

The Mystery of Silk Cord Quilts

lecture by Linda Baumgarten
delivered at the "Global Quilts" symposium, International Quilt Study Center
Lincoln, Nebraska, April 2009.

The Mystery of Silk Cord Quilts

Linda Baumgarten



This whole cloth quilt is in the collections of Colonial Williamsburg, here seen in a 2009 exhibition entitled "Quilted Fashions." Although the quilt came out of England at the time of its purchase in 2005, its original genesis is part of the "mystery" I'll be discussing today. You'll notice I said, "discussing," not necessarily "solving" the mystery. My goal is to bring this style of quilt, surviving examples, and research to the attention of quilt scholars in the hope of finding additional examples, especially those with histories of use or designs that may help determine provenance and trade patterns.



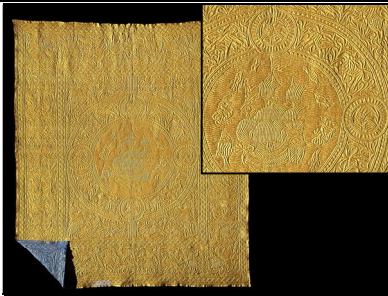
The quilt is reversible, made of thin yellow silk on one side and blue silk on the other. The silks are woven in plain weave measuring about 32 inches wide between the selvages. There is no all-over batting; instead, the quilt is worked in a cord quilting technique, with cotton used as the fillings in the corded areas. (CWF 2005-94)



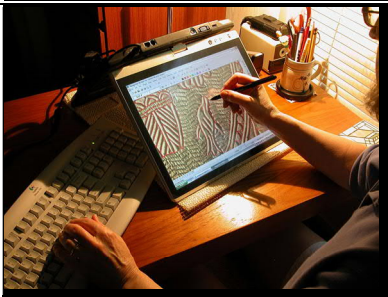
In most surviving examples of early cord quilting, the technique is more delicately handled, seen in this detail of an English embroidered quilt. Silk backstitches form fine channels for thin cotton cords pushed or pulled in through more coarsely woven backing. (CWF 1941-261)



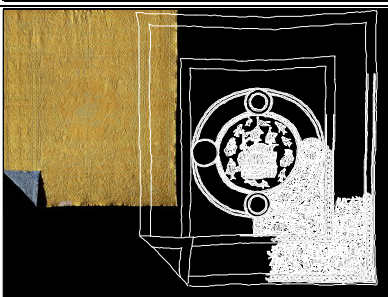
In this silk quilt, like the others in the group that I've examined, the scale is much bolder, with fat rolls of cotton about 1/4 inch in diameter forming the cords. There is no evidence that cords were inserted through the back after stitching—the delicate silks are unbroken—so the stuffing must have been laid in during the process of quilting. (CWF 2005-94)



In order to help us better study the complex designs of this and other whole cloth quilts, Colonial Williamsburg retired conservator John Watson (who is also my husband) developed a technique for creating line drawings of the complex quilting patterns. (CW 2005-94)

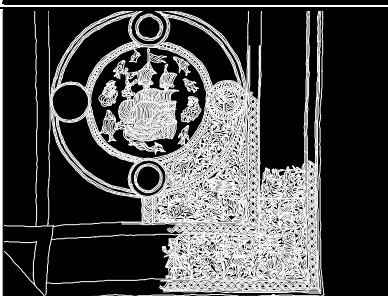


I use computer-assisted design technology, CAD for short, to draw the quilting patterns directly on a notebook computer. I load a high-resolution digital photograph into the CAD program and draw around the quilting stitches with the stylus. After the quilt or selections have been drawn, I can drop out the photograph, leaving a line design.

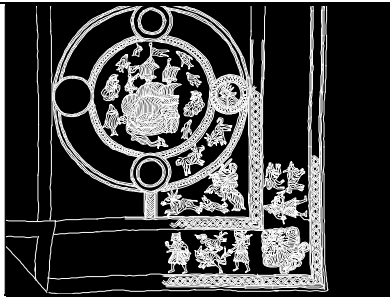


Now we can study the designs more clearly. The quilt is centered with a roundel inside rectangular borders. A sailing ship is surrounded by fish, and two men at left and right of the ship are perched on cloud-like islands. (CWF 2005-94)

For high resolution image, see appendix 1.



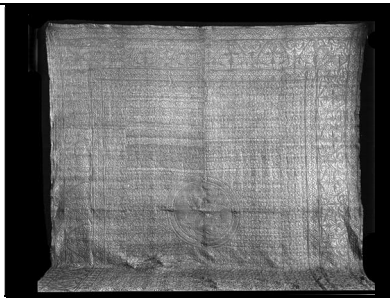
Four circles within the circular border enclose profile heads. The narrow borders feature classical guilloche bands, similar to figure 8s. The quadrants and wider borders are filled with hunting scenes almost lost in the foliage. (CWF 2005-94)



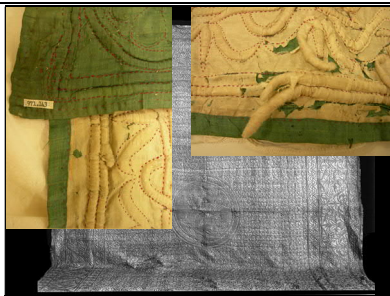
We see them better when we drop out the background vines. There is a knight on horseback, waving a sword and carrying a shield. His dog is running down a deer. In the outer borders, men on foot attack wild boars. The corners have double-headed eagles.

For high resolution image, see appendix 2.

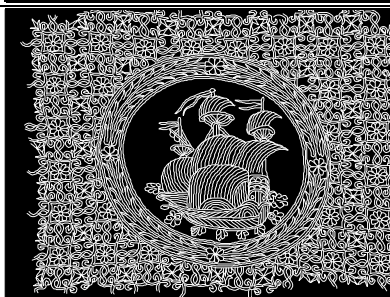
Part of putting this quilt in context is comparing it with other surviving examples.



Two quilts similar to Williamsburg's example are in Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum. I'm showing the first example in black and white. (Royal Ontario Museum 971.143)

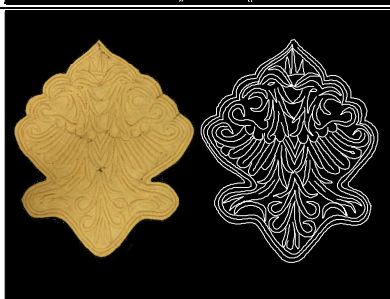


This quilt is made of green silk reversing to pinky-white, stitched with red silk. The cording is thick rolls of cotton. Like the Colonial Williamsburg quilt, the plain-woven silks are about 32 inches wide from selvage to selvage.



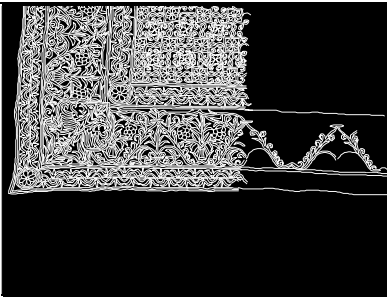
The central roundel of the quilt is very closely related to the Williamsburg example, with a similar ship at sea. The circle is surrounded by an extensive field of interlacing tracery. (Royal Ontario Museum 971.143)

For higher resolution drawing see appendix 3



All four corners are filled with double-headed eagles like this one.

(ROM 971.143, For high resolution image, see appendix 3)



Wide borders of interlacing vines undulate in the borders. (ROM 971.143)

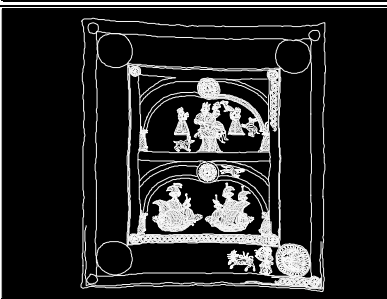
For high resolution image, see appendix 3



The second Royal Ontario Museum quilt is also made of green silk reversing to pink-cream silk, each textile about 32 inches wide, quilted with pink-brown silk and with fat cotton cording. (Royal Ontario Museum 975.349)



Here is the overall in a black and white image. Unlike the roundel-centered quilts, this one has a complex tiered and arcaded design. (Rom 975-349)



We see the design more clearly in the drawing. In the lower section are ships framed by guilloche bands, running animals, and profile heads, with 8-petal flowers at the corner junctions. The upper section has a central seated musician flanked by animals, birds and female figures. The columns are spiral. The borders illustrate hunting scenes with men in armor and animals. (Rom 975-349)

For high resolution image, see appendix 4.



A quilt at the Winterthur Museum is also part of the group. This reverses from yellow to dusty pink that was probably a deeper reddish color originally. The borders feature guilloche bands and interlacing flowers very much like the Royal Ontario Museum quilt. There are also men in armor, and 8-petal flowers in the corners. According to curator Linda Eaton, the silks are about 29 inches wide, and the dyes are weld and redwood, the latter probably Brazilwood. I'll say more about the dyes later.

For high resolution image, see appendix 5



The ship sails on an undulating sea, although without the accompanying fish and figures in the Williamsburg example. (Winterthur)

For high resolution image, see appendix 6.



