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THE FERMO CHASUBLE OF ST. THOMAS BECKET AND HISPANO-MAURESQUE COSMOLOGICAL SILKS: SOME SPECULATIONS ON THE ADAPTIVE REUSE OF TEXTILES

Adaptation of the cosmos into the artistic vocabulary of the medieval world had programmatic ramifications in many aspects of the arts and architecture of Islam and Christianity. Its diverse manifestations have long been among the many interests of Oleg Grabar, and an interest that I have shared. The subject of this paper offers an intersected application involving East and West and one which Grabar could shoulder very well.

Among the possessions of the treasury of the Fermo Cathedral is a chasuble said to have belonged to St. Thomas Becket, murdered in Canterbury on 29 December 1170 and canonized by Pope Alexander II on 25 February 1173. It is said to have been given to Fermo by Bishop Presbitero (1184–1204).[1]

The semicircular chasuble is 5 feet, 4 inches high (1.60m.), with a circumference of 17 feet, 11 inches (5.41m.). It is made of light-blue silk and covered with gold embroidery. The embroidery consists of large roundels interlinked with smaller roundels and eight-pointed stars in between. The thirty-four large roundels on the outside of the garment contain images of peacocks, winged lion griffins (two), eagle griffins (four), frontalized eagles with spread wings, confronted birds, confronted winged lions, some rapacious birds atop gazelles, a winged sphinx, and fragments of other animals. In addition, there are elephants with howdahs, one containing women, turbaned hunters holding falcons seated on horses with rabbits below (four groups), and two enthroned men flanked by musicians and other attendants. Many of the images are multiples woven alongside each other. An oblong panel with a lavish scroll contains a Kufic inscription, "In the name of Allah the Merciful, the Compassionate, the kingdom is Allah's ... greatest blessing, perfect health and happiness to its owner ... in the year 510 in Mariyya" (or 1116 A.D. in Almeria), is sewn on top. The fact that there are numerous partial images suggests we are missing part of the program (fig. 1).

The chasuble is made up of many pieces stitched together, sometimes with red silk thread. Some of the seams were made before the textile was embroidered, but some join pieces of cloth without regard for the design. The recent restoration has minimized some of the closures and repairs made to the garment from the twelfth century to the present day, some of them during the seventeenth century.[2] It is likely the textile was created for another purpose and was retrofitted to make the garment. Clues to the original format and function of the cloth are offered by the imagery.

Many questions concerning this textile are as yet unanswered and are perhaps unanswerable. What its original use was, how and when the cloth found its way to Italy or England, and under what circumstances it was transformed into a chasuble will be the thrust of this article. The confluence of cult and commerce raises some interesting questions about the transmission and use of Islamic textiles in the West.

Adaptive reuse of treasured cloth was not uncommon during the Middle Ages and several notable examples have survived in church treasuries and burial sites. A work related to our chasuble involves the various fragments of the Suaire of St. Lazare, now preserved in the treasury of Autun Cathedral, the Musée de Cluny in Paris, and the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyons. It was used to envelop the relics of Saint Lazarus in the twelfth century — some hundred years after it had been woven. This particular cloth was recovered again in the eighteenth century following an inspection of the relics and later presented by a prince of Navarre to the cathedral of St. Lazare in Autun.[3] The imagery in the older cloth, like the Fermo textile, alludes to fanciful as well as actual animals and animal groups, with a somewhat related spectrum of images, including griffins and sphinxes, along with mounted falconers and rapacious birds with their prey.

In each case, the cloth was made for another purpose before being reused as garments and wrappings. These particular cloths had to have suggested a relationship toward heaven long manifest in the fabrication of gar-

