mainland state the “Kingdom of Naples” as does this paper.

Although continental Italy offers fewer records to consult, the several dozen that exist suggest that kings, queens, their courtiers, and nobles throughout the peninsula all had access to fine quality quilted white chamber sets. Duke Robert II of Artois likely acquired his chamber furnishings that feature the heraldic arms of the Kingdom of Naples during the period 1282 to 1292 that he lived there as counselor to two kings of the realm (Charles I, his uncle, followed by Charles II, his cousin).²⁸ When Marchese Federico Malaspina of Liguria died in 1301, he owned six white coltre made of high-quality imported cloth.²⁹ The 1328 testament of Clémence, queen consort of Louis X of France, lists several elaborately quilted white chamber furnishings.³⁰ Until her marriage, at age 21, Queen Clémence had lived in the court of Naples, where, as will be discussed later, white quilted chamber furnishings apparently were certainly available if not made there. In Giovanni Boccaccio’s mid-century epic *The Decameron*, he twice describes coltre made of a brilliant white imported cotton in the bed chambers of fictional princesses.³¹ A regular

²⁵ Pio Rajna, “Intorno a due antiche coperte con figurazioni tratte dalle storie di Tristano,” *Romania: recueil trimestriel consacré à l’étude des langues et des littératures romanes* 42 (1913), 579: “una coltre ciciliana di drappo cum armi”, citing a record Rajna received from Attilo Schiaparelli.

²⁶ Quilt historians often refer to an article by Antonino Uccello to support claims of this alleged long-term island tradition, however, the oldest record Uccello cites is a 1923 dowry inventory; see *Amore e matrimonio nella vita del popolo siciliano* (Palermo: Palazzo Acreide, 1976), 32.

²⁷ The 1302 Peace of Caltabellotta.

²⁸ Mahaut d’Artois inherited her father’s effects which were then confiscated in a raid by her nephew, Robert d’Artois III; see Antoine Le Roux de Lincy, “Inventaires des biens meubles et immeubles de la comtesse Mahaut d’Artois, pillés par l’armée de son neveu, en 1313,” *Bibliothèque de l’Ecole des chartes*, 13:53-79 (1852) doi : <https://doi.org/10.3406/bec.1852.445056>. Robert’s wife, Jeanne de Valois, possessed the goods when she was arrested in 1334; see Delisle, “Inventaire des biens trouvés en l’hôtel de Quatremares,” 13: 103, 108.

²⁹ Eugenio Branchi, *Sopra alcune particolarità della vita di Dante: lettere di Eugenio Branchi a Pietro Fraticelli seguite da un documento inedito dell’anno 1301* (Florence, 1865) 37.

³⁰ Louis Douet-D’Arcq, *Nouveau recueil de Comptes de l’argenterie des rois de France*, Société de l’histoire de France (Paris, 1874) 75-76.

in the Neapolitan court from 1327 to 1340, Boccaccio wrote to a friend that he was “familiar with the habits and lifestyle of the courtiers” in whose chambers he may have seen examples of these furnishings.³² One of Boccaccio’s friends, Niccolò Acciaiuoli, who later became *seneschal* or chief of staff to Queen Joan I of Naples, owned a white tester quilted with his arms and a white coltra stitched with figures of beasts.³³ In 1341, the goods of Ysabetta, widow of the fabulously rich Venetian doge, Francesco Dandolo, included one white coltra from Cyprus and two large and two small quilts the notary termed *traponte*.³⁴ In 1413 King Ladislas of Naples sent an undoubtedly splendid white quilt to Catherine of Burgundy.³⁵ (His motive for doing so is somewhat suspect, as she had recently been jilted by the son of the man Ladislas had overthrown to gain the Neapolitan throne.)