The Victoria and Albert Museum in London has five quilts or fragments of quilts that are clearly related in technique and/or materials. This is one of them. (V & A T62-1937)

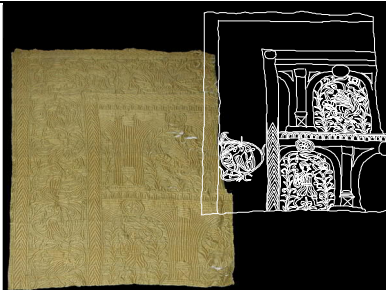


In all the examples, the silks are thin and wide—about 32 inches from selvage to selvage—with fat rolls of cotton cording between the silks. (V & A T62-1937)



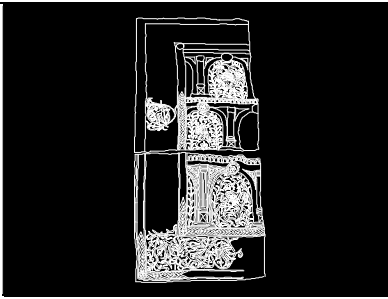
This fragment features birds in a border of interlacing foliage and a mounted knight beneath an arch. The border creates a chevron or herringbone effect. (T62-1937 V & A)

For high resolution image, see appendix 7.



A second fragment has arches, warriors, and fantastic birds. It was only after I returned home and began analyzing the photographs that I realized this must be the upper half of the previous fragment. (They were cataloged with different numbers but came into the V & A in the same year.) Curator Susan North was able to confirm that the pieces were once part of a whole. (V & A CIRC 94-1937)

For high resolution image, see appendix 8.



The uncut quilt would have had three tiers of arcades, like this reconstruction. (V & A CIRC 94-1937 and T62-1937 as one quilt)

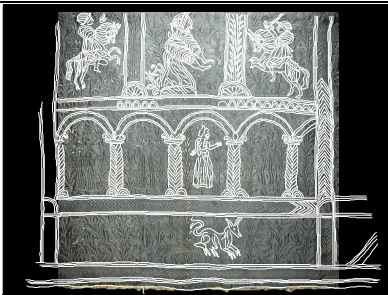
For high resolution image, see appendix 9.



This small red and yellow fragment, seen with one side folded back, employs an interlacing border. (V & A T207-1953)

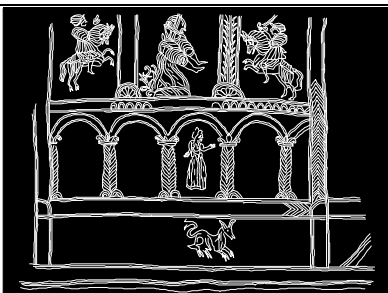


It has complex arabesques in the field that call to mind the field in the Royal Ontario Museum quilt. This fragment may have had a center roundel originally. (V & A T207-1953)



Continuing at the Victoria and Albert Museum, I examined and photographed the next two large quilts in a small storage room with a single dim overhead light and was unable to take overall photographs. Here is a partial drawing overlaid on a detail picture of one of the quilts. (V & A 349-1886)

For high resolution image, see appendix 10.



The quilting features tiers of arcades. The borders have the same chevrons we've seen already and a wonderful lively prancing animal. Underneath one of the arches, seen at the top of this drawing, is a musician (partly drawn here). Notice the musician's legs encased in puffy knee breeches. The musician is positioned between mounted warriors. (V & A 349-1886)

For high resolution image, see appendix 10.

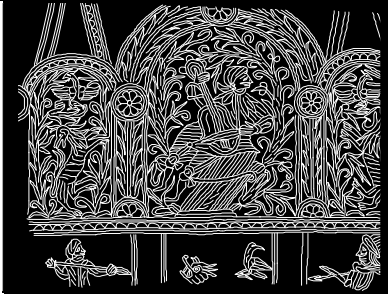


In the corner is a profile head wearing a turban or hat. (V & A 349-1886)

For high resolution image, see appendix 11.



This Victoria and Albert quilt has a similar layout. (V & A T296-1967)

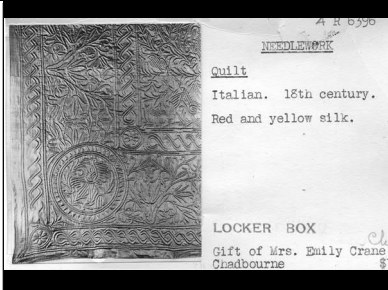


In the drawing we see that a musician very similar to that in the previous quilt plays under the arch, surrounded by vines and accompanied by animals and hunters. (V & A T296-1967)

For high resolution image, see appendix 12.



The borders feature guilloche bands instead of chevrons. (V&A T296-1967)



The Art Institute of Chicago has two related quilts, one of which I did not examine in person. Judging from the catalog card, however, this yellow and red quilt must be part of the group. (Chicago Art Institute 37-701)

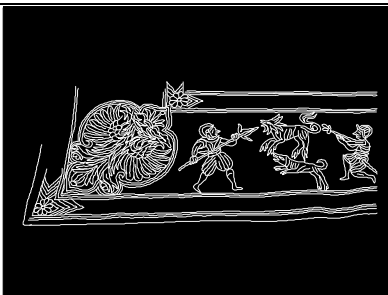


The quilt I did examine has both similarities and significant differences from the rest of the group. The quilt is made of narrow (20-inch-wide) silk satin, not the wide plain-woven silk found in the other examples. Yellow reverses to bright red. In other respects, however, the quilt falls into the grouping. (Art Institute of Chicago 1960-889)



The center roundel features a seated musician similar to that in other examples we have seen. He—and probably the other musicians—probably represent Orpheus, a Greek hero whose musical abilities could charm wild animals and coax rocks and trees to dance. (AIC 1960-889)

For high resolution image, see appendix 13.



The wider borders feature energetic animals and hunting scenes. Double-headed eagles inside shaped frames fill the four corners. (AIC 1960-889)

For high resolution image, see appendix 14.

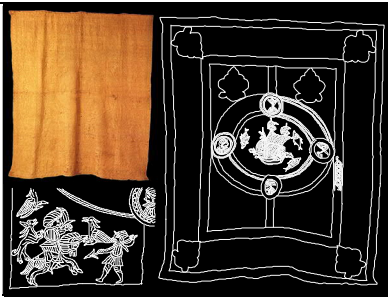


The leaping donkey-like animal must come from the same pattern as that on a quilt in the Victoria and Albert Museum (AIC 1960-889 and V&A 349-1886)



Thus far, we have seen two different types of designs: either center roundels or horizontal bands of arcades. Another example in the Colonial Williamsburg collection is a fragment that had no known history prior to coming to Williamsburg as a gift in 1974. Although the technique and materials are the same, the design layout is different from the other quilts. This design is a mélange of figures, many from the Greco-Roman repertoire. The most familiar element is the guilloche border. Other elements also call to mind the other silk quilts, including the ships and a man, apparently fishing from a cloud-like island; I've outlined them in red. (Colonial Williamsburg 1974-650)

For high resolution image, see appendix 15.



Several other related quilts have been published or shared with me by colleagues. Although I have not examined them and cannot comment on the materials or technical aspects, I'd like to review the designs. A quilt was found at Truro by the British Quilter's Guild as part of their heritage search. The central medallion has the familiar ship and fish swimming in the water. A fighting man fills the interior quadrant. (Pvt Collection. Published in *Quilt Treasures*)

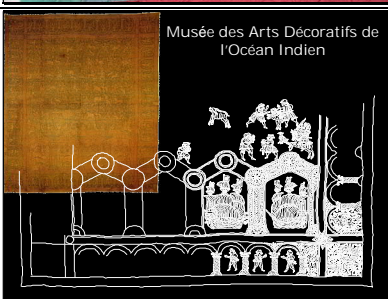
For high resolution image, see appendix 16 and 17.



A quilt at the Wadsworth Atheneum has an arcade and ships flanking a structure. It is shown here in black and white, without a drawing. (Wadsworth Athenaeum 1977-71)

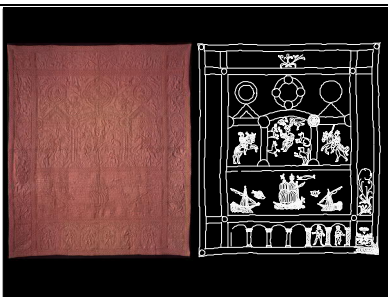


Borders are defined with chevron banding. (Wadsworth Athenaeum 1977-71)



This example in the colors of yellow reversing to green is now in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs de l'Océan Indien. I've drawn the lower third. The chevron borders, ships, arcades, 8-petal flowers, and hunting figures place it within the grouping. The central ship is flying a crescent flag. The figures in the upper portion appear to illustrate the 12 labors of Hercules, including stealing apples guarded by a dragon, capturing a boar and a golden stag, and similar tasks from the Greek stories originating hundreds of years BC.

For high resolution image, see appendix 18.



Another example was once in the collection of Cora Ginsburg and was sold at Sotheby's in 2005, (although its present whereabouts is unknown to me). I thank Titi Halle for sending me a photograph. The lower band has sailing ships and fish, and the center arcade has a musician, probably Orpheus, flanked on either side by men on horseback. The last two examples—that at the Musée des arts Décoratifs and the Cora Ginsburg quilt—have more detail in the figures, more sensitive designing, and apparently larger areas of stuffing. These may have been made in a different workshop or even a different country.

(Ex. Coll. Cora Ginsburg. Sold Sotheby's 2005)

For high resolution image, see appendix 19.



The Los Angeles County Museum of Art has this silk satin quilt that appears even less closely related to the group. Although the quilt is reversible silks and does use cording, the design is quite different in character.



