

**Avinoam Shalem (ed.): *The Chasuble of Thomas Becket: A Biography*.
Munich: Hirmer Verlag GmbH, 2017. 304 pp.**

**Reviewed by INGRID LUNNAN NØDSETH
NTNU**

Over the past years, textiles have again become subjects of a range of studies in the field of medieval studies: from ecclesiastical history, economics and trade, to the role of textiles in medieval literature and cultural and gendered identities.⁸⁹ The recent exhibition of embroidered vestments at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, with its beautifully illustrated exhibition catalogue, has likewise spurred new interest in medieval textile art (see Browne *et al.* 2017). Despite this reinvigoration of a topic long neglected in medieval studies, the book reviewed here represents one of very few art historical monographs on an ecclesiastical textile from the Middle Ages. With *The Chasuble of Thomas Becket: A Biography*, professor Avinoam Shalem presents us with a collection of essays discussing different aspects of a textile now preserved in the cathedral of Fermo in Italy, known as the Chasuble of Thomas Becket. Venerated as a relic believed to have been worn by Becket, the textile was an important part of the Fermo cathedral's treasury. However, the textile was made in an Andalusian workshop and the authors argue that the textile was originally a tent for a Muslim ruler. At some point (probably around 1200) the textile reached Italy and was remade into a chasuble for the cathedral's bishop.

In the Middle Ages, the chasuble was a circular garment with a hole in the middle for the head, thus draping and covering the priest's body like a tent or a 'little house' as describes by its Latin term *casula*. This liturgical garment is known for Norwegian readers as the most prominent liturgical vestment used by priests in Lutheran churches today (*messebagel*), albeit in an altered form with the sides of the garments much shortened. The Fermo chasuble is preserved in its thirteenth-century bell shaped form, made of silk covered in embroidered medallions populated with fighting animals and hunting scenes. The details of these intricate embroideries are thoroughly presented in colour plates, together with reconstructed images of what the textile would have looked like when the background fabric had its original blue

⁸⁹ I think here of for example Maureen Miller: *Clothing the Clergy* (2014), Huang and Jahnke: *Textiles and the Medieval Economy* (2015), Goehring and Dimitrova: *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages* (2014) and Burns (ed.) *Medieval Fabrications* (2004).

colour (almost entirely lost today). Among the most arresting features are the Islamic inscriptions. Islamic textiles were quite common in medieval western churches, and from the Scandinavian countries we have many examples of various “heathen cloths” requested for ecclesiastical textiles (*heidinstykki*). This suggests that the patron was well aware of the non-Christian origin and context of these fabrics, and furthermore, that they were desirable for ecclesiastical purposes despite these heathen associations.

The book comprises twelve chapters written by Miriam Ali-Unzaga, Birgitt Borkopp-Restle, Ariane Dor, David Jacoby, Márta Járo (*addendum*), Germano Liberati, Ursula Nilgen, Regula Schorta and Avinoam Shalem (several chapters). The publication is richly illustrated and includes three *addenda* in addition to a comprehensive bibliography and index. As such, this publication provides an exhaustive study of the textile, its techniques of manufacture, reconstructing the textile’s original shape, investigating the chasuble’s inscriptions and motifs, exploring its changing functions and framing the textile within a historical context of the political, economic and cultural setting of the Mediterranean region. Furthermore, the topics include prior analysis and restorations, the history of the Fermo cathedral where it was kept, and brief analysis of two additional embroideries from the Iberian Peninsula expanding the context of the Fermo embroideries. The programme of the book is stated explicitly in the introduction, namely to provide a biography of the Fermo textile, including as many visual and literary sources on the lifetime of the object as possible: “Applying the word “Biography”, I conceptualized this book as one that provides as many visual and literary sources on the chasuble in its medieval, late medieval, and early modern times and discussing its modern history as well.” (Shalem 2017: 12)

In the introduction titled “On Textiles, Bones and the Politics of Reuse” Avinoam Shalem makes a case for a more contextualized and art historical approach to the study of medieval textiles. Acknowledging that technical art history and textiles studies – focusing on techniques of manufacture – are important to this topic, Shalem nevertheless points to other aspects of medieval textiles worth discussing within the field of art history: their migrant characteristics and the human experience of cloth. The widespread practice of reuse of medieval textiles is described by Shalem as “soft spolia”, and he is especially interested in the reuse (spoliation) of Islamic artefacts in church treasuries of the Latin West. Furthermore, Shalem discusses textiles and the human experience, how ecclesiastical textiles wrapped both living bodies and the bones of saints.