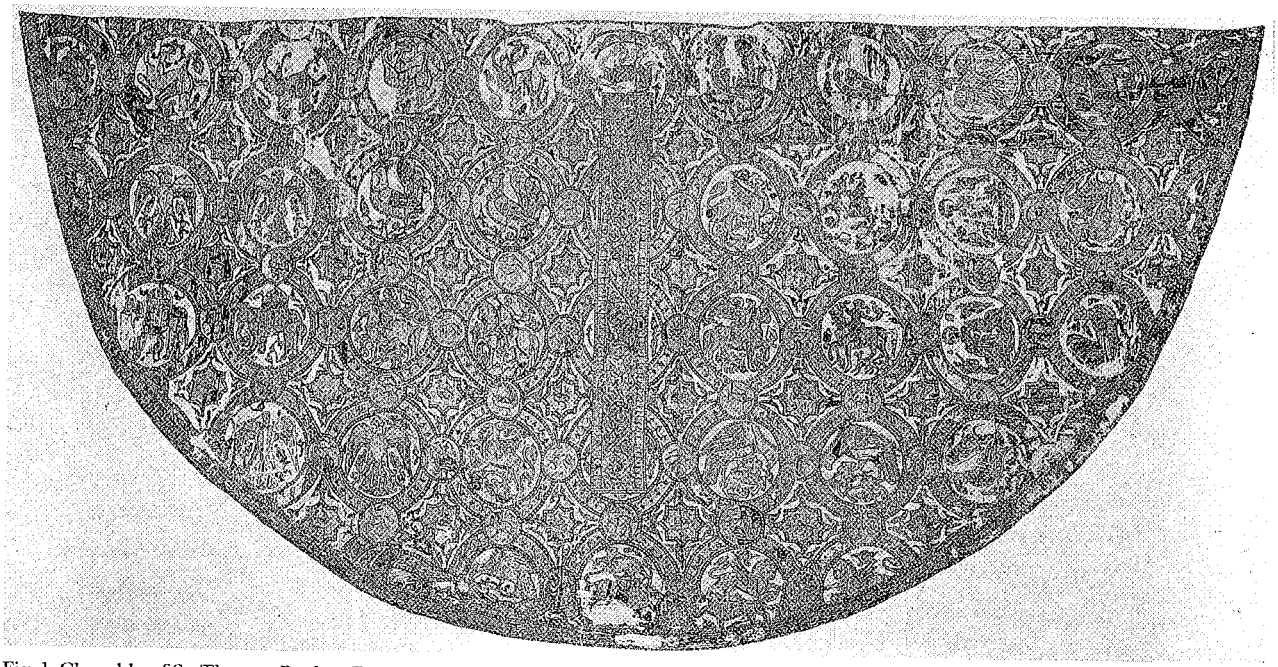

Fig. 1. Chasuble of St. Thomas Becket. Fermo Cathedral, Italy. (Photo: Istituto Central per il Catalogo e la Documentazione [ICCD], Rome, gen. ser. E, no. 46946)

ments for secular and religious leaders. Most noteworthy in Europe were the various mantles made for the Ottonians, including the star mantle of Henry IV and the pluvial, dalmatic, and caligae in the tomb of Pope Clement II in Bamberg Cathedral.[4]

The Almeria textile is said to have been made into a garment by Thomas Becket himself. It also could have been fabricated after his death in the fast unfolding of his cult and, if so, would suggest a great deal about the general perception of Becket the man, mortal and immortal.

There are numerous instances where textiles have been made into garments, but few that are such a patchwork of fragments as the Fermo chasuble, almost as though it were a "scissors job" salvaging an already aged cloth. The garment itself shows that we do not have the entire fabric, since not only are there missing portions of roundels, but there is no evidence of the original border except, perhaps, the inscription giving the date of fabrication.

When and where the garment was made is problematic. Since Becket was born either in 1118 or 1120, two or four years after the textile was woven, its conversion into a garment for him or pertaining to him was well after the cloth had had a lifetime of use in another context.

The length of the garment bespeaks a man who was at least six feet tall. Becket was said to be this tall, as was his friend and colleague Herbert of Bosham. The garment may or may not have been made during Becket's lifetime. William Fitzstephen records that St. Thomas was buried

> in the hairshirt in which they found him and the breeches of linen lined with haircloth and the same shoes on his feet and the monk's habit which he had on; and over this the vesture that he had been ordained in — the alb, called in Greek *poderes* — the plain amice, a chrisom cloth, a mitre, stole and maniple — all of which he had ordered to be kept for him, perhaps against the day of his burial. Over these he had as an archbishop, tunicle, dalmatic, chasuble, pall and pins, chalice, gloves, ring, buskins, pastoral staff, such is the usual state and he deserved it.[5]

While Becket had had a reputation for being a lavish dresser during his time as chancellor under Henry II, as archbishop of Canterbury, Becket foresook such practices, despite external appearances; according to Roger of Hoveden,

> His bed was covered with soft coverlets and cloths of silk, embroidered on the surface with gold wrought therein; and while other persons were asleep, he alone used to lie on the bare floor before his bed, repeating psalms and hymns ... until overcome with fatigue, he would gradually recline his head upon a stone put beneath it in place of a pillow. ...