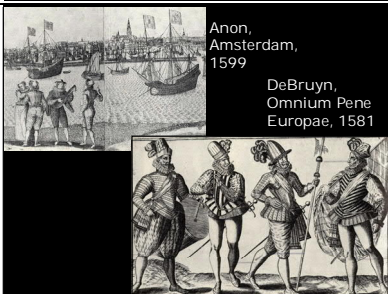
The central rectangle with a hunting scene is derived from a published print dating to 1619 and the drawing is quite different in its detailing, compared to the other corded silk quilts. Sandi Fox published this in *Wrapped in Glory* and has attributed the quilt to Goa, India.



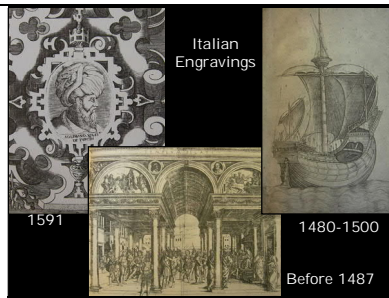
The cord quilts we have been looking at are generally accepted to date around 1600, based on the style of costumes and ships. The iconography and stylistic elements in them can be compared with other decorative arts about the same time.



Theodore De Bry's woodcut maps utilize similar wavy lines to suggest the seas. This is a detail from a map printed in Frankfurt in the 1590s. (CWF 1984-58; center from Winterthur's Quilt)



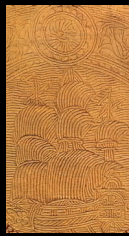
The clothing styles in the quilts are current for the fashions of the late 1500s. (Amsterdam from de Groot, *Sailing Ships*; Costumes from Payne, *History of Costume*)



And engravings from Italy reflect similar shapes and motifs from the late 1400s on. (Nat Gallery Art and Miller, *16th C Italian Ornament Prints*, V&A.)

Where Were They Made?

- Germany?
- Italy?
- Marseilles?
- Portugal?
- India?
- Indo-Portugal?



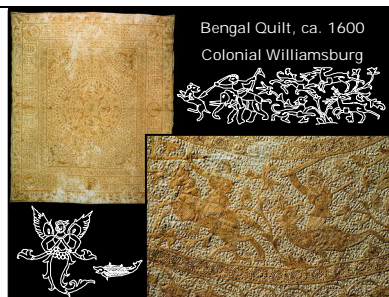
But the question of where the quilts were made remains a bigger mystery. Over the years, museums and collections have cataloged their quilts of this type as being from Germany, Italy, Marseilles, Portugal, India, and Indo-Portugal. By Indo-Portugal we mean objects made in India but under patronage and influence of the Portuguese who dominated Indian trade through Goa until the mid to late seventeenth century.

Quilts made in India

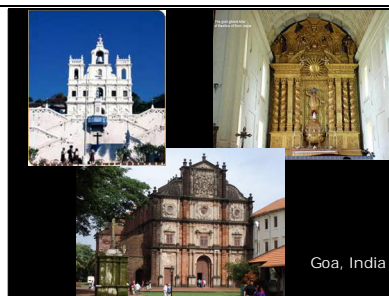
Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East India*, 1615

"sattin lined with taffeta, betwixt which they put cotton wool and work them together with silk"

The written record confirms that silk quilts were made in India for export. An early seventeenth century account describes the quilts as follows: "...sattin lined with taffata, betwixt which they put cotton wool, and work them together with silk." The writer continues: "Those taffata or satin quilts are excellently stitched by them, being done as evenly, and in as good order, as if they had been drawn out for them for their direction, the better to work them." (p. 127, Edward Terry, *A Voyage to East-India*, first published 1615, reprinted 1777.) Judging from this reference, quilts made in the same materials as our group were being made in India: silk front and back stitched with silk and with cotton filling. In the second half of the seventeenth century, orders went out from England to India for silk quilts by the hundreds. (Slomann, *Bizarre Designs in Silks*, p. 148-149)



The surviving silk quilts in our group do show Indian influence in their designs. Some of the motifs in the quilts are related to those in seventeenth-century embroideries from Bengal, India. This example has a center circular medallion not unlike the center-medallion silk quilts, human and animal figures, hunting scenes with men spearing animals, and sea creatures. (Colonial Williamsburg 1987-551)



The early architecture of Goa, India, can be related to the motifs on the quilts, with arcaded buildings and spiral twisted pillars.

Quilts made in India

Edward Terry, A Voyage to East India, 1615

"sattin lined with taffeta, betwixt which they put cotton wool and work them together with silk"

There are problems with an Indian attribution, however. Assuming the writer knew what satin and taffeta were, the seventeenth-century description matches the quilts in the group with respect to *fiber* (silk), but not to weave structure. With the exception of the satin Chicago and Los Angeles examples, (and possibly others not yet discovered) the quilts are *not* satin lined with taffeta.



Almost all of the quilts in this group are made of thin, plain-woven silk, not satin with its shiny float weave structure or taffeta, which was finely ribbed.



There is another problem with an Indian attribution. Both the Winterthur and Williamsburg quilts have undergone dye testing that identifies the yellow as weld, a dye believed to be unknown in early Indian textiles. This evidence may not be entirely conclusive, for records show that European textiles were imported into Goa during Portuguese domination. Further, English traders sent dyers and weavers to Goa later in the seventeenth century. (Vilhelm Slomann, *Bizarre Designs in Silks, Trade and Traditions*, Copenhagen, Ejnar Munksgaard, 1953, pp. 90, 110-111.)

Where Were They Made?

- Goa, India?
- Portugal?



Although the Royal Ontario Museum's specialist in Indian art suggested Goa as a possible source, the curator of Indian artifacts at the Victoria and Art Museum insisted that the quilts in the group are *not* Indian. In fact, she has never seen an all-silk quilt she feels confident is Indian, despite the early references to them.

[Conversation with Peter Kaellgren, Royal Ontario Museum, October 2, 2006 and with Rosemary Crill, Victoria and Albert Museum.]

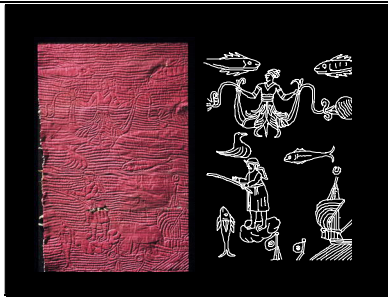
What other locations are possible? The Winterthur Museum once attributed their quilt to Portugal.



The motifs do, indeed, seem to relate to work now re-attributed to Portugal, such as this silk embroidered counterpane at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

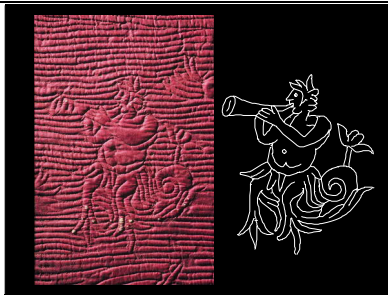


In 1998, Maggie Lidz of the Winterthur staff published her pioneering research work on their quilt and related examples in the magazine *Antiques* in an article entitled “The Mystery of Seventeenth-century Quilts”. (I’ve borrowed her concept of “mystery” for my title, because I think it still applies.) Maggie pointed out that a curator from Portugal has never seen quilts like these in her country. Cross off Portugal, unless they were all exported. Instead, Maggie Lidz suggested a possible origin of Chios, one of the Greek Islands. Chios was controlled by Genoese merchants until 1566, and then was taken over by the Ottoman Turks. Maggie based her attribution on early period references to quilt-making on the island of Chios, as well as iconographical relationships between art, architecture, and quilt designs.

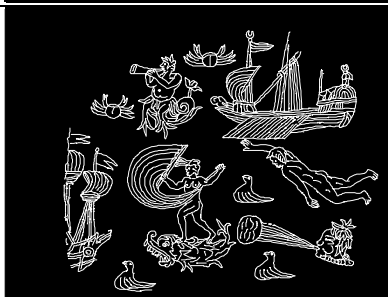


Earlier we saw the quilt fragment with an all-over design in the Colonial Williamsburg collection. Let’s look at the motifs more closely. Like the two quilts from the collection of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and Cora Ginsburg, these motifs are also taken from classical stories and iconography. (CWF 1974-650)

For high resolution image, see appendix 15.

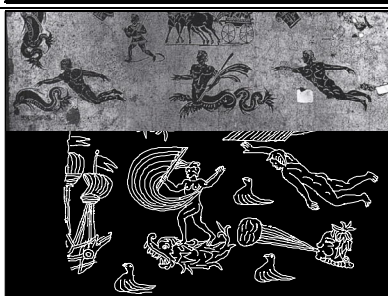


Here, the god Triton blows his horn. (CWF 1974-650)



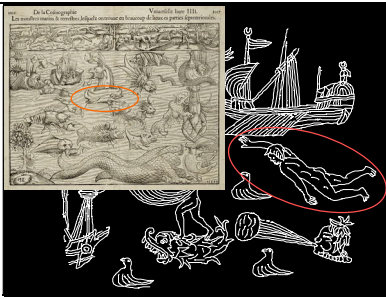
Neptune or Poseidon, the god of the sea, is shown riding a dolphin. Look at the swimming man. (CWF 1974-650)

For high resolution image, see appendix 15.



The rendering of the swimmer is very much like this second-century mosaic found at Ostia, not far from Rome, with similar swimming figures surrounded by dolphins.

For high resolution image, see appendix 15.



That is not to say that the quiltmaker necessarily copied mosaics: the swimmer is also related to northern European motifs intended for maps, such as this print from Switzerland in 1550. (CWF 1974-650, 1986-16)

For high resolution image, see appendix 15.



