



Life and cult of Cnut the Holy

The first royal saint of Denmark

Edited by:

*Steffen Hope, Mikael Manøe Bjerregaard,
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Report from an interdisciplinary research seminar in Odense.
November 6th to 7th 2017

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Kulturhistoriske studier i centralitet – Archaeological and
Historical Studies in Centrality, vol. 4, 2019

Forskningscenter Centrum – Odense Bys Museer
Syddansk Univeristetsforlag/University Press of Southern Denmark

Textiles in Christian Tombs

By Gale R. Owen-Crocker

The article begins with a brief discussion of textiles in pagan and pre-Christian graves, highlighting the differences between what can be deduced from these deposits and those from tombs in churches, especially in the age of St Cnut. It notes the different gender biases of the evidence from different periods and different kinds of archaeology. It considers clothing remains from two individual cases from the period of St Cnut. The consequences for burial ritual of the concept of death as sleep are discussed, particularly in relation to the addition of pillows or cushions and other bedding to graves. The accumulation of textiles in the shrine of St Cuthbert over centuries is highlighted. The survival of numerous silk shrouds demonstrates the range of sources and designs of medieval silks available in Western Europe. Finally, the survival of small pieces of textile used as wrappings for Christian relics is discussed.

Textiles in pre-and early Christian graves

There are a considerable number of textile fragments surviving from pre- and early Christian graves in North-western Europe, when people were buried clothed and accompanied by grave-goods (see, for example, Owen-Crocker 2004; Walton Rogers 2007; Brandenburgh 2016). In these cases, the textile is normally only preserved – often mineralised – on metalwork, usually iron or copper alloy, especially on dress accessories such as brooches, buckles and clasps. Despite the very small size of most cloth fragments, it is often possible to establish the quality and weave of the fabrics and to deduce – by criteria such as their degree of professionalism and relative frequency – which were likely to have been local products and which imported from other areas. The fibre from these early medieval graves is usually wool or flax, much of which was probably local. Silk always had to be imported into North-western Europe, whether as thread for embroidery or tablet

weaving, or as woven cloth. Silk is only attested in England from the seventh century as furnished burial was disappearing, though it may have been present there earlier but not survived, since it was evidently worn in Francia by the late sixth century: a richly-dressed woman buried in the cathedral of St Denis, Paris, and identified, by the inscription on her ring (*Arnegundis*, and an abbreviation of *Regina*), as Aregund (d. c.580), wife of Clotair I, king of the Franks, wore a long silk coat and silk veil as well as garments of wool, beaver hair and linen (Desrosiers and Rast-Eicher 2012). Silk is more common in the burial archaeology of Scandinavia, since the northern countries were converted to Christianity later than the mainland Europe and England, and therefore the pagan custom of burial with grave-goods persisted longer in Scandinavia, into the period when silk had become more available. There is a good deal of textile evidence from Viking Age graves of the ninth and tenth centuries, much of it wool preserved on oval brooches, but a particular feature is that small pieces of patterned silk were recycled as appliqués on women's clothing (Vedeler 2014: 3-47; Hedeager Krag 2018: 37-44).

Archaeological textiles from early medieval cemeteries and barrows are predominantly associated with female burials since the metal dress accessories which preserve the fibre were buried in much greater quantities with women than with men.

The conversion to Christianity, along with other cultural and economic factors, brought about a general change in burial practice, and a general end to the practice of depositing grave-goods with the dead, as corpses came to be buried with only a shroud for covering, in keeping with Christian belief in the immortality of the soul and the transience of the body. However, the Church did not actually forbid grave-goods, and royalty and distinguished male ecclesiastics (see below) evidently continued to be buried in rich dress which reflected their status and office. There are a number of examples from the era of St Cnut, some of which will be discussed below. The

gender bias towards females which is found in archaeological textile finds of the pre- and early Christian period is reversed in finds from Christian tombs. Considering the emphasis on male succession in the secular world, and that popes, archbishops, bishops and priests, the wearers of elaborate vestments were all male, it is hardly surprising that textile finds from Christian tombs have a strong masculine bias.