Robert of Artois II, Clémence, Boccaccio, Acciaiuoli, and King Ladislas are the only Neapolitan court figures associated with white quilted bed furnishings. Although one would expect to find coltre listings in contemporary royal inventories, during their retreat from southern Italy in September 1945, German soldiers burned all Kingdom of Naples archival records dating from 1265 to 1435.³⁶

A Swiss inventory partially offsets that loss by describing quilts with story-telling imagery and identifying where the owner acquired them. Pierre, count of Geneva, spent much of 1382 in the Kingdom of Naples in support of the campaign of Louis I of France’s campaign to gain the throne of that realm (although the would-be king died before attaining his goal). The detail-oriented notary who drew up the Pierre’s 1393 testament wrote that one quilt, made of black silk and stitched with imagery of vipers, was *travail de Naples* or “work of Naples” and six other white quilts depicting Saint George, King Solomon, and other monarchs and assorted nobles, were *de Naples* or “from Naples.”³⁷ The reference is extraordinary not only as a rare identification of quilt production, but for clearly naming the city of Naples as the source, given

³¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decamerone*, Novella 80, 9; Novella 41, 5; quoted in Accademia della Crusca, *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca, con tre indici delle voci, locuzioni, e proverbi Latini, e Greci, etc.*, compiled by L. Salviati, vol. 1 in a series (Florence, 1729), 708; at <http://www.lessicografia.it/Controller?lemma=COLTRE>.

³² Giovanni Boccaccio, letter to Francesco Nelli, June 28, 1363, Lettere XIII, 33–34, quoted in Roberta Morosini, “Polyphonic Parthenope: Boccaccio’s Letter XIII and his ‘Plebeian’ Naples, According to Domenico Rea,” *Quaderni d’Italianistica* 23, no. 2 (2002), 10.

³³ Curzio Mazzi, ed., *Argenti degli Acciaiuoli*, (Siena, 1895) 13.

³⁴ Pompeo Molmenti, *La storia di Venezia nella vita privata dalle origini alla caduta della Repubblica*, (Torino, 1880) 601.

³⁵ Henry Havard, *Dictionnaire de l’Ameublement* (Paris, 1887), 2: col. 882.

³⁶ Riccardo Filangieri, “Report on the Destruction by the Germans, September 30, 1943, of the Depository of Priceless Historical Records of the Naples State Archives,” Arthur H. Levitt and Salvatore D. Nerboso, transl., *The American Archivist*, 7, no. 4 (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1944), 252–255.

³⁷ Max Bruchet, “Trois inventaires du Château d’Annecy,” *Mémoires et documents publiés par la Société Savoisienne d’histoire et d’archéologie*. Vol. 38, 2^e série (Chambéry, 1899), 8: 339, item 13; 340 items 15, 16, 19–21.

that the kingdom retained the title “of Sicily.”³⁸ The notary also recorded that in Taranto, a city within the Apulia region of the kingdom, the count bought a large white “*culcitram punctam ... operatam avibus et magnis undis*” or “quilt stitched with birds with large waves.”³⁹ Max Bruchet who wrote about the inventory and transcribed this original Latin phrase, explains that quilting stitches produce a regular undulation on the surface of a bedcover akin to the ripple of waves, in other words, that the word *undis* describes the play of light and shadow over the quilt rather than a motif.⁴⁰ The inventory lists another Taranto purchase, stitched with motifs of vines and fleur de lys; and a smaller white quilt bought in Apulia patterned with criss-crossed diamonds.⁴¹ Pierre of Geneva left many furnishings to his niece and three white quilted furnishings show up in her 1426 testament, all described as *de l'ouvrage de Naples* or “work of Naples,” one “beautiful and fine,” the others illustrating the stories of Alexander and Solomon.⁴² Not only do these two inventories contain definitive references to the city of Naples as a likely place of coltre production, but they are also the first to describe legends and tales depicted within their stitching.

The Azzolino quilt, named for the family that discovered it in their villa near Florence, relates to the Tristan hangings and to possible origin in the Kingdom of Naples.⁴³ Although, the top portion of the central figures are missing, medievalist Rajna proposes that they represent Tristan and Isolde and, rather reluctantly, concludes that the costumes depicted in the quilt and the inscriptions stitched into each panel place it in the 1400s and within the mainland kingdom.⁴⁴

With Rajna’s conclusion that the Azzolino quilt was made on the mainland, the significant number of quilted, story-telling chamber furnishings described as works of Naples, and the many elaborately stitched works owned by those closely associated with the Kingdom of Naples, it seems safe to conclude that the mainland realm was a reliable source of elaborate, story-telling white quilted chamber furnishings, and likely the source of the Tristan hangings. There is scant evidence of comparable local production on the island of Sicily in the late fourteenth century, as was discussed earlier. Moreover, listings in four mid-fifteenth-century testaments indicate some islanders apparently acquired their white quilted chamber furnishings from the city of Naples: one large “*cultram napolitanam*” stitched with figures (1438), two coltre described as made “*neapolitano*” style (1444, 1455) one holding floral motifs, the other stitched with hunting scenes, and two others “worked “*napulitano*” style” (1459).⁴⁵

³⁸ The notary’s awareness of this title appears in a following reference to the “*regis Sicilie*” or “king of Sicily,” see *Ibid.*, 344, item 52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 340, item 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 340, n1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 340, item 18; 359, item 140.

