The Story of the Site – Material and Immaterial Heritage Framework

*Archeon, Alphen a/d Rijn (the Netherlands)*

*Merchants House, Wall Paintings: Story of Gawain and the Chessboard*

Photos
Description
The images depicted in the house of the Merchant in the Heerestraate represent the story of Gawain and the Flying Chess Board. This story is reproduced in several Medieval Manuscripts from Holland and Flanders. Translations of the stories surrounding Gawain were made in different languages and spread throughout Medieval Europe. Similar Wall paintings were found in Germany (Cologne), Italy and France (see 47.01.01). The story is depicted in a number of scenes:

1. Walewein is seen on his horse, armoured and holding shield and lance. The chessboard is seen floating ahead of him (based on the original depiction in the Manuscript which tells of Walewein).
2. Walewein stabs a dragon in the mouth, using his lance. He is in a cave, the chessboard can be seen floating out the other side.
3. Roges the fox points the way to a tunnel which leads under the river of swords.
4. Isabel, the daughter of King Assentyne, can be seen mounted on a horse, holding a falcon as a sign of royalty / nobility.
5. Walewein is attacked by King Assentyne, who knocks the magical sword with two rings out of his hand.
6. Walewein and Isabel are seen in the castle, with the small figure of the ghost of the red knight seen below them.
7. Walewein and Isabel are seen under the Tree of Love, holding hands. Two rings symbolise their union, Isabel is also holding the chess board.

Summary of the story:
King Arthur is holding court with his knights, including his cousin Walewein (Gawain), most desired of the bachelor knights, as well as the best knight among them. Suddenly a magical chessboard floats into the hall and comes to rest on the round table. It is made of gold and ivory, and set with gems. Everyone is aghast, except for Arthur who challenges his knights to a game. No one dares move, though, so the chessboard floats back out the window. Arthur desires the board and promises that the one who fetches it will become heir to his lands and throne. Still no one dares to move, angering Arthur. Only when he says he will chase the board himself does Walewein intercede and, filled with shame, accepts the quest.
Walewein follows the chessboard, mounted on his horse Gringolet (scene 1.). He passes through treacherous mountains at the edge of Arthurs realm and sees the chessboard disappear into a cave.
Leading his horse, he follows it to find a litter of baby dragons and their enraged mother. He shield himself from her fiery breath with his shield and then kills the dragon to continue his quest (scene 2.).
First Walewein finds himself in a forest, where he is challenged by a knight all in red. This Red Knight tells Walewein he cannot pass until he has bested him in battle. Walewein narrowly defeats the Red Knight, whose final request before he dies is to be buried properly, in the Christian way. Walewein does so and continues his journey.
He arrives at the castle of King Wonder. Walewein finds him playing chess with his young son, but the king will not sell the board to Walewein. His castle and everything inside it is already made of gold, he does not need any more. But he does desire the magical sword with the two rings, which makes the bearer invincible in battle. This sword is held by King Amoraen, one kingdom over. Walewein continues his quest and finds the castle of Amoraen to also be made of gold. Therefore he cannot buy the sword from him, but king Amoraen is also willing to trade. He desires Ysabele, the daughter of kind Assentyne from distant Endi (India). He lends the magical sword to Walewein to help him on his quest.
Exhausted after a long journey, Walewein arrives in Endi, to find his path blocked by a river. Before fording it, he tests the water with his lance, which comes out charred and blackened. He tries to cross a
bridge made of swords, but they are too sharp to step on. All seems lost but then he meets the fox Roges, who leads Walewein to an underground tunnel under the river (scene 3.). He does warn him that he will never reach Ysabel, as King Assentyne’s castle is guarded by twelve walls, each wall protected by eighty knights.

Walewein is not deterred and fights his way past all the walls and all the knights. Finally he comes face to face with Assentyne, who is as strong as ten thousand men. Assentyne charges Walewein and knocks the magical sword from his grasp (scene 4.). Before the king can kill Walewein, Ysabel intercedes and wishes to question the knight. She immediately falls in love with him, which king Assentyne quickly learns. He has them both locked in the dungeon and plans to kill them the next morning.

Luckily the spirit of the Red Knight arrives in the knight and frees them, in return for receiving an honorable burial (scene 5.). Walewein steals back the sword with the two rings and they make their way back to King Amoraen. Unfortunately, he has passed away. Luckily for Walewein, this means he gets to keep both the sword and the princess. He exchanges the sword for the chessboard and makes his way back to King Arthur. They lived happily ever after (scene 6).

Further Reading

   Discussing the reconstructions in Utrecht.
2. Petra Barendregt, Noor Bloem and John Verbeek, Walewein (Amsterdam ...).
   Basic information and modern translation of the story.
   Walewein placed in the larger frame of Medieval Arthurian Romance.
   English publication on the Roman van Walewein.
   English publication on the Roman van Walewein and Arthurian Romances in the Low Countries.

Sources

1. Location: Utrecht, Oudegracht 114
2. Dating: Mid-14th century
3. Current Location: Utrecht, Oudegracht 114, calques at centre for Archaeology.

Story

1. Van Es, Gustaaf Armandus, and Pieter Vostaert, De jeeste van Walewein en het schaakbord van Penninc en Pieter Vostaert; Artur-epos uit het begin van de 13e eeuw (Tjeenk Willink 1957).
Image from the Walewein Manuscript, Bijz. Collecties UB Leiden.