Queens and Abbesses

Female Christian graves with textiles are few, and there are none known to this author from the time of St Cnut (d.1086), whose commemoration was the subject of the conference for which this paper was originally composed, though interments from both earlier and later contained unique remains of female garments of outstanding interest. Queen Aregund's corpse (see above), which was dressed in elaborate jewellery as well as a full outfit of clothes, demonstrates this practice for the burial of an early Christian queen. There is some evidence that early abbesses and royal nuns may have been buried in clothing that reflected their social prestige rather than the humility of their vocation. Textile relics preserved at Chelles, France, are associated with the royal nun Bathilde, widow of the Merovingian Frankish king Clovis II, who re-established the abbey of Chelles and died there in 680. Her unique burial garment takes the form of a linen "front", with silk embroidery depicting jewellery: two necklaces, from one of which hang pendants and a jewelled cross, depicting in needlework metal religious jewellery of a kind which a Christian queen might in fact have worn, but which Bathilde had renounced (pictured at E-Ref Chelles). Replica regalia, presumably prepared specially for a funeral, has occasionally been found in later royal tombs, such as the gilded-copper grave crowns accompanying Holy Roman Emperors Conrad II and Henry III in their graves at Speyer (respectively 1039 and 1056), and the leather-covered resin orb from Henry's grave which was also, presumably, an imitation of a metal treasure (English 2004: 364 and Plates 14, 18). A silk mantle and hair ribbon are among Bathilde's other surviving garments, as well as a linen over-gown and shawl. Other garment remains at Chelles are attributed to Bertille, abbess of the convent, who died c.704. She too had worn splendid silk clothing in the form of a tunic with tablet-woven decoration on the cuffs (Laporte 1998; Laporte and Boyer 1991).

After these early Christian examples, we have, as far as this author knows, no female graves with

textiles until the thirteenth century. The royal mausoleum of the rulers of Castile and León, in Burgos, Spain, has produced several female burials with textiles, among them another queen/nun, Eleanor, divorced queen of Aragon, who died in 1244. She was buried in a matching outfit of fashionably-cut gown, over-gown and mantle of costly gold-brocaded silk over a linen blouse, with a silk, muslin and gold headdress (Gomez-Moreno 1946: 23-4; Herrero Carretero 1988: 47, 52-3; Yarza Luaces and Mancini 2005: 171-3).

We do not know, at the present time, whether abbesses, especially royal ones, and royal nuns were regularly buried in splendid textiles, and, perhaps, religious jewellery. This is a question which future archaeology might resolve.

Vestments from the tomb of Pope Clement II

Outstanding examples of surviving ecclesiastical vestments come from the tomb of Pope Clement II in Bamberg, Germany (Müller-Christensen 1955, 1960). Born to an aristocratic family, he became the second bishop of Bamberg in 1040 and was enthroned pope in December 1046. Although allegedly accepting the office with reluctance, his policy of reform against simony promised much, but was cut



Fig. 1: The buskins of Pope Clement II. Photo: Diözesanmuseum, Bamberg.

short by his death in October 1047 while returning to Rome from a visit to Germany. His body was interred in Bamberg, which was unusual, since popes are normally buried in Rome. When his tomb was opened in 1942, Pope Clement's remains were found to be vested in silk liturgical garments including a dalmatic, a cope, a bell-shaped chasuble and buskins (ecclesiastical stockings) (Fig.1). (The vestments are effectively pictured on the website E-Ref Clement: Kollmorgen 2009.) The cope is papal red, with a green border. The other silk vestments are monochrome, natural coloured silk, and their golden iridescence goes some way to conveying, even now, the visual impact of such vestments on the observers of a celebrant in a dark church illuminated by flickering lamps and candles as their intricately woven patterning caught the light. The human representative of God's Church, clad in these shining golden garments, must have appeared as a physical manifestation of Divine Light.

The buskins and the cope (both the border and the body of the garment) are woven to the same design though the cope is dyed, the buskins undyed. The textile is almost certainly Byzantine (Müller-Christensen 1955: 23, cat. 27d; Müller-Christensen 1960: 44–6) though Maureen Miller (2014: 194) has suggested the pattern is typically Persian. Both are pattern-

ed with large roundels containing addorsed griffins and panthers. The frames of the roundels are filled with geometric patterns, and there are pairs of confronted birds between the roundels. The papal tomb also contained the remains of a cingulum (a liturgical belt), a stole, four silk crosses which had been attached to the woollen papal pallium, gloves, lap-pets and a band from some kind of headgear. An alb, which was probably linen, had disintegrated apart from fragments of silk decoration for the sleeves.