⁴² Louis Barthélemy, “Inventaire du Château des Baux en 1426,” *Revue des Sociétés savantes*, 6 (Paris, 1878), 39.

⁴³ Rajna, “Intorno a due antiche coperte,” 569. The Azzolino quilt is now lost.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 569.

⁴⁵ Bresc-Bautier and Bresc, *Maison de mots*, 4: 983, item 44; 1137, fol. 104v, item 10; 5: 1445, fol. 1117v, item 43; 1548, fol. 83v, items 594, 595.

At left Biloberis, standing in front of his bed, receives a messenger and at right King Arthur and his high constable play checkers on a bench placed in front of the king's curtained-off bed. Guiron le Courtois, Milan 1370-1380; National Library of France, Paris, NAF 5243, fol. 3v.

Decorative furnishings such as the Tristan hangings played a key role in domestic decor. Fourteenth-century Italian Bruno Latini declared that a magnificent household was a moral virtue.⁴⁶ A member of the elite could practice this virtue by filling his best *camera* or bed chamber with furnishings that vaunted his social and economic status. Contemporary manuscript illustrations confirm the seignorial *camera*, near the entrance, was a semi-public space open to friends, relatives, persons conducting business, and hosted eminent guests overnight.⁴⁷ Trappings for this rarely used bed of state would display family social and economic status and, importantly, affiliations. The Datini family of Prato welcomed ambassadors and cardinals into their munificent *camera terrena*, and Louis II of Anjou, former king of Naples, was twice an overnight guest.⁴⁸ The Tristan hangings would have been used in just such a setting and visitors would have recognized the implications of their imagery. Almost all of the quilted furnishings that are identified as from both the city and the Kingdom of Naples are filled with figurative motifs – including Tristan, Solomon and “bestes.” At the time Pierre of Geneva acquired his quilted works “of Naples,” Italian secular decor drew from imagery that linked patrons with ideal protagonists and victorious battles. A wall-length fresco in Siena’s public palace celebrates the 1363 triumph of Sienese troops at Val di Chiana. By 1380, Manfredi Chiaramonte’s palazzo ceiling in Palermo held hundreds of painted religious and secular heroes, including Tristan. Tristan’s story, the stock in trade of wandering troubadours and

⁴⁶ Brunetto Latini and Polycarpe Chabaille, *Li livres dou tresor* (Paris, 1863), 285-286.

⁴⁷ James R. Lindow, *The Renaissance Palace in Florence: Magnificence and Splendour in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (Burlington VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 123.

⁴⁸ Anne Dunlop, *Painted Palaces: The Rise of Secular Art in Early Renaissance Italy* (University Park PA: Penn State University Press, 2009), 36.

prolifically distributed in manuscripts written in local dialects, captivated Italians. Tristan represented the perfect chevalier who faced down injustice. Arthurian scholar Daniela Delcorno Branca describes Tristan as “the best expression of the hopes and longings for better age, dominated by noble generosity and courtesy.”⁴⁹

The narrative depicted in the Coperta Guicciardini and The Tristan Quilt portrays Tristan’s very first act of valor. As a youth he visits the court of his uncle Mark, king of Cornwall, where he learns the Irish are demanding tribute. Morold, the Irish champion, comes with a large army and threatens to raze Cornwall if the payment is not made. King Mark, his knights and terrorized subjects, alarmed by this show of brute strength, prepare to pay up. Young Tristan, only fifteen years old, resists. He asks Mark to make him a knight, fights valiantly, vanquishes Morold and saves Cornwall. Fatally wounded, Morold slinks away, then safe offshore, shoots a poisoned arrow into Tristan’s thigh that severely wounds the young knight. The last scene shows the sorrowful Irish as they await Morold’s return.

