

Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages

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The collection of essays edited for Brepols by Kate Dimitrova and Margaret Goehring, *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages*, addresses the significance of cloth and clothing in visual culture during the Middle Ages. While the use of textiles in England and France is featured in several chapters, perhaps the book's greatest contribution is the inclusion of scholarship concerning textiles with origins and contexts elsewhere during the Middle Ages. The excellent Brepols production standards have provided a fine volume with very good (at times stunning!) color illustrations integrated into each chapter.

The volume has been organized with six chapters gathered in part one as 'Textiles in context', and four chapters arranged in part two as 'The represented textile as sign'. The opening chapter prepared by the editors serves as an introduction. In the ten individual essays that follow, each author addresses iconography and inscriptions, and most discuss the performative nature of the textiles and clothing in contexts. The use of 'propaganda' (a word entering English in the 18th century) in the book title hints at the goal editors' goal of integrating substantial art historical studies with a 20th-century theoretical approach derived from linguistics into the consideration of fashion. Though the theoretical language proposed by Roland Barthes informs the editors' approach to the history of dress and textiles, their introduction implies they had begun rethinking their sorting of the chapters into two parts. Proposing that the collection concerns how medieval textiles were used, Dimitrova and Goehring make use of Barthes' matrix of signs to propose that the sequence of chapters should be 9, 3, 2, 11, 4, 7, 10, 8, 5, 6. Barthes' linguistic system of signs does not structure or permeate the chapters. Uneven in length, theoretical approach, and quality, some of the chapters offer breathtaking analyses and interpretations, while others provide good descriptions of little-known works.

Chapter two, 'Pictorial textiles and their performance: The Star Mantle of Henry II', by David Ganz, is one of the longer and more complex chapters of the collection. Ganz makes a brilliant analysis of this treasure. He pays close attention to the technical features of the Mantle, beginning with the warp and weft of the original supporting cloth behind the embroideries, and introduces an entirely new understanding of this cope. The great inscription, *Descriptio tocius orbis*, reveals that these embroidered pictures of constellations constitute a description of the entire world. Further deciphering of the tituli and the identification of the donor reveal the political nature of silk diplomacy at the court of Henry II and the contexts for these gifts.

The same workshop seems to have produced this doubly-gifted mantle: first as a gift for Henry II from Ismahel (d.1020), shortly thereafter re-gifted by Henry II to God, through Bamberg Cathedral. In an engaging, fascinating deciphering of the diagrams on the Star Mantle, Ganz provides a frame of reference for the textile: 'a principale-defining feature of medieval textile art is the use of geometric patterns that are lined up serially' (p. 20). He redefines the experience of the garment, which became three-dimensional when on the body, so it is not a map but something completely different. 'By dividing the cloak into northern and southern halves, the two diagrams do not merely represent cosmic order but in fact manifest its presence' (p. 22). Even more than 'cosmic' order, a new Christian order was the goal of Ismahel's gift (p. 23). Further, Ganz convincingly argues that, given its performative context (p. 25), this gold and silk robe, decorated with images and words, including dedications and vows in chrysographic inscriptions, visualized a celestial order. He proposes that the inscriptions bordering the hem separate the self from the world in this and other representations.