Textiles from the tomb of Edward the Confessor

Textiles from secular graves are rarer than ecclesiastical. An example from the period of St Cnut, and almost contemporary with the burial of Pope Clement II, is that of Edward, king of England, who was buried in Westminster Abbey at his death in 1066. Although he passed into relative obscurity immediately after his death, a cult subsequently developed around alleged miracles during his lifetime and posthumous healings. The king was canonized a confessor in 1161, celebrated enthusiastically as a saint, particularly in royal circles, for several hundred years and is still remembered today.



Fig. 2: Fragments of textile from the tomb of Edward the Confessor. Photo: V&A Images, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

According to documentary evidence, cloth was taken from his shrine each time his body was translated, in 1102 (when another textile was substituted) and 1163; and in 1245 goldwork was taken from the tomb of his wife, Queen Edith, who was exhumed with him (Owen-Crocker, forthcoming). However, three small cloth fragments recovered from Edward's tomb when it was damaged in 1685 (Fig. 2) almost certainly date back to the original funeral of 1066, since they closely resemble near-contemporary textiles from the tomb of Pope Clement II (deposited in 1047): specifically the undyed, patterned material of which Pope Clement's buskins were made, but also the coloured versions in the pope's cope and its border. Similar fabrics have been recovered from other eleventh- and twelfth-century burials, from a garment of Holy Roman Emperor Henry II (d.1024) and the chasuble of Archbishop Arnold I of Trier (d.1183). The textiles are of the same weave (now called weft-patterned tabby, called *diaspros* by contemporary writers), and the patterns and scale of the designs are very similar. The fragments from Edward's tomb are manifestly not, as their seventeenth-century labels proclaim, from three different fabrics: a cerecloth (a waxed cloth), a shroud like a sheet, and a ribbon from round the head of the corpse. In fact, they are all from the same undyed silk cloth. The assumption that the textile was from a shroud is also likely to be false: all of the similar survivals from royal or ecclesiastical graves were garments, and one of the fragments from Edward's tomb has the remains of a seam which indicates that it was tailored (Cigaar 1982: 89-90; Granger Taylor 1994a, 1994b). The presence of this fabric in the graves of a pope, a Holy Roman Emperor and a king of the prosperous country of England indicates the prestige in which it was held in the eleventh century, and gives a tantalizing glimpse of a contemporary international elite fashion. This is a particularly valuable contribution to social history in view of the facts that Clement's reign was so short and Edward's (though long) relatively undocumented. However, Hero Granger Taylor (1994b) has argued that this type of silk was not particularly rare or of high quality, and if she is correct it is possible that it was used for entombment in preference to other, more exclusive and expensive products. Even if this was the case, the material was far removed from what ordinary people would have worn, and its shimmering beauty would have made an impressive contribution to the funeral ceremonial.

The concept of death as sleep

Death is described as sleep repeatedly in the Bible, and this concept seems to have been taken literally from the conversion period onwards. In Anglo-Saxon England this was sometimes manifested by burying a person in a bed. As many as thirteen possible bed burials – identified by the remains of the iron fittings of the bed – have been excavated from Anglo-Saxon England, mostly of young women and dating to the seventh century (for example Speake 1989; Sherlock 2012; E-Ref Trumpington). The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial from Suffolk, England, c.625, was rich in organic remains, including textiles, though there was no trace of a body, and there have been various theories about the deposition of the rich grave-goods, including for a while, post-World War II, the possibility that the burial was an empty cenotaph. Opinion has now settled on the likelihood that this was an inhumation, probably of Rædwald, king of the East Angles, who was baptised a Christian but retained his pagan affiliations, in a chamber built aboard a ship, and furnished like a room, with a soumak-woven hanging, possibly a rug and bedclothes including a saffron-dyed cover (Crowfoot 1983; E-Ref Sutton Hoo). The current reconstruction of the burial chamber in the National Trust Visitor Centre at Sutton Hoo includes a realistic figure lying under bedding, turned slightly on one side, as if sleeping. It is fascinating to see how quietly and reverently visitors enter this chamber, both adults and children, as if a person were really sleeping there!

