The *Stoning of Saint Stephen*

The *Martyrdom* appears among the first seven tapestries that arrived in Rome in 1519 and were displayed for the first time in the Sistine Chapel on the night of December 26 that year, to general admiration during the annual solemn celebration held in the papal chapel in honor of Saint Stephen, in the presence of the pope.

The tapestry illustrates a passage from the *Acts of the Apostles* (*Acts* 7:2, 51-60), recounting the martyrdom of the protodeacon Stephen, the first Christian to sacrifice his life for his faith in Christ.

According to the sacred text, Stephen, an active preacher accused of blasphemy, was arrested and sentenced to death after giving a lengthy speech to the Sanhedrin. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he gave a powerful testimony of faith, which led to his sentence of stoning.

The tapestry captures the dramatic moment of Stephen's martyrdom outside the gates of Jerusalem. A fierce group of executioners, contorted in frenzied movement, looms over the kneeling deacon, who gazes upward in inspiration at soft, pink clouds. Angels appear to part these clouds like a curtain, revealing the figures of Christ and God the Father. In the background, a lush green landscape stretches toward a bridge and a city with towered buildings. In the foreground, seated to the right and watching over the cloaks of the persecutors, is Saul, the future Saint Paul.

The presence of this final figure has led scholars to suggest that the tapestry might have been intended to bridge the scenes of Peter's stories with those recounting the life of Paul. It not only connects to Paul but also to Peter, who, along with the other apostles, chose Stephen as a deacon, beginning the mission that would lead to his martyrdom. Additionally, the smaller dimensions of this tapestry compared to the others suggest it may have served as a unifying piece, positioned on the altar and thus at the center between the stories of the two Apostles displayed on the lateral walls of the Sistine Chapel.

A sketch by Raphael (Vienna, Graphische Sammlung) depicting the *Stoning of Saint Stephen*, which includes some figures mirrored in the tapestry, may have been an initial concept for the "panno", or more likely, an early exploration of the theme from which some figures were later adapted for the tapestry's design.

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Stoning of Saint Stephen

CA. 1517 - 1519

INV. MV43871