> His inner garment was of course sackcloth made of goats' hair, with which his whole body was covered from the arms down to the knees. But his outer garments were remarkable for their splendor and extreme costliness, to the end that, thus deceiving human eyes, he might please the sight of God.[6]

Becket would not have used a chasuble before becoming archbishop. Was the garment made in England at the time? Might Becket have acquired the cloth at another time, and if so, when? Becket entered Archbishop Theobald's household as a clerk in 1143, and it was he who advised the archbishop to go to Rome in 1144. Some modern historians have argued that the clerk went with him on the six-month journey.[7]

That such a cloth might have found its way to Rome has to be given some consideration. There had been an active textile trade around the Mediterranean. Commerce between Spain, Italian ports, and Sicily was brisk. These maritime towns maintained political and commercial balance with the three powers west, east and north.[8] Of the trade routes affecting the commerce of textiles in the Mediterranean, we know Almeria was then the textile center of Andalusia. When Almeria was sacked by the Genoese in 1143, they brought back a number of textiles to Italy, some of which, Otto von Freising (d. 1158) recounts, were given to Frederick Barbarossa.[9] Genoa was not the only port through which such textiles came, since Sicily maintained an active trade with Andalusia. Despite the complicated political relations between the Norman kings, the Pisans, the Genoese and the Papacy, commerce between these various centers was maintained.[10] The cloths would have made suitable gifts to notable visitors like Archbishop Theobald and his protege Thomas Becket, even if the age of the cloth suggests it was not in pristine condition. This is confirmed by the garment itself, which shows worn areas and was patched. The textile was probably already in some state of disrepair (fig. 2).

If one deconstructs the garment to reconstruct the original cloth, the imagery is significant. The visual vocabulary is one which was commonly shared in numerous contexts and played some role in the programmatic unfolding of works such as the ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo. Textiles like the Almeria cloth were perhaps numerous and, because they were easily transported, were useful models and sources. However, one did not necessarily need cloths of this nature as direct references, since such works participated in a general cultural understanding about the cosmos which translated it into ordinary terms related to known figurative

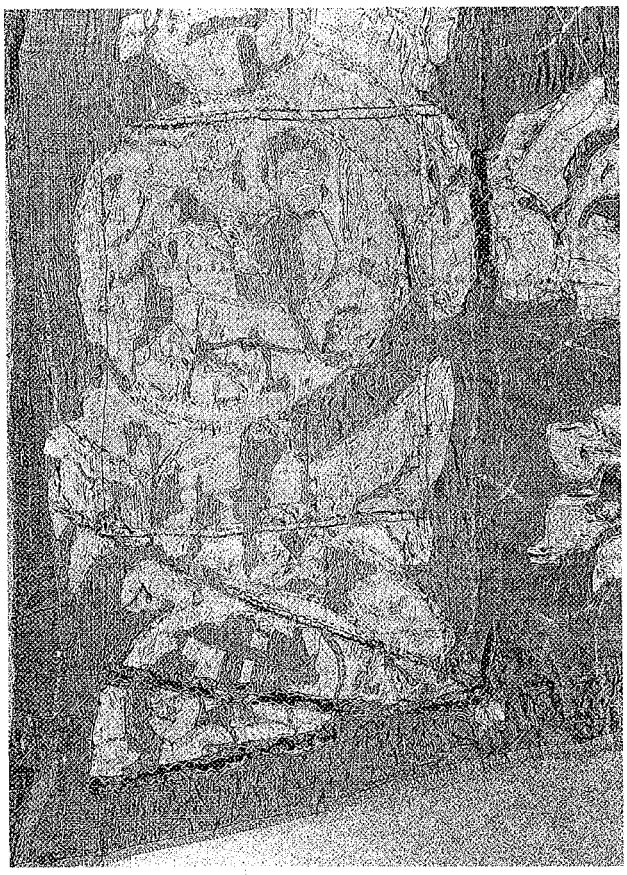

Fig. 2. Chasuble of St. Thomas Becket. Detail. (Photo: Istituto Central per il Catalogo e la Documentazione [ICCD], gen. ser. E, no. 44612)

groups. These images transcended any special format and medium. They popularized ideas about the cosmos shared particularly by seafaring cultures and communities, but popular throughout the West and were given greater programmatic weight and meaning in context.