In his eminently clear essay, chapter three, 'Orthodox liturgical textiles and clerical self-referentiality', Warren T. Woodfin reveals components of order in the hierarchy in the Orthodox Church and the Byzantine imperial court that demystify ecclesiastical visual culture. The detailed and beautiful illustrations function as the vestments might have done to present the gold and silk textiles, with Christ in the guise as high priest dressed as an Orthodox patriarch. Woodfin reprises his conclusion that Orthodox clothing is transformative: '...the clergy were not merely representatives, but *representations* of Christ' (p. 31). The Orthodox priest participating in the liturgy personified Christ when he put on the image of Christ. With excellent photos, Woodfin seamlessly illustrates the transition from Christ-garbed ancient dress, via the *sakkos* and *omophorion* of the patriarch and the imperial *loros* and *stemma*, concluding with Christ in a 14th-century Royal Deësis, where the insignia of a patriarch are combined with imperial insignia. In a graceful interaction between illustration and description of the embroidered iconostasis curtain, and the human celebrant revealed when the curtain was drawn aside dramatically, Woodfin demonstrates the '...interchangeability of the earthly and heavenly actors in the liturgy...' (p. 36). His analysis and the illustration of the Great Deësis in an *epitrachelion* from Chilander Monastery combine as a revelation: the vestments '...convey the paradox that the priest is simultaneously himself and Christ' (p. 43)! The essay proceeds chronologically from textiles to embroidered images to woven representations, elucidating terms and functions. Woodfin's prose conquers the boggling challenges of explaining weaving techniques that provide evidence of design flaws in patterns repeated over decades. Descriptions of the textile forms and the flashing colors inherent in the woven images are as essential as the deciphered iconography in opening the readers' eyes to perceive with fresh understanding. Delightful and engaging, the essay takes time to self-consciously observe some complications: '...Christ is represented "as if" a bishop, the bishop is presented "as if" Christ, who is in turn presented "as if" a bishop and so on ...' (p. 49). The endnotes, filled with bibliography, digressions, and explanations, further engage and challenge the curious. In the end, because of their portability, textiles survive even when architecture can be lost and '...The essential message that the textiles convey is that the ministering clergy are living icons of Christ...' (p. 49).

Unfolding like a mystery story, the fourth chapter, Henry Schilb's 'The *Epitaphioi* of Stephen the Great', illustrates four and discusses several more large, complex, and little-discussed liturgical textiles as political statements made by their donor / patrons. Schilb's careful analysis explains how these embroideries were used in their historical contexts. The reader is given access to the meaning of these textiles through very concise descriptions of the *epitaphioi* and Schilb's cogent analyses of their iconography. Most powerful are the transcriptions and translations provided of the Greek and Cyrillic lettering and the Slavonic language texts. Previous interpretations concerning the religious continuity in the region are evaluated. Schilb's step-by-step parsing of the inscriptions and iconographic formulae combine to reveal intended messages addressing the legitimate inherited succession and dynastic continuity for the rulers of Moldavia at the beginning of the 16th century.

In the fifth chapter, 'Liturgical textiles as papal donations in late Medieval Italy', Christiane Elster poses questions about the nature of gifts and the relationship of giver and receiver. One full cope is illustrated along with extraordinary and clear color details of the gifts under discussion: the gift from Nicolas IV of a

cope to Ascoli Piceno; the gift of a cope from Boniface VIII to Anagni and the gift from Pius II of a cope and a chasuble and mitre to Pienza. The extravagant and costly material of gifted vestments are discussed along with the iconographic programs decorating the precious textiles and the ornamental language employed to communicate values. Elster demonstrates that receiving these gifts changed the wearer. She rehearses the traditions and types of gifts and proposes that these gifts required recipients to honor the pope with loyalty, as is shown by the integration of these gifts into the recipients' worlds. To support this she cites evidence that garments were used and reworked rather than being preserved as treasures. Using Mauss's theories of gift exchange, she describes the perpetual relationship of these popes and the recipient communities, a relationship that created a visualization of papal authority. Further, these gifts have a memorial function, not only cultivating the memory of the popes but also of their families. 'During the celebration of the liturgy, in which the donated textiles were used and seen ... the textiles ... functioned as a visualization of papal authority and power...' (pp. 74–5). The memory of physical contact with the body of the leader of the Christian community elevated and transformed the recipient community as well.

In chapter six, Stefanie Seeberg's 'Monument in linen: a thirteenth-century embroidered catafalque cover for members of the beata stirps of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary', introduces the reader to the significance in the 14th century of linen as a means of communicating humility and purity. This essay, one part of Seeberg's painstakingly extensive research into the female Premonstratensian convent of Altenberg / Lahn, defies previous iconographic analyses. Altenberg became a cult center for burials and cloth for the landgraves of Thüringen. It may come as a surprise to realize that the children or 'beata stirps' (holy lineage) of Saint Elizabeth of Hungary were contact-relics. The embroidery made when her daughter Gertrud of Thüringen directed Altenberg as *magistra* has a pictorial program to be used for memorial days of the family, and illustrates their genealogy.