The concept of death as sleep persists on medieval tomb monuments where pillows or cushions are depicted supporting the heads of the dead. The effigy of Matilda le Caus, in the Church of St Peter and St Paul, Old Brampton, Derbyshire, England, dating from 1224, is an early English example, but there are other early thirteenth-century cases from France, Germany and Spain, both of men and women, the males both knights and ecclesiastics. (E-ref Effigies). This mirrors actual practice, since elaborate cushions have been found though material remains are quite rare. They include the thirteenth-century royal mausoleum at Burgos in Spain, where the heads of corpses rested on exquisite knitted silk cushions, and Bishop Antonio della Agli, who was buried in 1477 in the Basilica of Santa Maria dell' Impruneta, Italy, pillowed on a dazzling patchwork cushion (Evans 2012).

A startling aspect of this practice is that when the remains of a distinguished person were translated to



Fig. 3: The skull of Cnut the Holy resting on a pillow. Photo: Peter Helles Eriksen 2017.

a superior burial place some years after death, he was still treated as if he were sleeping and accordingly provided with a pillow and sometimes other bedding. Alpheide, sister of the ninth-century King Charles the Bald, left an explanatory inscription embroidered in silk and gold thread around a cushion supporting the head of the dead St Remigius, who had died in 533. The cushion cover was made of Byzantine or Persian silk, and the inscription relates that Bishop Hincmar (of Rheims) had asked Alpheide to embroider the cushion for the saint at the consecration of the church in 852, over three centuries after his death (Volbach 1969: 106, 112; Coatsworth 2005: 8; pictured at E-Ref Remigius).

King Cnut IV of Denmark was murdered and buried in 1086, exhumed in 1095, and, in 1100/01, placed in a shrine in Odense, at which point textiles were added. As with St Remigius, the passage of time since the subject's death was no obstruction to the conception of the interior of the shrine as a bed, with a yellow silk quilt on which the remains of the body were laid, and a pillow. The shrine of the king's brother, Benedikt, who was killed at the same time, was also provided with a quilt and pillow (Hedeager Krag 2010). However, in the case of Cnut, the resting place for his head was much more than a functional

cushion (Fig. 3). The yellow silk cushion cover was patterned with birds, facing a cross. The birds may be doves, but are more probably peacocks. Both birds potentially carry Christian symbolism, especially in association with a cross: the dove a biblical image of the Holy Spirit, the peacock widely used as an emblem of immortality and resurrection. As such, the iconography of the pillow is very suitable for the resting place of a saint, but the silk of which it was constructed was not made for that purpose, its silk was as much as 200 years old when it was placed in the shrine. The pillow, then, was not just an item of luxury bedding for a king to lay his head, it was probably already a precious object in its own right.

Accumulation of textiles in the shrine of St Cuthbert

The bodies of saints did not necessarily remain at rest. Exhumation and re-interment were common, and it was often the case that those honouring the dead person took the opportunity to substitute or add expensive and prestigious silk cloths to a shrine during its opening. This practice surely reaches its apogee in the case of the tomb of the Anglo-Saxon saint,

Cuthbert (Battiscombe 1956).

A well-known ascetic and bishop of Lindisfarne, in the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria, Cuthbert died in 687, and, according to textual sources, was initially buried in ecclesiastical vestments. Exhumed eleven years later, his body was found to be miraculously incorrupt, a fact that became the basis for an enduring cult. He was re-vested and reinterred but was repeatedly moved, initially because of Viking attacks on Northumbria, until his remains arrived in Durham Cathedral in 995, where his tomb remains today. Cuthbert's coffin became a repository for precious textiles presented to the saint's shrine both while it was located in Chester-le-Street in the ninth to tenth centuries and after its removal to Durham Cathedral at the end of the tenth. It was frequently opened in the eleventh century by a zealous sacristan and relic collector called Alfred Westou. The tomb was formally opened in 1104 when the body was translated. The occasion was described by Reginald of Durham (Battiscombe 1956, 107-111). Some of the textiles were removed at that time and replaced with others considered superior. The tomb was again partially disturbed at the Reformation and was finally excavated in 1827. Investigation of the fragmentary textiles found then shows that silks dating to various times and originating from various places had evidently been added to the tomb on different occasions long after the death of the saint. The earliest, probably eighth-century, was a garment in the form of a silk tunic. Hero Granger-Taylor suggests that the garment was a hybrid, in some ways like an ecclesiastical dalmatic, normally at this period made in light-coloured silk, with the contrasting border typical of secular Germanic tunics. The body of the garment was made from two (different but similar) cream, monochrome, weft patterned, silk textiles, perhaps Italian, with repeating designs of large and small crosses. Clearly, in this case the material was chosen for its visible Christian pattern as well as the beauty of the silk. The makers were also evidently re-using other silks: an unpatterned green tabby silk, probably also from the Mediterranean area, was used as a seam binding and a purple and yellow compound twill silk, perhaps from Central Asia, was used for seam binding and facings. The garment was edged with a tablet-woven band decorated with soumak ("wrapped") weave. The band was probably English-made, but copying an Asian design (Granger-Taylor 1989a, 1991). There is no evidence of when the garment was given to the shrine. Cuthbert would not have worn a dalmatic during his lifetime. This