One can speculate whether the Almeria textile was originally intended to function as a tent cloth or canopy. The cloth would have been at least six feet by nine feet. The pictorial vocabulary would have fit neatly into a long tradition of decoration which used confronted lions as heavenly supports, birds and sirens as the sounds of heaven, and a vast array of rapacious birds, animals, and seated figures as convenient translations of zodiacal signs, planets, stars, and other celestial bodies. I have mapped this out extensively in my interpretation of the ceiling decoration of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo.[11] How much this suited Thomas Becket's self-perception in those heady days in Rome and after is subject to one's

interpretation of Becket the man, the religious figure, and the politician.

The history of the chasuble as a relic began with the day of St. Thomas Becket's burial on December 30, 1170. His remains were transferred to a wooden coffin placed behind the altar of St. Mary shortly thereafter and subsequently placed in the crypt for fifty years. The relics were translated to a shrine on July 7, 1220, which was destroyed in September, 1538, by Henry VIII and Cromwell.[12]

There was a traffic in relics of Thomas Becket's clothing after his death, including four mitres, various garments, and such curiosities as his arm and his vestment, which are to be found in S. Maria Maggiore.[13] The problem of the distribution of relics after Becket's death is a complicated one. If the garment is not the chasuble Becket was buried in, it might have been made some time after his death and up to the time of the Jubilee in 1220, when his following was at its peak and demand for some piece of his possessions was at its height. This demand for relics was discussed at some length during the international colloquium in Sédières in 1973 and many questions were raised. The role of Hubert Walter, who was transferred to Canterbury from Salisbury in 1193, and that of Richard the Lion-Hearted in the fabrication and diffusion of reliquaries have to be enhanced with the role of monks of Christchurch who were meant to be the guardians of the tomb, but were probably involved in some traffic around the time of the Jubilee, the translation of the relics between 4–5 July 1220.

When the cult of St. Thomas Becket reached Fermo is not certain. D. S. Rice had suggested that Becket knew Bishop Presbitero as a student in Bologna. Most biographies of St. Thomas do not indicate that he was there. As far as we know, Thomas Becket was a boarder at the Augustinian priory at Merton in Surrey between the ages of ten and twenty-one (1130–41), and from there he went to study in Paris (according to William Fitzstephen and the Icelandic Saga), though this is a period when we are deprived of details because the schools of Paris were not yet a university and Becket was not a significant presence there. From 1143, as already noted, St. Thomas was in the household of Archbishop Theobald and was often used on diplomatic missions to the papal curia. It was then that he convinced Archbishop Theobald to go to Rome in 1144 and he may have gone with him. (John of Salisbury was also in Rome around this time.) Becket hardly left the court between 1152 and 1164, the years he was chancellor to Henry II.[14]

The cult sprang up almost immediately after Becket's death, with miracles recorded from the outset. Through records of the period (*Miracula sancti Thomae Cantuariensis*) we are able to document aspects of the cult's diffusion before the end of the twelfth century.[15] Pilgrims came from all directions, including Italy, where individuals from Asti, Pavia, Genoa, Lucca, and Brindisi are noted.[16] That those from the southeast may have passed through Fermo seems entirely probable. Among the early reliquaries is a pendant reliquary now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.[17] It included blood and fragments of garments. The object had been given by Reginald Fitzjocelin, the bishop of Bath to Margaret, dowager queen of Sicily after 1174 and before 1183, though how and under what circumstances he obtained such fragments can only be speculated.

That the chasuble may have been made an object of veneration in Fermo shortly thereafter has to be considered. Bishop Presbitero (1184–1204) had rebuilt the church after the troops of Emperor Frederick Barbarossa had destroyed it in 1176. Presbitero sided with the papacy in the dispute between the pope and the emperor, and he attempted to reintegrate the possessions and lands of the March of Ancona into the Holy See.[18]

That the bishop chose to enhance his new building with a major artifact reflecting the Becket cult would have added another dimension to his complex. However, nothing is said about the cult of Becket or the translation of the garment to this site in the documents. That the garment could well have found its way to Fermo at a later date, even as late as the seventeenth century, is inferred by some of the stitchery.