The Colonial Williamsburg quilt fragment also has ships flying crescent pennants. The single crescent was part of various Ottoman pennants and flags from 1453 into the nineteenth century. (Source Wikipedia, "Ottoman flag") Perhaps this quilt fragment does, indeed, support a Mediterranean origin for at least some of the group.

For high resolution image, see appendix 15.



By the late 1500s, the Ottoman Empire had extended to include the eastern Mediterranean, north to present-day Hungary, and southwest to Iran and Egypt. The areas of the eastern Mediterranean, indeed, the entire Mediterranean, would have had a long-standing Greco-Roman cultural influence. Yet they would have been keenly aware of the Turkish, given the nearness and influence of that major power, especially after expansion by the Ottomans in the 1560s to the areas shown here in darker pink. Maggie Lidz has also pointed to the important Battle of Lepanto, fought in 1571 between the Ottoman Turks and the Christian alliance called the "Holy League." This battle had great symbolic importance, because it disproved the previous belief that the Ottomans were invincible.



Could some of the ships on the quilts, especially those apparently shooting cannon, refer to that battle?

The quilt group opens fascinating avenues for the study of international trade and design. The quilts were apparently widely disseminated by sea—examples have been found from Cornwall in England to the French coast and Italy. At this stage, we are left with many fascinating questions:



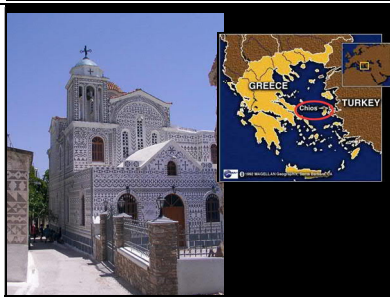
If the quilts are not Indian, where *are* the Indian silk and cotton quilts that were described in the seventeenth century? Could the Indians have made quilts using imported silks or imported dyestuffs such as weld, thus explaining the non-Indian dye?



Were printed sources used by the quilt's designers? I suspect so, but where were they printed?



Were the silk quilts in our group made at one location or in a wider geographical area? The standardized materials and designs of many of the quilts suggest they were made in close-knit workshops and intended for export to an international audience familiar with Greek legends and eastern exotica. But perhaps our assumptions of a single origin are wrong, and the genre was copied in more than one location. But where?



Is Chios the answer? If the quilts are from Chios, is there an example with a firmly documented history in that country? Although many scholars now are willing to attribute the quilts to somewhere in the "Mediterranean," and the Chios origin remains a strong possibility, it is still conjecture until a more firmly documented example is found.



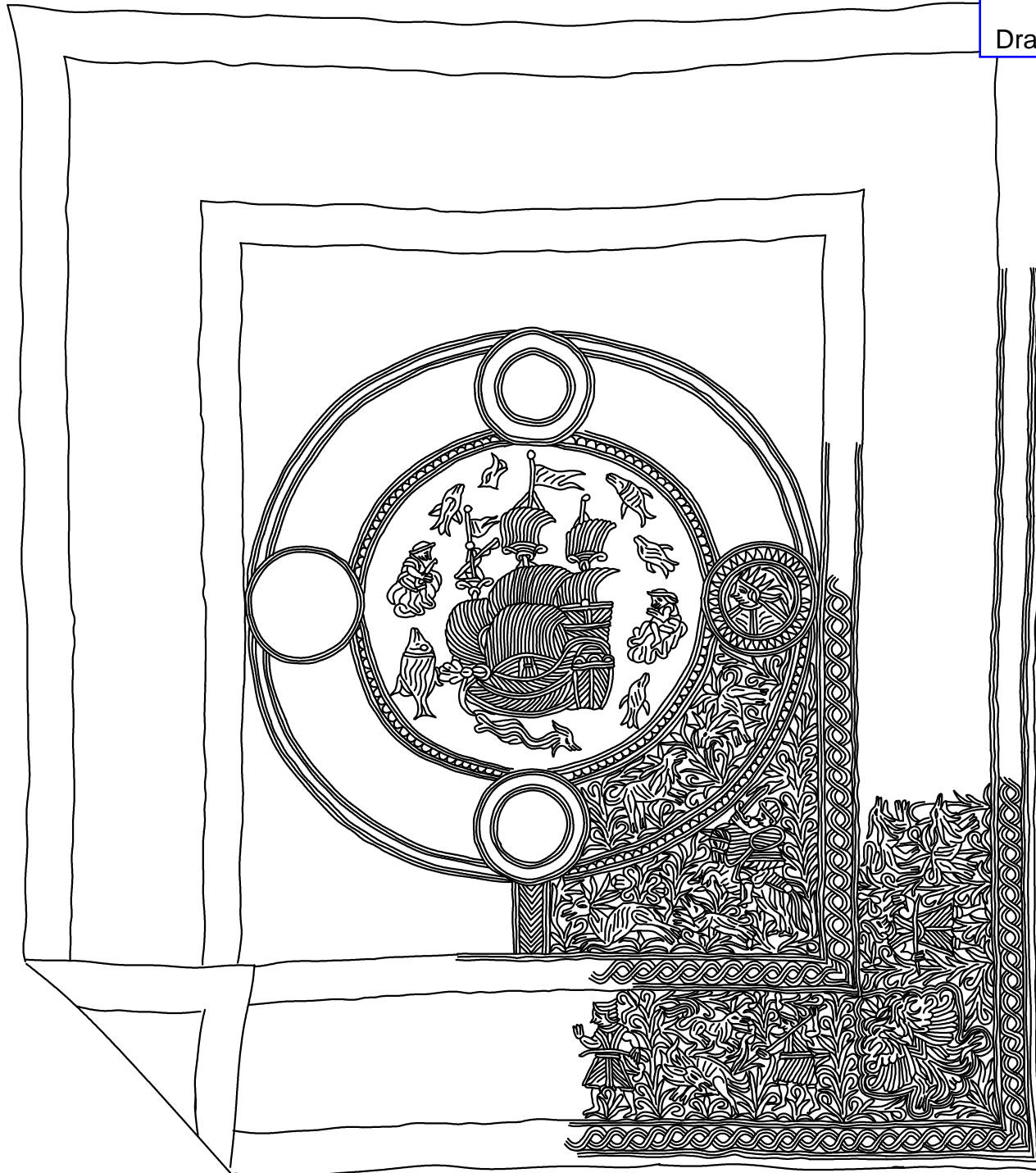
One thing we can conclude, that the quilts speak eloquently of cross-cultural influences, international trade, and not a little mystery.