vestment was not used in the ordination of Anglo-Saxon deacons or bishops, as it was on the Continent, though there is some evidence that dalmatics were being worn in England in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Keefer 2007: 29-30). The dalmatic given to St Cuthbert may have been constructed from old and valued materials when these vestments became fashionable in England and added to the tomb at that time.

More precisely dated is the donation made by King Athelstan, who visited St Cuthbert's shrine in Chester-le-Street in 934. According to the eleventh-century *Historia de sancto Cuthberto* formerly attributed to Symeon of Durham (Arnold 1882: 196-214) the king donated, among other gifts, a girdle and a stole *cum manipulo* – "with a maniple". This is almost certainly the matching embroidered stole and maniple which survive today (Freyhan 1956; Hohler 1956; Plenderleith 1956; Coatsworth and Owen-Crocker 2018: 327-331). Reginald saw the stole in the tomb at the opening of 1104, and the embroideries were recovered in the nineteenth century. The two narrow vestments are of the same materials – red silk embroidered with coloured silks and gold spun round a silk core, and both depict figures in a similar style. Both display a complex theological iconography (Fig. 4). The design of the maniple centres round an image of the *Manus Dei* (Hand of God), which is flanked by four figures in ecclesiastical vestments, identified by captions: Popes Sixtus and Gregory the Great, with their respective deacons, Saints Laurence and Peter the Deacon, who were both martyrs. The four share liturgical significance. St Sixtus and St Laurence are both named in the Canon of the Mass, while St Gregory and his secretary St Peter the Deacon were responsible for an important revision of the Roman rite. In addition, St Gregory was the inspiration behind St Augustine's mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Named busts of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist, Christ's predecessor and the disciple who continued His message, occupy the fronts of the square, fringed terminals. On the reverses of those terminals is a Latin text naming the patron and intended original owner of the embroideries: *ÆLFFLÆD FIERI PRECEPIT ... PIO EPISCOPO FRIDESTANO*: Ælflæd [commissioned this] to be made ... for pious Bishop Frithestan. The inscription gives a close date for the gift, between 909 and 920, because both donor and recipient are documented elsewhere. Frithestan was bishop of Winchester, the most important city in the kingdom of Wessex, a post he assumed in 909. Ælflæd is a female name.



Fig. 4: Detail of the maniple from the tomb of St Cuthbert. By kind permission of the Chapter of Durham Cathedral.

Ælflæd was evidently the patron of the embroideries. To have commissioned such a luxurious gift she was no doubt of high rank and is almost certainly to be identified with Elffled, wife of King Edward the Elder of Wessex. Since Edward remarried in 920, Ælflæd had either died or retired to a convent by that time.

The stole is less well preserved, having suffered the loss of some pieces removed for souvenirs since

it was excavated. Its design centres round an image of the *Agnus Dei* (the Lamb of God, representing Christ). This is flanked by depictions of prophets, twelve surviving but probably once sixteen. The prophets immediately flanking this central motif both refer to “the lamb that is led to the slaughter” and the image of the Lamb of God was formulated by John the Baptist (“Behold the Lamb of God”), quoted by John the Evangelist, and hence indicating that the prophets foretell the coming of the Messiah (the central Lamb of God), and also providing a link between stole and maniple since the two St Johns are depicted on the maniple. The obverses of the stole’s terminals have busts of saints Thomas and James, probably representing the extent of the Church, since Thomas was believed to have gone to India, James revered in Spain. The reverses of these terminals carry the same text as the maniple.