Seeberg presents clear explanations of the nuns' use of architectural spaces for liturgy in the church, of programs of sculpture and painted stained glass originally in the monastery (four now preserved in the Cloisters in New York), the concept of *memoria* (celebration of a Requiem Mass, and the Office of the Dead) and of comparative examples of sculpture and tomb monuments. She presents the significance of crowns and halos for royal ancestors, and suggests that coats of arms represent continuity rather than individuals (p. 89). The catafalque might substitute for the tomb on memorial days and in Altenberg, on memorial days, the Office of the Dead was celebrated in the gallery. If the catafalque was in the nuns' choir, surrounded by family in the stained glass and mural painting of the architecture, it was as if Saint Elizabeth's family surrounded the memorial, and the family joined the ranks of the saints, apostles and prophets. The mirrored images of standing figures in the embroidery indicate its arrangement draped over a form, covering a bier.

It is remarkable that this chapter features a precious textile that is not silk; it is made of linen, embroidered with linen, showing that white-on-white embroideries were gaining popularity in 13th- and 14th-century Germany. This material communicated the ideas of humility and purity of those who wanted to demonstrate their piety and to follow Christ. Seeberg declares that linen was the ideal material for the work of nuns, and for this memorial of Elizabeth's family. The conclusion self-consciously declares, 'With the installation of their *memoria* in Altenberg and a catafalque cloth in the humble medium of linen, propaganda for the family and service to God could go hand in hand' (p. 94).

Three excellent color illustrations of items from the tomb of the Infante Fernando de la Cerda (before 1275) highlight chapter seven, 'Cultures re-shaped: textiles from the Castilian royal tombs in Santa María de las Huelgas in Burgos', by Kristin Böse. Since photography is not permitted in the exhibition of funerary textiles at las Huelgas, these three fine images are most welcome! In her short chapter, Böse offers a workmanlike description and a contextualization of the sumptuous textiles and heraldic material found in the tombs at las Huelgas. Böse makes use of Yuri Lotman's concept of the *semiosphere* (a border region where exchanges take place), in her discussion of textiles within the culture of courtly performance. The discussion of the complicated evolution of artistic vocabulary shared between media (textiles and stucco decoration) on the Iberian Peninsula is useful but is not illustrated with images. The hierarchical ranking of cloth pervades

the essay, which emphasises the social and economic value of goods in the Castilian community.

In chapter eight, “‘So lyvely in cullers and gilting’”: vestments on episcopal tomb effigies in England’, Catherine Walden foregrounds the worldly status of the bishops with sculpted and painted *gisants*. Walden offers sensitive descriptions of the tomb designs, valuing the merit in the materials illustrated, and recognizing that these decorations were produced by accomplished specialists. The endnotes provide a gazetteer of painted effigies; tombs from Salisbury, Exeter, and Ely are illustrated. The color details of the 13th-century effigy of Bishop Bronescombe in Exeter Cathedral are simply spectacular. Walden notes that the illustrated vestments are corroborated by descriptions of garments in the inventories of churches and by extant actual textile fragments from the period. At the same time, she observes that a kind of spiritual anxiety about the individual’s status in the afterlife is expressed through vestimentary exaggeration, since the effigy garments can be even more sumptuous than the real ones. Using what is and what is not illustrated in the painted sculpture, her analysis suggests that the liveliness of the effigies places these churchmen in a post-resurrection, revived state with special status, close to God.