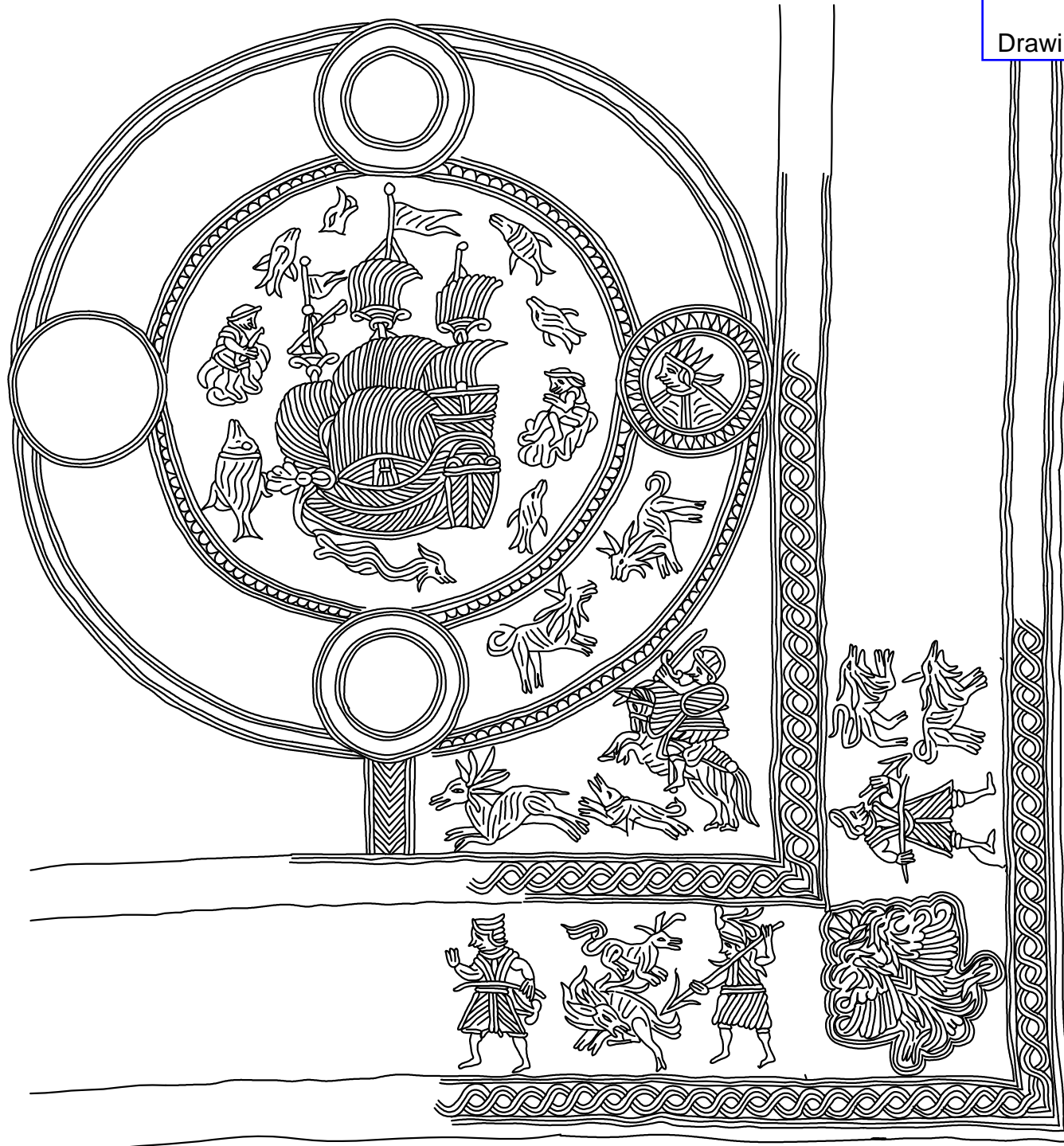
Acknowledgments

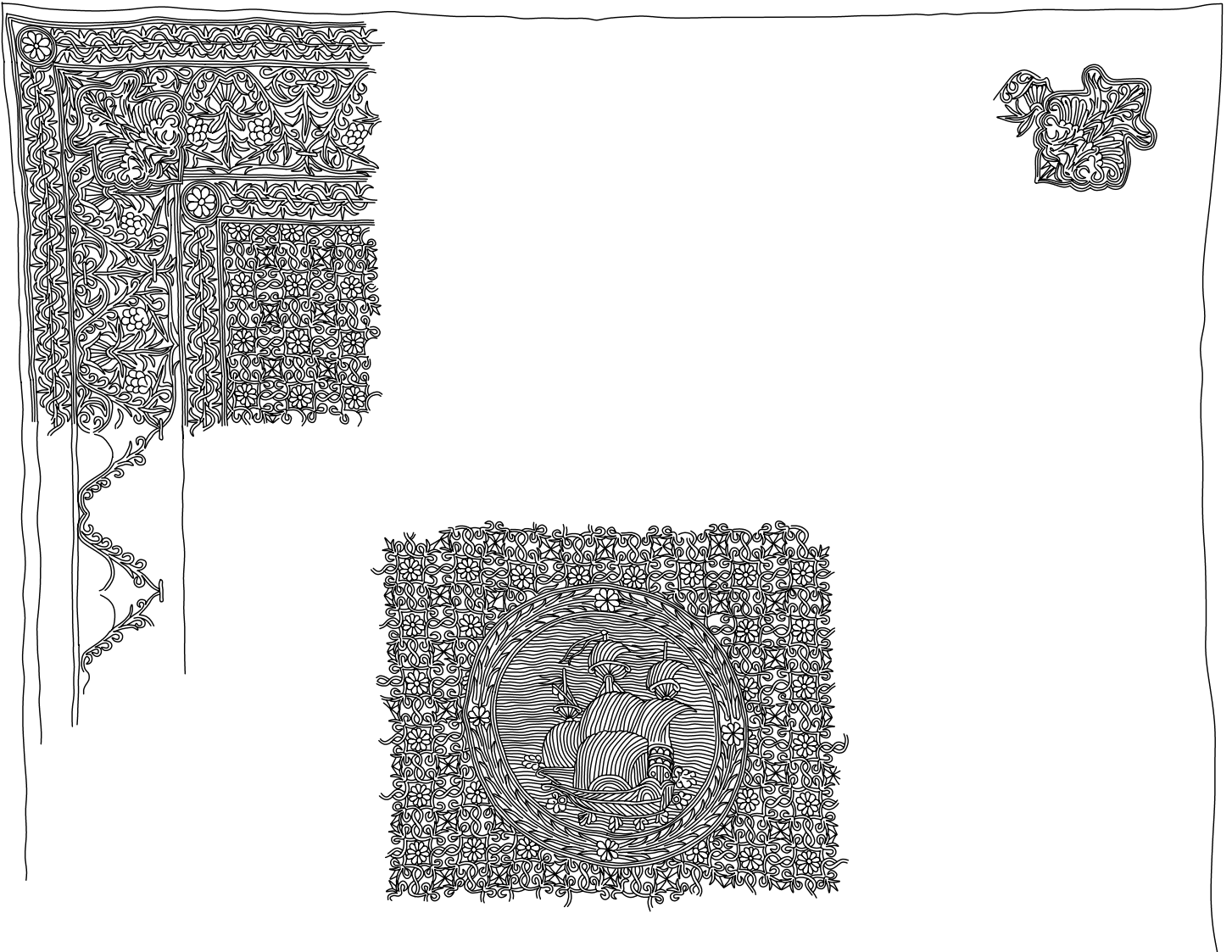
- John Watson
- Lynne Bassett
- Aileen Bastos
- Kathryn Berenson
- Rosemary Crill
- Linda Eaton
- Sandi Fox
- Tili Halle
- Maggie Lutz
- Bridget Long
- Hans Lorenz
- Craig McDougall
- Susan North
- Alexandra Palmer
- Christa Thurman
- Ligh Wabner
- Veronika Gervers Research Fellowship

Note: since writing this lecture I have drawn another quilt in the collections of the International Quilt Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska, acc. no. 2009.014.0003.

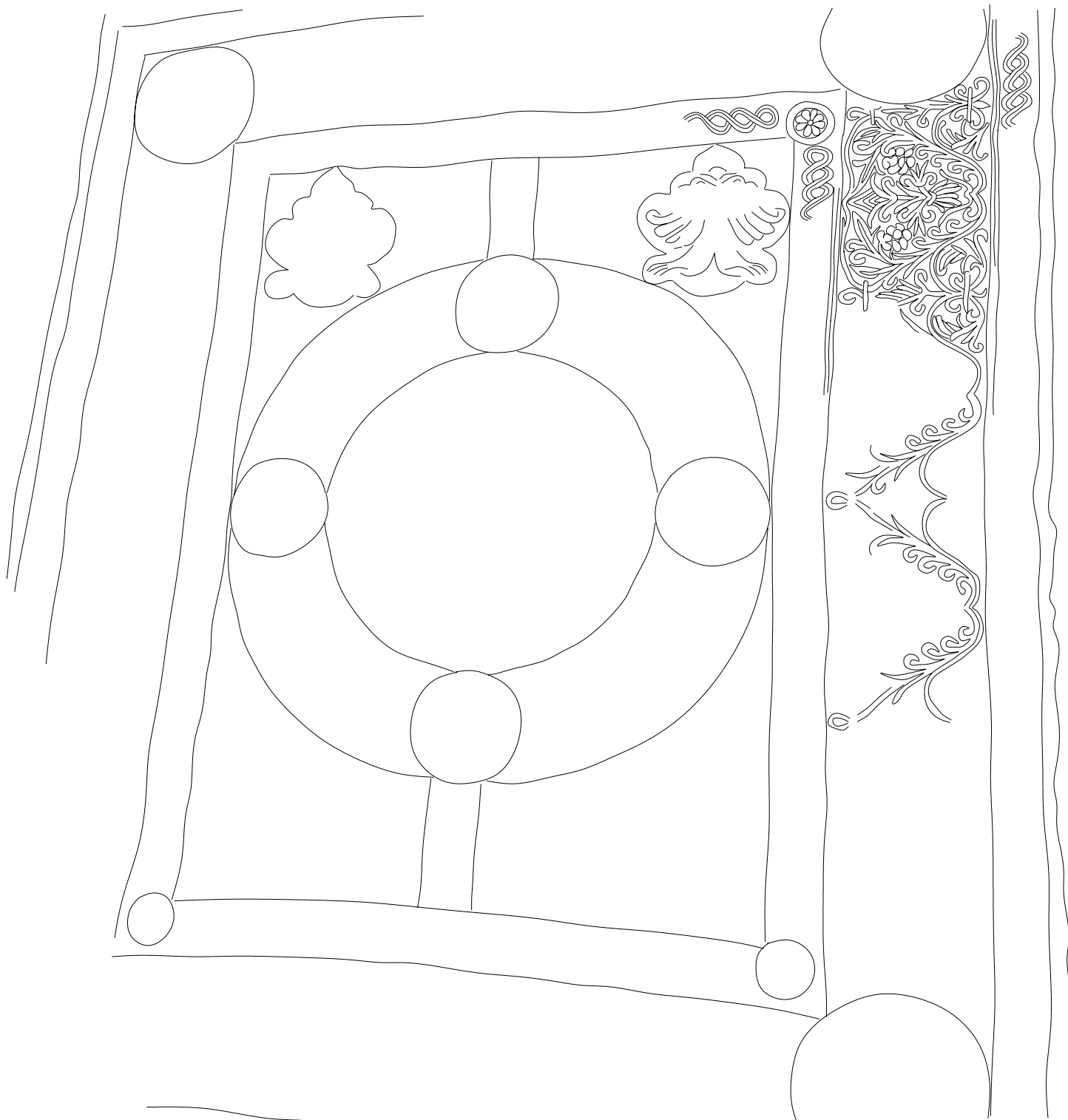
For high resolution image, see appendix 20.