Although the twelve chapters are unnumbered there is a clear structure of the book as the essays thematically fall into three main topics; background and historiography, the physical textile, and contextualising the textile. For the first section, Gar-

mano Liberato looks at the cathedral basilica of Fermo. This is followed by discussions of research history; Shalem's examination of the visual and literary sources to the textile and by Birgitt Borkopp-Restle's essay on previous research by Sigrid Müller Christensen.

The next section focuses on the physical textile, opening with a description of the textile's material, colours and motifs, followed by an essay discussing the Arabic inscriptions, both written by Shalem. Included in this section is also an essay by Regula Schorta identifying the thirty-eight fragments that makes the chasuble as it appears today. Schorta concludes that it is beyond reasonable doubt that the textile as it is today was not originally made as a chasuble. Schorta's meticulous study presents a reconstruction of the embroidery in its original shape, corresponding with that of a tent roof or canopy.

The last and most extensive section concerns the context of the Fermo chasuble. Shalem's essay "The Textile Contextualized" incorporate the two histories of the Fermo textile, its "life" in Islamic Spain as well as in Christian Italy. This essay is definitely the longest but also one of the most noteworthy contributions to this publication. Taking the object itself as his point of departure, Shalem underlines the importance of working from object to history: "Instead of looking for the material evidence that could illustrate history, here the visual evidence is taken in order to first establish a chronology to which, later on, history could be suggested". (Shalem 2017: 81) Looking at the royal iconography and lavish style of the embroidery, Shalem suggests a probable dating in the post caliphal period, most likely around the mid-eleventh century. Based on Shorta's account of the original, polygonal shape of the textile, Shalem proposes an original function as a canopy or tent, possibly for the Hisham II, al-Muáyyad Bi'llah (r. 976–1009 and 1010–1013). In his discussion of the second life of this textile as in a Christian setting, Shalem argues that the ideas associated with this royal and ceremonial textile migrated with the physical object, influencing the craftsmen who remade the object for its new context: the invented relic of Saint Thomas Becket was in itself a tent; "a protecting edifice" reproducing its original function.

Four more essays continue the contextualisation of the textile, introducing two other Andalusian embroideries, and the production and diffusion of Andalusian silk from the eight to thirteenth centuries. Miriam Ali-de-Unzaga examines the different biographies of an embroidered silk in the Cathedral of Oña, Burgos, while Ariane Dor discusses a Hispano-Moresque silk transformed into a relic (the *Suaire de Saint Lazare*). Together with the Fermo chasuble, these three embroideries are the only preserved (major) examples from Islamic Spain. Thus, their inclusion in this publi-

cation is valuable for both the discussion of the Fermo piece and its wider context, as presented by David Jacoby in his essay on the production and trade of silk in medieval Andalusia. The book concludes with an essay by Ursula Nilgen discussing the cult of Thomas Becket in Fermo during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The twelve different essays sometimes present different and conflicting views. One example is the discussion of date; Schorta suggests a dating between the 1030s and 1120s, Shalem argues for a dating around year 1000 based on style and technique, while Jacoby leans towards the earliest dating proposed by Schorta, around 1030. There is nevertheless coherence in the referencing to other authors in the volume, and in the bibliography. Different chapters vary greatly in length and style; some are short presentations of previous research and technical evidence, while others present extensive discussions of different interpretations and context. This discrepancy in form and length does not, in my opinion, make the publication less coherent or difficult to follow. Rather, it can be seen as a result of the overall aim to present all of the evidence available in an object biography.

The merit of this work resides in its thorough and innovative approach to studying medieval textiles. It is the hope that this will be the first of many object biographies uncovering the histories of medieval vestments. With this book, Shalem has made an important contribution not only to scholarship on medieval ecclesiastical textiles, but also to the relationship between Christian and Islamic medieval art. There is still much to be understood about how Islamic silks came to wrap and protect Christian relics and adorning the vestments of priests and bishops. By broadening the scope from technical textile studies, mainly techniques of manufacture, the authors of this present volume open up new avenues of research. As such, this collection of essays should be of interest to a broader audience within the field of medieval studies.

Bibliography

- BROWNE, C., G. DAVIES & M.A. MICHAEL (eds.). 2017. *English Medieval Embroidery, Opus Anglicanum*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- BURNS, E. J. (ed.). 2004. *Medieval Fabrications, Dress, Textiles, Cloth Work and Other Cultural Imaginings*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- DIMITROVA, K. & M. GOEHRING (eds.). 2014. *Dressing the Part: Textiles as Propaganda in the Middle Ages*. Turnhout: Brepols.
- HUANG, A.L. & C. JAHNKE (eds.). 2015. *Textiles and the Medieval Economy. Production, Trade and Consumption of Textiles, 8th–16th Centuries*. Oxford: Oxbow Books.

MILLER, Maureen. 2014. *Clothing the Clergy: Virtue and Power in Medieval Europe, c. 800–1200*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.