In chapter nine, a gem of an essay by Evelin Wetter entitled ‘Material evidence, theological requirements and medial transformation: ‘textile strategies’ in the Court Art of Charles IV’, English-language readers are given access to scholarly study of the *Glanz Virgin* (Prague, c. 1350) and the *Pierpont Morgan diptych* (Prague, c. 1355–60). Wetter delivers an accessible essay of thick description and careful analysis of textile representation in medieval painting and ‘truthful representation of actual fabric’ and embroidery. She avoids general interpretation throughout her analysis of material evidence. Inventory records identify donation information, with heraldic evidence supporting the description of painted garments and compositions. Wetter makes the case for the truthful representation of actual fabric through parallels between depicted textiles drawn and extant items. This chapter makes superb use of Durandus, returning again and again to the notion of *sponsus* and *sponsa* (in this case, extensive documentation is provided in Latin and German sources). Her studies of the donor’s *vitae* have revealed the role that the depiction of heraldry played in expressing episcopal status and devotion to ‘...the Virgin –cum-church’. This chapter provides a very specific case of the allegorically-based visual language of textiles and insignia in 14th-century Prague.

With her discussion of the ‘Chape de Charlemagne’ in the Pierpont Morgan diptych (pages 139–40), Wetter asserts that a panel painting makes a permanent statement, in which the donors define themselves with the depicted textiles, acknowledging that the viewer had to recognize the intended communication. This chapter, translated into English with the assistance of Andreas Puth, gives readers a key to unlock the code of this communication for a modern viewer.

Chapter ten, ‘Weaving legitimacy: The Jouvenel des Ursins family and the construction of nobility in fifteenth-century France’, by Jennifer E. Courts, discusses the well-known panel painting in the context of similar images in tapestries and manuscript illustrations. Courts explains the history, biography, and shared armorials of the Jouvenel des Ursins family and presents a careful description of garments and textiles and their significance, emphasizing that in this visual genealogy, material objects indicate elite status. She proposes that by depicting themselves as if in a chapel in the ambulatory of N-D Paris, this family of cloth merchants from Troyes implied theirs was a status ranking with the saints. ‘The painting’s representation of sumptuous textiles reflects one of their many efforts to weave themselves into the fabric of legitimate nobility’ (p. 141). Courts offers a meticulous examination of illustrations with heraldic textiles, including the depicted golden accessories of knights as opposed to the silver accessories of squires. Fine illustrations from the *Bedford Hours* and other manuscripts demonstrate the use of textiles to construct a woven screen to subdivide public and ecclesiastical spaces.

In the final chapter, ‘Textiles in the Great Mongol *Shahnama*: a new approach to Ilkhanid Dress’, Yuka Kadoi offers a way into the remarkable 13th-century manuscript paintings of the Ilkhanate (1256–53). Moving from one very fine color illustration to another, the chapter examines paintings and makes comparisons with actual extant textiles. With close attention to detail, three types of visual functions of textiles and garments are considered: brocades in funerary contexts; as Mongol- and Islamic-style robes; and

decorative elements and accessories. Yuka Kadoi concisely identifies named textiles represented in the *Great Mongol Shahnama* (1330s). It is in the depictions of Shahnama (Alexander the Great) that the concept of textiles for the purpose of 'propaganda' is emphasized most strongly. Depictions of Bahram Gur from widely-separated pages of the Tabriz *Shahnama* illustrate fashionable textile accessories. The endnotes for this chapter constitute a tremendous bibliographic resource.

Though an anthology that brings together such a prestigious company of international scholars might function as a unit, Dimitrova and Goehring's *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages*, merits a place on the reference collection of research libraries. The chapters operate as unique scholarly statements, offering important new ideas, especially to readers whose primary language is English. In a few of the chapters, there are welcome English translations of inscriptions in various languages, and this transliterated vocabulary illuminates the significance of the research. Valuable insights concerning the visual art and social history of the Middle Ages can be useful for various ranks of scholarly readers. However, when several chapters make excellent use of various works by Durandus and other medieval sources, or when authors emphasize the concept of *memoria* in relation to textiles and garments, they do so independently, without unifying editorial commentary. Most of the research is meticulously documented in endnotes, but there is neither a general bibliography nor an index integrating chapter references or content for the whole book. Despite these structural drawbacks, this collection is an important publication.

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