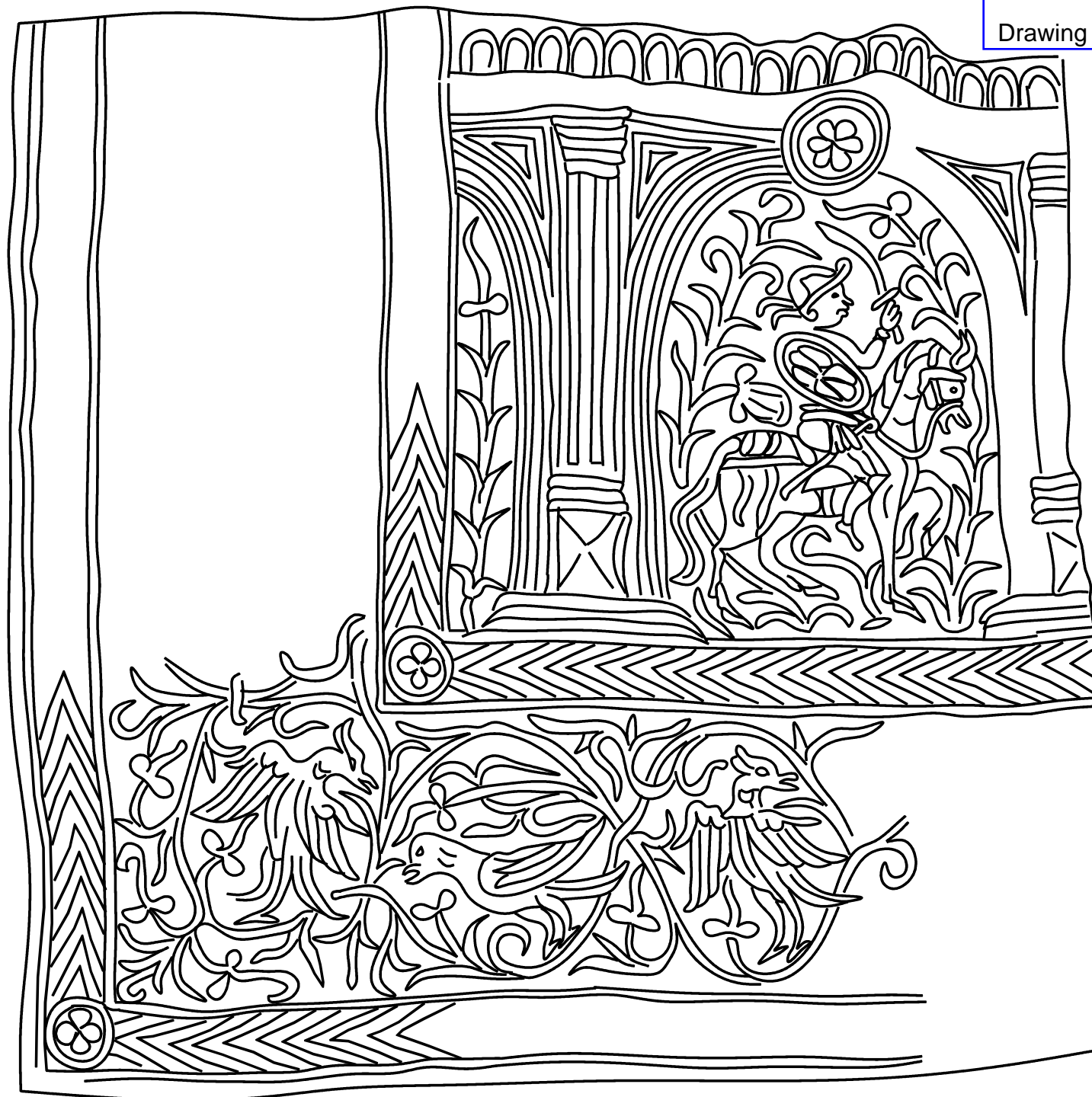






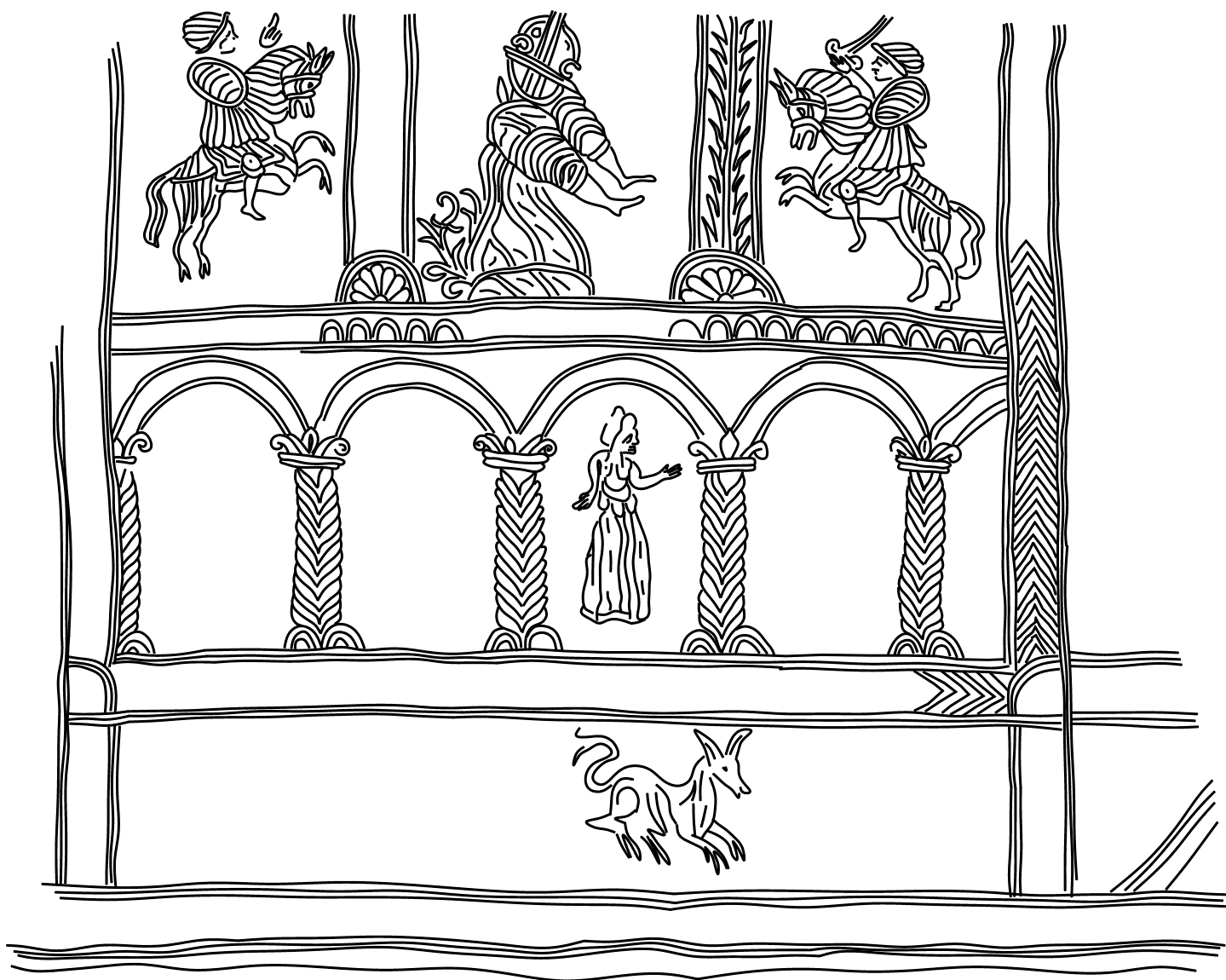




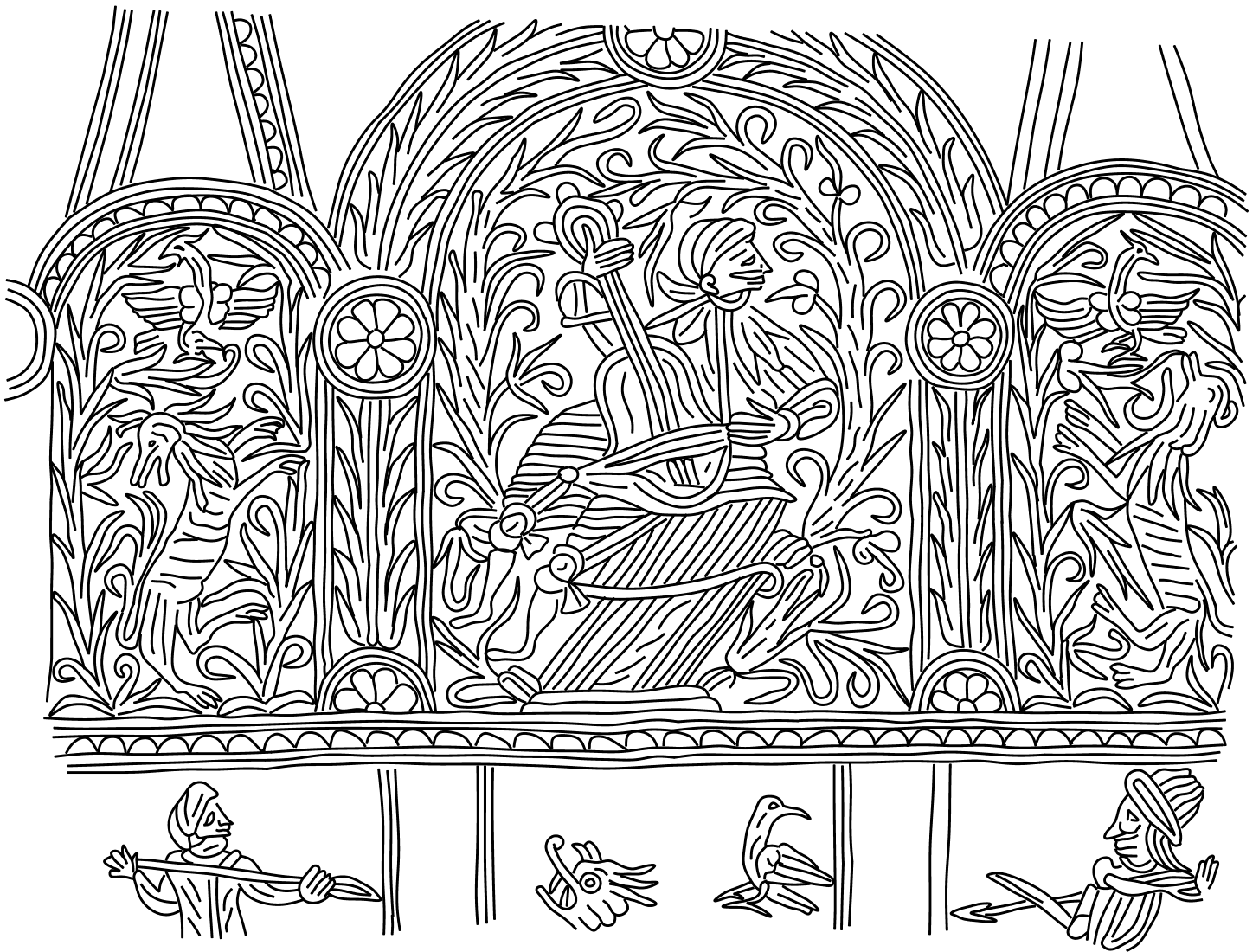