Closely dated, therefore, by the inscription to the early tenth century, the vestments are again not contemporary with St Cuthbert or even local to Northumbria. Their patron and recipient were located in Wessex and stylistically they are typical of Wessex art, specifically the tenth-century Winchester Style of art with its lavish use of acanthus leaves (here between the figures), its realistic human figures, somewhat attenuated with long slim hands and feet, the fluttery movement of their clothing and the decorated, metallic gold haloes. They show that English gold embroidery, which was to become famous later in the Middle Ages as *opus anglicanum*, had already reached a superb standard in Anglo-Saxon times.

The so-called girdle presented by Athelstan (above) has been identified with another embroidery, known today as Maniple II, which now consists of 2 embroidered strips sewn together. Made in the same materials and techniques as the stole and maniple, it has no religious decoration. Elizabeth Coatsworth has argued that it was originally a secular piece. Unlike the stole and maniple set, it is double sided, so was probably expected to flip over when worn. It is not long enough to constitute an entire girdle but could be the decorated ends of one. However, Coatsworth (2001: 292-306) suggests it was originally part of a headdress or a pair of cloak ribbons as seen in a depiction of the earlier King Cnut the Great in an English manuscript dated to 1031 (British Library MS Stowe 944, fol. 6).

Significantly, St Cuthbert’s shrine was also the recipient of a variety of silk cloths which were not tailored into garments. The source of what is probably one of the surviving examples is documented: King

Edmund visited the shrine in 944, presenting two *pallia graeca*, Greek or Byzantine textiles, which he personally wrapped around the saint's body. The surviving fragments of what was once called the Nature Goddess silk, but is now known as the Earth and Ocean silk, is likely to be one of these, since it has a Greek inscription and must originally have been quite stunning in appearance (Granger-Taylor 1989b; Higgins 1989). Possibly ninth-century, it was originally purple, now dark pink, woven with yellow, blue, green, white and purple silks. It depicts a female figure in a jewelled costume, bearing fruit, rising from water. The production and distribution of silk was an imperial monopoly, strictly controlled, and silk was an important Byzantine diplomatic tool. A silk cloth of this quality can only have left Byzantium as a diplomatic gift. It must have been chosen for the shrine on account of its beauty and prestige, not for its iconography, which is pagan.

Other magnificent silk cloths attested by fragments from St Cuthbert's tomb include the so-called Rider Silk, which is probably tenth- or early eleventh-century. It could have been added to the coffin at the 1104 translation of St Cuthbert. It is probably Spanish, from Cordoba, and is extremely rare, having been printed with gold on some kind of glue. It depicts a rider with a falcon, and a dog below the horse (Muthesius 1989). Another, known from its design as the Peacock Silk is also probably Spanish, and is eleventh- or twelfth-century. It could have been added at the last documented opening of the tomb in 1104, but more likely on some later, undocumented occasion (Muthesius 1989).

When the contents of the coffin were seen in 1104, St Cuthbert had a mitre on his head, and a gold fillet, which might perhaps have been added under the charge of Alfred Westou, updating the regalia of the saint. Mitres were not worn when Cuthbert was alive. Reginald of Durham, by his own account, was awestruck by a dalmatic of a purple colour unknown in his own day, shot through with yellowish-green. It was finely embroidered with small animals and flowers and had a gold border the width of a man's palm and similar border at the ends of the sleeves and at the neck, covering most of the shoulders in front and behind. It gave off a crackling sound when it was moved, presumably because the gold made it so stiff. Outermost, the saint was covered with a very large, fringed, linen sheet bordered with embroidery depicting paired birds and beasts flanking trees. This, and presumably the crackling dalmatic and the mitre, were removed at the translation and have disappeared.

Surviving silks

There are more than 1.000 precious medieval silks still to be found in church treasuries of Europe (Muthesius 1997, 2004, 2008). Some of them are garments, and some of these, like the magnificent tenth- to eleventh-century chasuble surviving at Bressanone (Brixen), Italy, of Tyrian-purple dyed silk and woven (like the Eagle Silk from the tomb of St Cnut) with a pattern of large freestanding eagles, have never been buried (Coatsworth and Owen-Crocker 2018: 127-8). Many more silk textiles have been recovered from tombs and are designated "silk shrouds" (Fleming 2007). These were not stitched into body bags but were sheets of cloth wrapped around or draped over corpses. The Nature Goddess/ Earth and Ocean Silk, the Rider Silk and the Peacock Silk from the shrine of St Cuthbert are assumed to be shrouds of this kind, as is the Eagle Silk from Odense.