The hangings essentially portray this tale as it is recounted in two contemporary manuscripts written in Tuscan dialect: the *Tristano Riccardiano* and *La Tavola Ritonda*.⁵⁰ However, the imagery in the hangings often deviates from these accounts. Almost every one of the 22 surviving scenes holds out-of-text details and two scenes are wholly fabricated. Collectively, these inventions link Tristan’s story with major conflicts that convulsed the peninsula at the end of the fourteenth century.⁵¹ Briefly, in 1378 cardinals elected an Italian from Naples, Urban VI, to lead the Roman Catholic Church in Rome and to whom most Italian city-states, including Florence, were sympathetic. Rebellious French cardinals then triggered the Western Schism by electing the anti-pope Clement VII, seated in Avignon and protected by France. All parties wanted control of the Kingdom of Naples. By 1390, the two popes had supported different contenders, both teenagers, for the realm’s throne. Urban VI promoted Ladislao of Durazzo d’Anjou, raised in the Neapolitan court.⁵² Clement VII backed Louis II d’Anjou, nephew of King Charles VI of France. A combined French and anti-papal fleet had installed Louis in the capitol city of Naples in 1389, forcing Ladislao, under the co-regency of his mother, Margherita, and Cardinal Angelo Acciaiuoli of Florence, to flee to Gaeta, some fifty miles north.

⁴⁹ Daniela Delcorno Branca, *Tristano e Lancillotto in Italia: studi di letteratura arturiana* (Ravenna: Longo, 1998), 101. Italians excuse Tristan and Isolde’s adulterous betrayal of King Mark (his uncle and her husband) by pointing out that they were slipped a love potion during an otherwise innocent game of checkers and as victims of this trickery, they had no choice in the matter.

⁵⁰ F. Regina Psaki, ed. and trans., *Tristano Riccardiano, Arthurian Archives, Italian Literature* (Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2006); Marie-José Heijkant, ed., *La Tavola Ritonda* (Milan: Luni Editrice, 1999).

⁵¹ For more discussion of the changes to the traditional account of this episode in Tristan’s legend that reflect contemporary events and people, see Kathryn Berenson, “A Political Hanging,” in this volume of *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings, 2018: The Social Fabric; Deep Local to Pan Global*.

⁵² Andreas Kiesewetter, “Ladislao d’Angiò Durazzo, re di Sicilia,” *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 63 (2004), not paginated, at [www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ladislao-d-angio-durazzo-re-di-sicilia_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/ladislao-d-angio-durazzo-re-di-sicilia_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).

Left to right: Guicciardini memorial plaque, 1727; Chiesa Santa Felicita, Florence; “How Tristan Smites Morold on the Head,” (detail) *The Tristan Quilt*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London; plaque on portal of the Chateau de Vincennes, Paris, built by Charles V of France about 1375. Photos and drawing by author.

Imagery in both hangings explicitly references these political alliances. The most telling are the heraldic arms assigned to Tristan and his enemy, Morold. Tristan is depicted bearing the same heraldic arms the Guicciardini of Florence adopted around 1300, showing a vertical rank of three hunting horns. Morold bears the royal arms of France adopted about 1376, showing three fleurs-de-lis arranged two at the top and one below. Significantly, no known source in any other media assigns arms to these storied characters that relate to existing persons or states. This single change from the traditional tale links its fictional events to actual events and its fictional hero and anti-hero to real people and a real state that, in effect, turns a centuries-old story into a partisan political statement. Patrons of the arts in the fourteenth century often made use of real or fictitious battles to illuminate actions and their consequences. Giovanni Boccaccio proposed this use of “fiction as a form of discourse ... which illustrates or proves an idea; and as its superficial aspect is removed, the meaning of the author is clear.”⁵³ Idealization of a chivalric hero, Tristan/Ladislas, who challenges an enemy whose demands are based on force, Morold/Louis II, is a calculated choice. Further, the hangings’ imagery endorses those who would likely support Ladislas of Durazzo’s campaign - the Guicciardini of Florence.

Rationally, the furnishing’s patron would be the person whose interests best would be served. Many historians suggest a Guicciardini family member commissioned them because Tristan bears that family’s arms. However, the Guicciardini were unlikely to jeopardize their ongoing international banking and trade activities that directly or indirectly involved the French. Luigi Guicciardini, head of the family from 1370 to 1403, often had represented Florence in delicate politically-charged negotiations with France.⁵⁴ Moreover, as early as 1391 the city-state sought

⁵³ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentium libri*, 2:706-7, c1360-75, in *Boccaccio on Poetry*, trans. Charles G. Osgood (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), 48.

