

THE *NATIVITY*

The tapestry depicting the *Nativity* (fig. 1) was commissioned in 1635 by Pope Urban VIII from the Barberini tapestry manufactory for the "papal chapel", probably the Sistine Chapel. Intended to hang behind the altar as the dossal of the papal canopy, it was accompanied by six hanging tapestry panels (figs. 2a–b and 3). Weaving began in September 1635 and was completed in February 1636 under the direction of Giacomo della Riviera, with the work of the tapestry weavers Michele fiammingo and Antonio francese.

Papal inventories describe the hanging as woven "con oro seta e stame" (with gold, silk and worsted), referring to the use of metal thread, silk and wool. They attribute its design to the "Cortonese", that is, Pietro da Cortona, one of the leading figures of Roman Baroque painting.

The composition depicts the Adoration of the Shepherds. On the left, the Virgin presents the Christ Child lying in the manger, while Saint Joseph and the shepherds gather around him. Above the scene, angels hold a scroll bearing the inscription "Gloria in excelsis Deo" ("Glory to God in the highest"), taken from the angels' song in the Gospel of Luke (2:14) and also serving as the opening of the *Gloria* of the Mass. In its original position behind the altar, the image thus linked the announcement of Christ's birth with the celebration of the liturgy.

The *Nativity* was joined by the *Resurrection* in 1642 and *Pasce oves meas* in 1643, both woven for Urban VIII after designs by Giovan Francesco Romanelli. The three tapestries were intended to alternate behind the altar according to the liturgical occasion. In 1658, Cardinal Francesco Barberini commissioned a fourth dossal, the *Annunciation*, as a gift to Pope Alexander VII Chigi (1655-1667), a gesture that may have encouraged the continued use of the entire ensemble under the new pontiff. The following year the pope himself had Pietro Lascotti's workshop weave six additions to the altar tapestries, after designs by Ciro Ferri.

The display of the tapestry at Castel Gandolfo for Christmas invites visitors to contemplate the mystery of the Saviour's birth through a precious woven image that once accompanied the prayers and celebrations of the papal chapel.



Fig. 1 — **Nativity**

Barberini Workshop, after a design by Pietro da Cortona, Rome, 1635-1636, tapestry, wool warp; wool, silk and silver-gilt thread weft. Vatican City, Vatican Museums, inv. no. 43739.



Figs. 2 a-b — Putti with the Coat of Arms of Urban VIII

Barberini Workshop, after a cartoon by Giovan Francesco Romanelli, Rome, 1636–1637, tapestries, wool warp; weft of wool, silk and silver-gilt thread. Vatican City, Vatican Museums, inv. nos. 43732 and 43730.

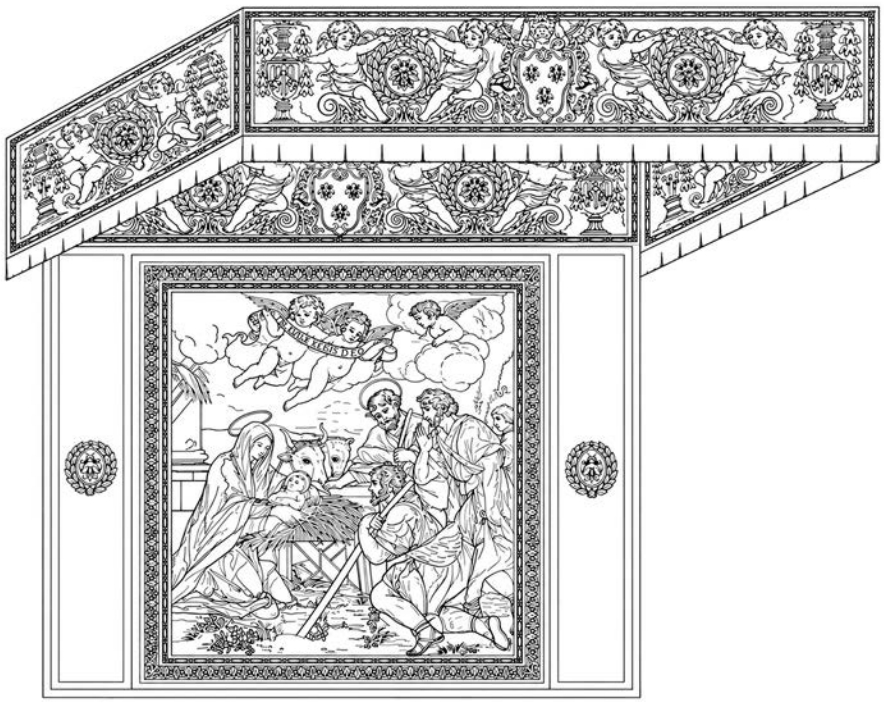


Fig. 3

Reconstruction of the canopy and the Nativity dossal for the altar of the papal chapel, probably the Sistine Chapel. Drawing by E. Berardi, from Anna Maria De Strobel, Le arazzerie romane dal XVII al XIX secolo, Rome, Istituto Nazionale di Studi Romani, 1989, pl. I.