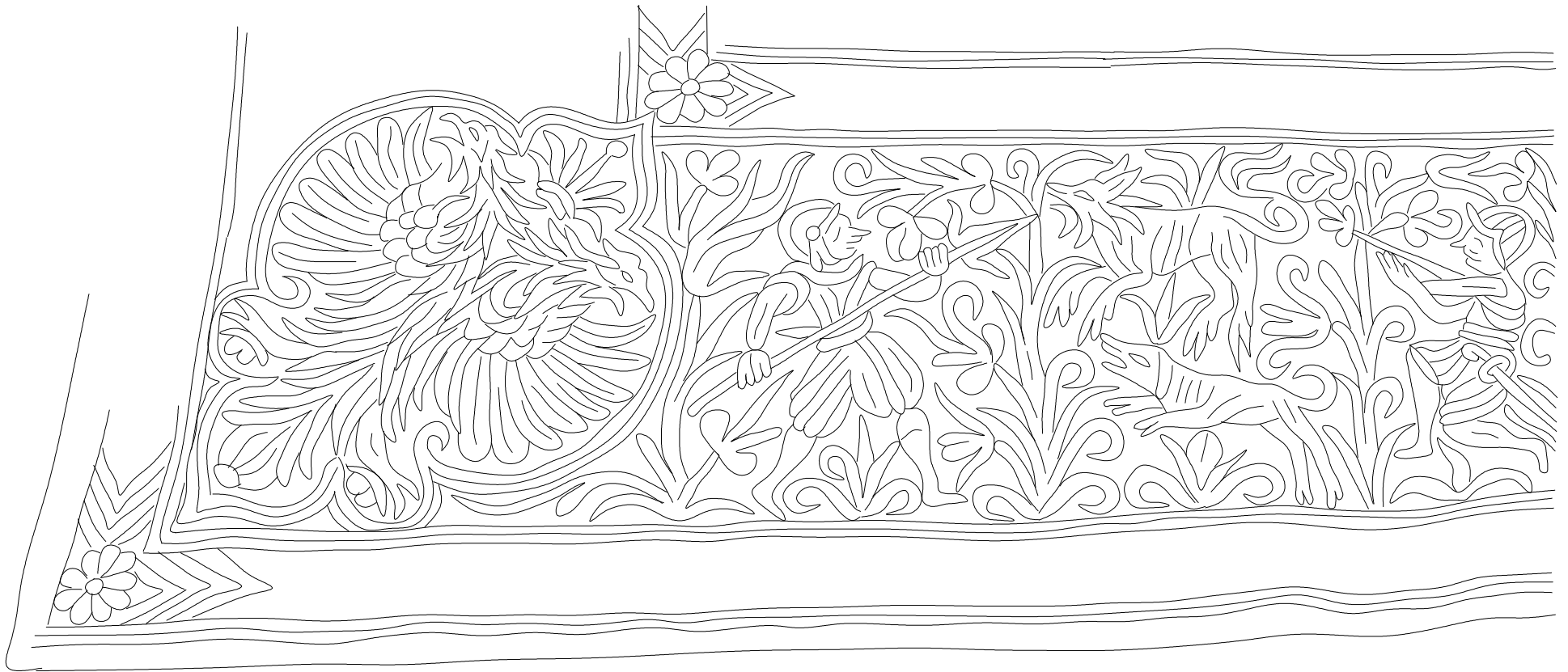


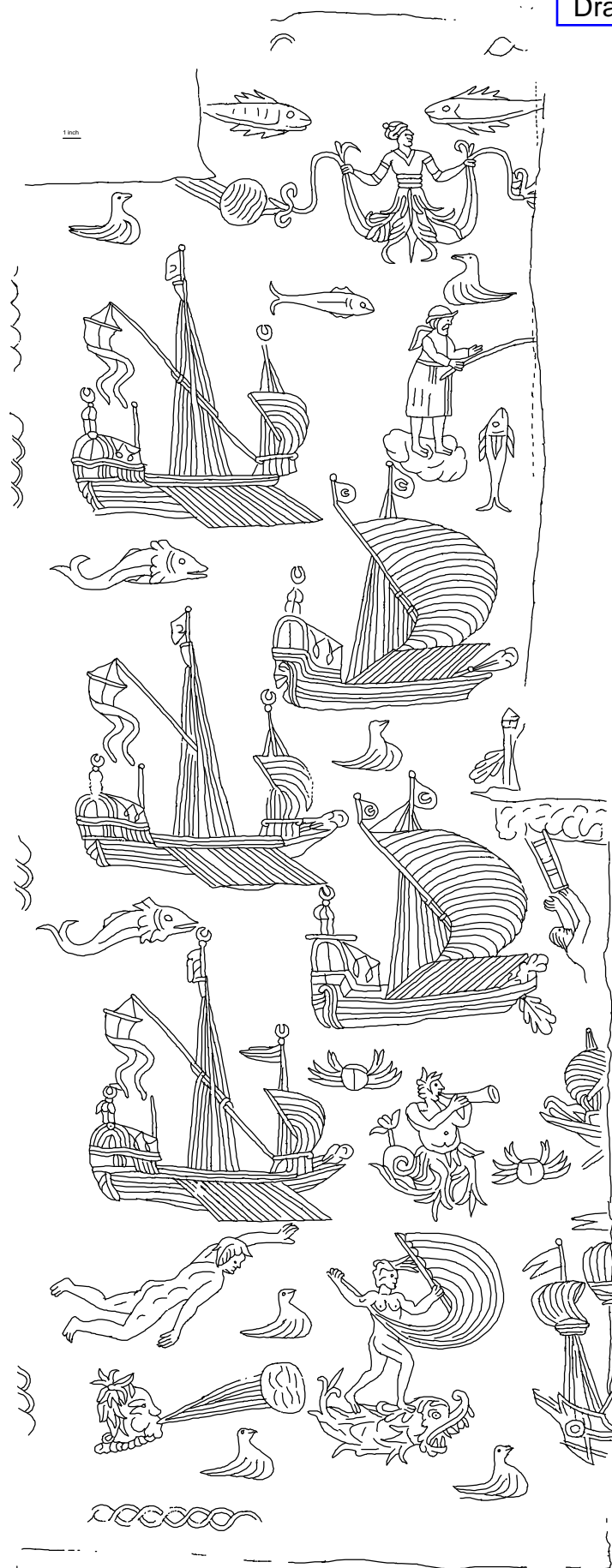


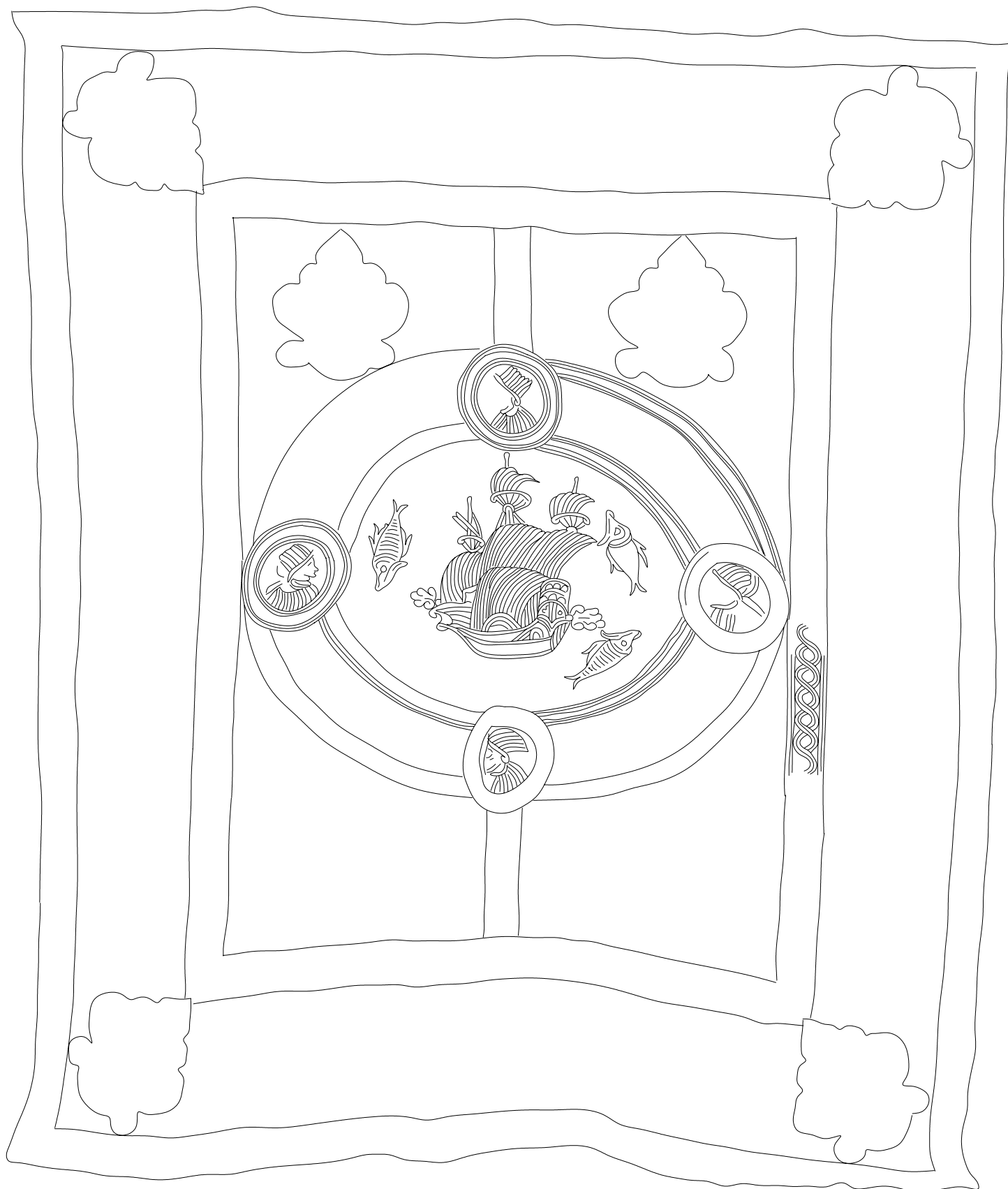