⁵⁴ Vanna Arrighi, “Luigi di Piero Guicciardini,” *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, Vol. 61 (2004), unpaginated, at [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/luigi-guicciardini_res-640c5bdb-87ee-11dc-8e9d-0016357eee51_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/luigi-guicciardini_res-640c5bdb-87ee-11dc-8e9d-0016357eee51_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).

peaceful relations with the French, finally achieving an alliance with them that lasted from 1395 to 1398.⁵⁵

Ladislas of Durazzo, or a strong Durazzo patron, such as Margherita, who served first as his regent and later as his viceroy when her son was off to battle, was more likely to have commissioned the Tristan hangings. The king claimed the qualities of a knight throughout his military campaign. Medieval art scholars name Ladislas or his mother as probable patrons of other commissions: a fresco series that links Ladislas to the knightly actions of Saint Ladislao of Hungary, the ancestor for whom he was named, and a wedding chest panel that depicts his late father's 1382 conquest of Naples.⁵⁶ Throughout Ladislas's 1390s campaign to secure his kingdom he perpetually wanted for money. A gift that flattered the wealthy Guicciardini of Florence by depicting the heroic Tristan bearing their arms, held the prospect of an important contribution to his treasury. Such a gift, a set of white quilted chamber furnishings filled with story-telling imagery was apparently a specialty of nearby Neapolitan needlework ateliers.

The Tristan hangings were not the last figurative and story-telling quilted works associated with Italian workshops. René of Anjou ruled the Kingdom of Naples from 1438 to 1443; inventories of his chateaux in France list several bedchamber sets worked in white, two stitched with figures of men and women.⁵⁷ A Marseilles' quilt historian credits René's wife, Jeanne de Laval, with making a white quilt that depicts the story of Alexander the Great.⁵⁸ The cardinal of Amboise, in the Loire region of France, owned two white testers described as stitched "à la mode d'Ytalie in 1510," as did the Albret family ten years later in Chateau de Pau, Gascony.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Alison Williams Lewin, *Negotiating Survival: Florence and the Great Schism, 1378-1417*, (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2003), 104-110.

⁵⁶ *The Conquest of Naples by Charles of Durazzo*, Master of Charles of Durazzo, cassone panel, 1381-1400, Florence, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, #07.120.1; *Storie di san Ladislao*, fresco series, about 1403, Santa Maria dell'Incoronata, Naples.

⁵⁷ Victor Godard Faultrier, *Le chateau d'Angers, au temps du roi René* (Angers, 1866) 43, 45, 51, 90, 96-97; Gustave Arnaud d'Agnel, *L'Ameublement Provençal et Comtadin durant le Moyen Age et la Renaissance* (Marseille, 1929), 1:150.

⁵⁸ Personal interview with Marie-José Eymar-Beaumelle, on March 29, 1994, in Marseilles. Eymar-Beaumelle said Jeanne's alleged work was exhibited at the Chateau Falque in Marseilles, then sold at auction in 1960, after which it disappeared.

⁵⁹ Achille Deville, *Comptes de dépenses de la construction du château de Gaillon* (Paris, 1850), 488, 490; Havard, *Dictionnaire de l'Ameublement*, 1: col. 361, citing the *Inventaire des meubles restés au pouvoir du maître d'hôtel du château de Pau*, dated 1519.

This detail from the border of a large bedcover worked in broderie de Marseille features exotic small animals and mythical beasts, including a merman, a mermaid and a rabbit dressed in hat, doublet, and breeches over tight hose running off with a sack of goods. Provence, maker unknown, mid- to late-eighteenth century. Private collection, photo by author.

I suggest the quilting techniques that evolved in Italy made their way north to the port of Marseilles and led to development in Provence of white corded and quilted work known as *broderie de Marseille*. By the 1600s, adaptation of needlework from southern cultures led to production of garments and furnishings worked in *broderie de Marseille* that were exported by the thousands throughout Europe, where needleworkers there soon made their own revisions according to local customs, imagery, materials, legends and needlework techniques.

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