The surviving silks from medieval tombs are an eclectic collection gathered over centuries. The history of silk weaving is complex, and diverse in both cultural and geographical terms. Originally a Chinese monopoly, silk weaving was taken up by Sassanian Persia, Christian Byzantium and the Arab world, different cultures copying, adapting and redeploying motifs from one another. Thus hunting scenes, originating in the tradition of Sassanian culture (AD 224 to 651), became useful motifs in Byzantine art of the ninth and tenth centuries when religious images were banned under the periods of iconoclasm in the Christian Church. Griffins, mythological creatures, appear regularly: with the front parts of an eagle and the back of a lion, the concept of the griffin dates back to around 3000 BC and was again probably transmitted into medieval art through Persian silks. Such legendary creatures were mixed on medieval silk textiles with common (but potentially symbolic) birds such as doves and eagles. Exotic animals, native to Africa or Asia, such as lions, panthers and elephants, also appear on silks found in Christian tombs in western Europe. Fashions from different eras – large freestanding animal and bird motifs from the second half of the ninth century, geometric patterning from the tenth and eleventh (Muthesius 2008), and creatures in medallions are all found in the treasuries and museums of western Europe. Silks were prized by both the ecclesiastical and the secular elite for their exclusiveness, their economic value, their colour, iridescence and beauty. Apparently, the exact subject matter they depicted was less relevant, resulting in anachronisms such as one of England's

foremost Christian saints, Cuthbert, being honoured by a multi-coloured silk probably representing a pagan deity (the so-called Nature Goddess or Earth and Ocean silk); and the body of St Lazarus of Autun being shrouded in an eleventh-century Islamic Spanish silk of blue taffeta embroidered in red, white, yellow, blue-grey and green-bronze silk and gold with medallions containing a sphinx (a lion/human hybrid and an Ancient Greek motif) and a falconer: an Islamic silk surviving in Christian context. This is one of many silk fragments in the Musée de Cluny collection in Paris (Desrosiers 2004). The same collection also includes a Persian silk samite of the sixth to seventh century deposited with the remains of the little-known St Benignus, martyred in the third century. Its design includes confronted birds and stylised trees in blue, yellow, beige-pink, green and white.

The medieval passion for relic collecting has long passed, and the once esoteric subject of historical textiles has become an academic study and so recently, as in the case of the St Benignus fragment, more attention has been paid to the cloth that wrapped the relics than to the human being they honoured! However, new techniques in science are beginning to return scholarly attention to the bones and hopefully the two disciplines, textile studies and analysis of human remains, can be brought together in the future to shed more light on the history and practices of medieval cults of relics (see Kazan and Higham in this volume).

It is rare that the circumstances of deposition are known, as they are with the silk textiles donated to St Cuthbert's shrine by English kings. The elephant silk found in Charlemagne's tomb in Aachen tells some of its own story, but there are still uncertainties about who gave it to the shrine, and when. The textile bears an inscription denoting its origin in an imperial workshop in Constantinople under Michael the Eunuch. It has been dated to the first half of the eleventh century on both stylistic grounds and by association with the identifiable Michael (Muthesius 1992: 103). This Byzantine silk was one of the most skilfully dyed and woven of silk textiles, among the most beautiful of the cloths enjoyed by the early medieval aristocracy. It probably left Constantinople as a diplomatic gift. It must have been added to the shrine of Charlemagne centuries after his death, which had occurred in 814. It was almost certainly a royal gift to the shrine, but the date and patron are unknown. Anna Muthesius speculates that it might have been given on the occasion of Charlemagne's canonisation in 1165 by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I; or

when Charlemagne's shrine was completed in 1215, by Frederick II, then King of Germany. (He did not become Holy Roman Emperor until 1220.) It is just possible that the elephant silk was presented earlier by Emperor Otto III, who was responsible for the opening of Charlemagne's tomb in 1100, two years before his own death. His mother, Theophanu, was a Byzantine princess and associations between the German and Byzantine courts were particularly close in the tenth and early eleventh centuries. Whoever donated the elephant silk, and those who opened the tomb for him, may have seen an earlier silk, probably eighth-century, with the design of a Roman chariot-er, used earlier to cover the body of Charlemagne.

