Caravaggio's 'Pastor Friso'

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One of the more puzzling things concerning Caravaggio's *Nude Youth with a Ram* (fig. 1), usually identified as a Saint John the Baptist in the wilderness, is the fact that when the composition was seen by Gaspare Celio he identified the subject as a *pastor friso*: a shepherd Phryxus.¹ Baglione, however, recorded a *Saint John the Baptist* which he said Caravaggio painted for Ciriaco Mattei.² Celio, who saw the Palazzo Mattei collection between 1620 and 1622, made no mention of a Saint John by Caravaggio. Since the story of Phryxus contains the major ingredients of the Caravaggio composition: a youth (normally represented as nude or semi-nude) and a ram, there is little reason to doubt that Celio saw either the Doria-Pamphili or the Capitoline version of the picture.³ Baglione's confusion is understandable when one considers that the painting has been identified as a Saint John the Baptist, on and off, since the seventeenth century. This identification has not been seriously questioned until relatively recently.⁴ One would also suspect, on the basis of documentary as well as visual evidence, that the Capitoline version was probably the picture which once hung in the Palazzo Mattei. Mahon and Salerno have been able to demonstrate that the Capitoline painting was part of the group of paintings sold to Pope Benedict XIV in 1750 by Prince Gilberto Pio and that it was the picture owned by Cardinal Pio di Carpi in whose collection it was mentioned a number of times.⁵

Given the growing dissatisfaction with the identification of this Caravaggio picture as a Saint John the Baptist in the wilderness it is indeed surprising that the *pastor Friso* theme has not been investigated in terms of finding the true subject of the Capitoline canvas. It is true that the story of Phryxus, the legendary youth who, with his sister Helle, escaped death in Boeotia by fleeing to Colchis on the back of a miraculous ram with golden fleece, was somewhat obscure even during the Renaissance. It is also true that representations of Phryxus and his miraculous ram, while fairly popular during the classical period, are rather unusual during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries except in one context.⁶ That single exception, however, is significant, for it is in a series representing the months of the year and Phryxus and his ram are used in conjunction with March and the zodiacal sign of Aries. Unfortunately, although there is an extensive bibliography dealing with the iconography of the months and seasons, scholars, for the most part, have been concerned with the development of earlier, more
esoteric aspects of these representations. Therefore, it seems to have gone almost unnoticed that during the sixteenth century, especially in tapestry series, mythological scenes which were deemed appropriate to the various months were added. Most often the myth selected had some relationship with the zodiacal sign associated with the specific month. For example, Europa and the bull would stand for Taurus and April, while Phryxus and his marvelous ram (including, sometimes, his sister Helle) were used, naturally enough, for Aries and the month of March. Perhaps the best example of this particular phenomenon is to be found in the tapestry, part of a series, representing *March, April and May*, designed by Francesco Bachiacca.