In the larger scheme, however, the garment would have conflated function and image. While it may have been derived from a luxury cloth initially used as a tent cover or canopy, the subsequent adaptation to a garment consciously transposed the commonly understood implications of its imagery into a mantle/chasuble which conveyed its user's symbolic role as an earthly representative of God. It may well have been commissioned by Becket, but if it was created under the pressure of continuing demand for relics after Becket's death, then the transformation of the ancient cloth married function and symbol which well served the posthumous image of the venerated saint. And in a transposed contemporary application, the conflation of function and image on a comparable scholarly mantle could well be shouldered by the recipient of this festschrift.

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NOTES

1. D. S. Rice, "The Fermo Chasuble of St. Thomas a Becket Revealed as the Earliest Fully Dated and Localised Major Islamic Embroidery Known," *Illustrated London News,* October 3, 1959, pp.356–58, with a technical description by Sigrid Muller-Christensen.
2. A. Santangelo, "Il restauro della Casula di Fermo," *Bolletino d'Arte del Ministero della Pubblica Istituzione,* 3 (July–September, 1960): 273–77.
3. Eva Baer, "The Suaire de St. Lazare: An Early Datable Hispano-Islamic Embroidery," *Oriental Art* 13 (1967): 36–49.
4. Sigrid Muller-Christensen, *Das Grab des Papstes Clemens II im Dom zu Bamberg* (Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1960), pp.35–46.
5. Arthur James Mason, *What Became of the Bones of St. Thomas?,* a contribution to his Fifteenth Jubilee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), pp.21–22; William Fitzstephen, *Materials for the History of Archbishop Thomas Becket,* ed. J. C. Robertson, Rolls series, vol. 3 (1875), p.132.
6. Roger of Hovenden, *The Annals,* trans. T. Riley (London, 1853), vol. 1, p.332.
7. Gervase of Canterbury, *Actus Pontificum* in *Historical Works,* ed. W. Stubbs, Rolls series, 1879–80; A. Saltman, *Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London, 1956), p.20; F. A. Batisse in the *Canterbury Chronicle,* no. 65 (1970): 40, 46, and article cited by Frank Barlow, *Thomas Becket* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986), p.285, n.11, and unavailable to me.
8. R. S. Lopez and Irving W. Raymond, *Medieval Trade in the Mediterranean World* (New York-London, 1955), p.33.
9. Otto, Bishop of Freising, *Gesta Friderici I Imperatoris,* ed. G. Waitz (M.G.H. Script, rer. Germ. in usum schol.) (Leipzig, 1912), p.119; English trans. in C. C. Mierow and R. Emery, *The Deeds of Frederick Barbarossa* (New York, 1953), p.130. On the Italian textile trade, see R. S. Lopez, *Studi sull'economia Genovese nel medio evo* (Documenti e studi per la storia del commercio e del diritto commerciale italiano, vol. 8) (Turin, 1936). Note that in the reference to the "textiles" given by the Genoese to Frederick, Otto says more precisely "*sericum pannorum*" which means "silk cloths."
10. John Julius Norwich, *The Kingdom in the Sun, 1130–1194* (London, 1970), pp.35ff.
11. Annabelle Simon-Cahn, "Some Cosmological Imagery on the Ceiling of the Palatine Chapel in Palermo," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1978.
12. For a full recounting of this saga, see Mason, *Bones of St. Thomas,* pp.70–73, 86–93, 123–70, 173–93.
13. John Capgrave, *Ye Solace of Pilgrimes* (ca. 1450), ed. C. A. Mills (New York-Oxford, 1911), p.85. I wish to thank Walter Cahn for this reference.
14. Barlow, *Thomas Becket,* pp.34, 41ff.
15. See the studies of A. H. Bredero, R. Foreville, H. Martin, J. Becquet, and others, in R. Foreville, ed., *Thomas Becket, Actes du Colloque International de Sédières,* 19–24 August 1973 (Paris, 1975).
16. Idem, "La Diffusion du culte de Thomas Becket dans la France de l'Ouest avant la fin du XIIè siècle," *Thomas Becket dans la tradition historique et hagiographique* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1981), pp.347–69.
17. Foreville, *Thomas Becket: Colloque,* fig. 5a and b.
18. P. A. Kehr, *Italia pontificia* (Berlin, 1906–35), vol. 4, p.138, no.19; *Dictionnaire d'historie et de géographie ecclésiastique,* vol. 16 (1967), col. 1083–91.