Better known are the circumstances of the importation and deposition of the so-called *Günther Tuch*, a Byzantine silk tapestry depicting a secular subject: the triumphal return of a Byzantine Emperor. The silk was acquired by Gunther, Bishop of Bamberg, on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1064-5, probably received when he was in Constantinople as a gift intended for the German Emperor Henry IV. It was probably a soft furnishing originally: a wall hanging or perhaps a carpet. However, the bishop died on his return journey and the precious silk was used to wrap his corpse and buried with him. It was discovered in his grave in Bamberg in 1830 (Muthesius 1992: 102-3; E-Ref *Günther Tuch*).

Silk removed from tombs in medieval times

The removal of textiles is sometimes mentioned when the opening of a tomb in medieval times is documented. Sometimes textiles were appreciated for their arcane beauty (as in the cases of a purple kerchief and the gold bordered dalmatic in St Cuthbert's tomb seen by Reginald of Durham, which must have been removed at some point because they were not among the relics discovered in the nineteenth century), but any cloth taken from shrines was considered sacred by contact with the holy relics. No doubt these *brandea* (textile relics) were subsequently displayed, but they were also re-used. Goldwork removed from the tomb of Queen Edith when St Edward and his wife were exhumed in 1245 was incorporated into a cope already on order (Owen-Crocker forthcoming). A liturgical banner incorporating textile from the tomb of St Cuthbert, as well as a corporal (a square of linen cloth) which had been used for celebrating the mass of the saint, was pro-

cessed on festival and feast days and was carried into battle against the Scots from 1097 up to the Battle of Flodden in 1513 (Armitage Robinson 1923; E-Ref Banner). Some of these textiles found at exhumations may already have been fragmentary; others were probably cut up, in order to be distributed: some of the textile relics listed in medieval church inventories may have come from tombs.

Silk used to wrap holy relics

In addition to garments and shrouds, there are numerous surviving pieces of silk which were used to wrap holy relics, usually the bones of saints which must have been removed from their original resting places. The practice is attested from as early as the fourth century when the relics of St Athanasius of Alexandria were wrapped in silk (Muthesius 2008: 89). The oldest known example from western Europe is textile around the remains of St Paulinus, a former bishop of Trier, Germany, whose remains were returned there in 395, four decades after his death in Phrygia (Brown 1981: 167). The practice proliferated after AD 800, when all newly-consecrated altars in Christian churches were required to contain relics (Muthesius 2008: 89). Cut from larger cloths, which might have been vestments, curtains, hangings or cushion covers, in a recycling process to which many medieval fabrics were subject, the prestige of these brightly-coloured pieces of precious textile honoured the saints whose bones they wrapped, and the textiles thus associated with holy relics became sacred relics themselves. While the textiles consigned to tombs remained unseen for centuries, those which were wrapping smaller, separated relics may be more visible, though they were often kept in containers and so were not seen on a day-to-day basis. They may sometimes have been exhibited, and were regularly carried in processions long into the later Middle Ages. Whether they were looked at or not, they had been chosen to provide appropriately grand visual enhancement of the holy relics they enclosed, and remain magnificent fragments today, when the identity of the associated saint is often entirely forgotten.

Conclusions

While the discovery of textile fragments in pre- and early Christian graves in cemeteries or barrows is not unusual, these are most often wool and linen. The textiles recovered from Christian shrines in churches are largely silk, a cloth which was evidently import-

ant both for its prestige and beauty. Silk was considered appropriate for wrapping the holiest of corpses. Some of the textiles found in shrines were garments, others were shrouds, or luxurious bedclothes. The concept of laying out a tomb as if the dead person was sleeping was a persistent practice, therefore the enshrinement of St Cnut and his brother Benedikt with bedding was neither unique nor innovative, though the Christian iconography of the textile used for Cnut's pillow is unusually appropriate; many of these imported silk textiles recovered from Christian tombs have pagan or non-religious designs.

Some silk garments and shrouds had already been resting in Christian tombs for centuries when St Cnut was enshrined, but it is clear that the tenth to twelfth centuries were a period when donation of rare and expensive textiles to elite shrines had come to be particularly desirable as a gesture of piety on the part of the donor which equally gave honour to the deceased saint.

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