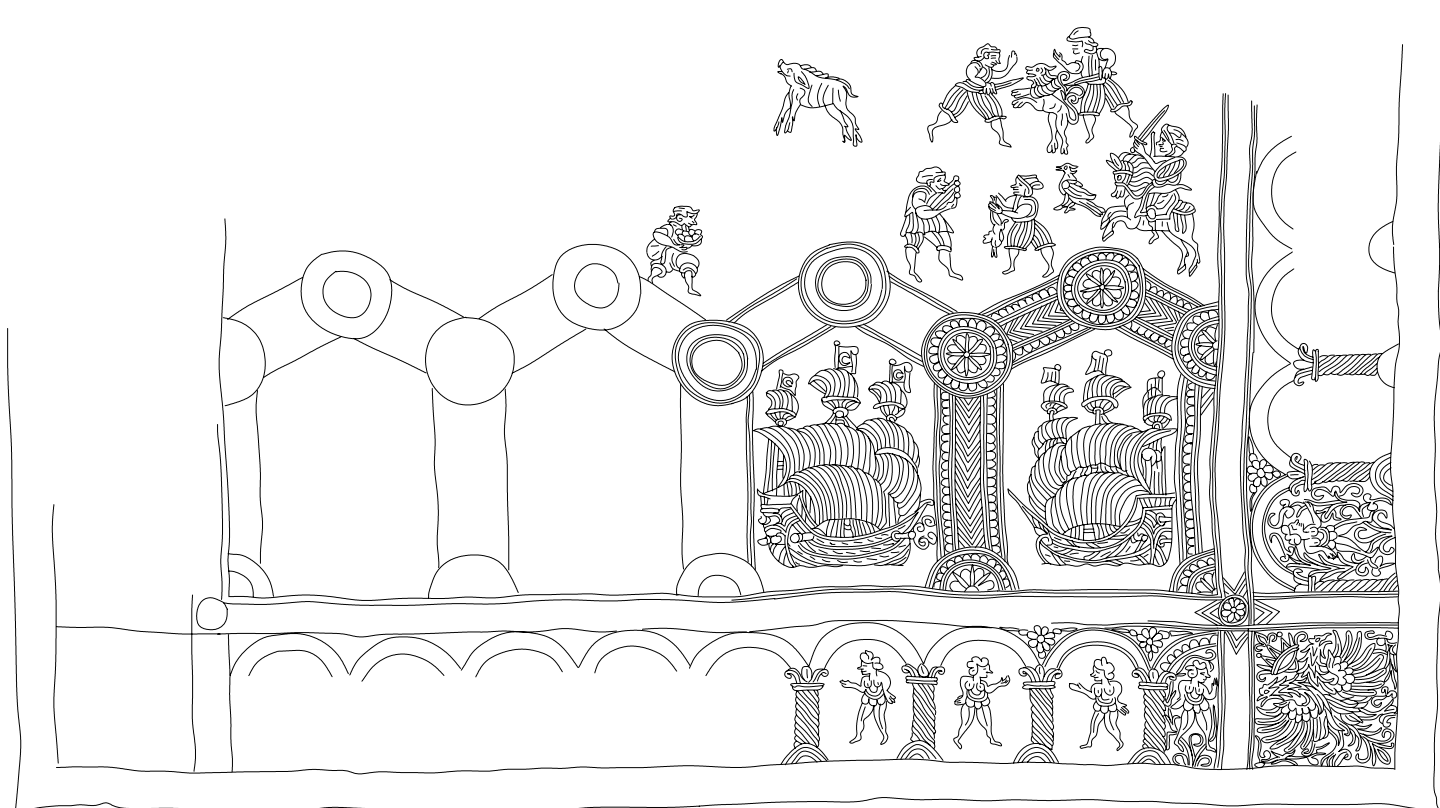


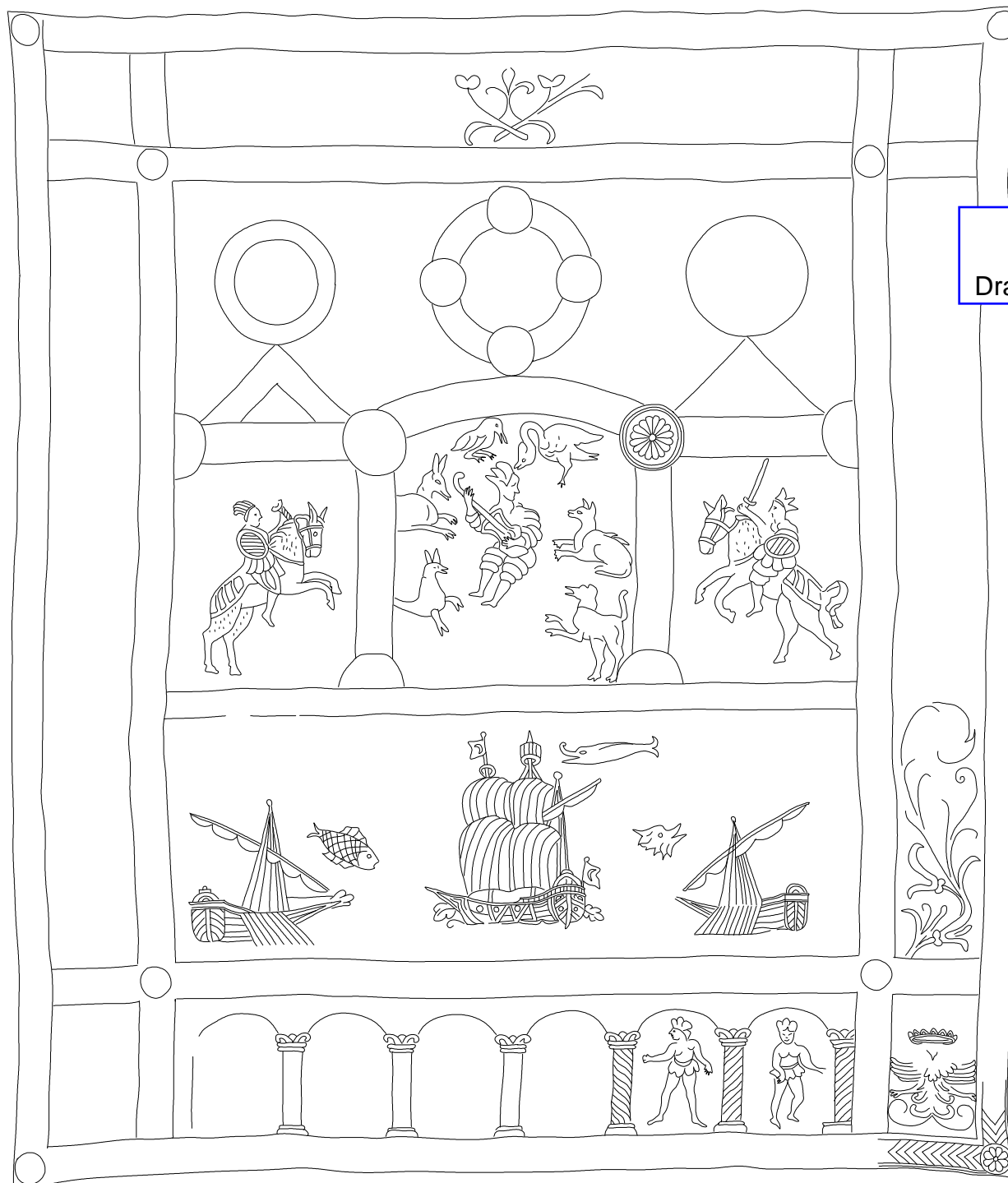












Appendix 19
ex coll. Ginsburg
Drawing by Linda Baumgarten

