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TEXTILES

The emergence of a Christian identity in cloth

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Introduction: what is a Christian textile?

A sixth-century tunic fragment, today housed in The Brooklyn Museum, represents a paradox common in early Christian textiles, as it prominently features both Christian and Dionysiac imagery together (Figure 14.1). The panel, which originally would have covered the front of the torso from the neck to the knees, has ornamentation pretending to be two pendants, one a jeweled cross on a beaded string, the other a dancing Maenad (Figure 14.2). The panel front has clavi, stripes, that are joined by a horizontal band that would have fallen across the clavicle, all populated with a series of griffins and putti in flight. Whether the wearer of this tunic was a Christian or a follower of Dionysos, the god of wine, is not clear. Maenads were often shown dancing before him with pinecones, which this Maenad may hold here. But the Dionysiac imagery, while certainly culturally important in Egypt where this textile was likely found, was not necessarily religious. Christians saw Dionysos as a precursor of Christ, with many aspects of his story parallel to Christ’s. Griffins too were mythical, immortal beings in the Near Eastern pantheon who were coopted by Christians because they embodied Christ’s dual nature by being half eagle, half lion. What reads as an inconsistency to our modern mindset about religion is common during Late Antiquity in the lands of the Roman Empire between the third and seventh century, from Roman times to the early Medieval, Byzantine and Umayyad periods, a period characterized by many interwoven cultural and religious threads.

Vast numbers of late antique textiles, mostly in fragmentary condition, survive in museum collections around the world today. Many, like the Brooklyn Museum tunic front, make it difficult to discern what might be deemed “Christian” in design or use. Because the textiles designated “Christian” were made using the same techniques and materials as any other Roman or secular textile it is principally important to explain what constitutes an “early Christian” textile.

Christian iconography on textiles made approximately between 200–600 CE determines an easily discernible group of early Christian textiles. However, many textiles used in churches or worn by monastics or clergy may have had no Christian symbolism whatsoever. Altar and other liturgical cloths, for example, were often donated by the faithful from their own household stores. Monastic clothing could be culled from the clothing gathered from new monastics as they entered the life and donned the habit. Thus, this chapter will discuss textiles in terms of their use in churches, as relics, on clothing, in homes and in burials rather than any clear
Figure 14.1  Coptic Tunic Front with Marine Motifs, 6th century CE. Wool, 13 × 44 1/2 in. (33 × 113 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 38.753. Creative Commons-BY.

Figure 14.2  Coptic Tunic Front with Marine Motifs I (detail of pendants), 6th century CE. Wool, 13 × 44 1/2 in. (33 × 113 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 38.753. Creative Commons-BY.
Christian symbolism to determine their status as Christian, while being fully cognizant that many textiles were not exclusively Christian.

Materials and techniques: continuity and innovation

Early Christian textiles, like all textiles of Late Antiquity, were made primarily from wool and linen, but silk and cotton were imported as well during this early period. Silk was particularly prized for the qualities of the fabric itself, which could be woven very tightly due to the strength of the fibers, took dye exceptionally well, and had natural sheen. Silk was also rare and had to be imported from China until the sixth century when the Byzantines learned to cultivate the “silk worm,” really a larval moth (bombyx mori) from whose cocoon silk threads come. Silk was not made in the west until the twelfth century when the Normans of Sicily learned the secrets of sericulture. To get from the raw material to cloth, wool from sheep, linen fibers from the flax plant, silk, or cotton, first had to be spun into thread, which then was dyed with a myriad of vegetal, and sometimes animal, materials. Cloth was then woven (in most cases) on either vertical weighted looms, pit looms or foot-powered horizontal looms. Weft threads were drawn through the supporting warp threads held taut by the loom. In a simple weave, weft threads were woven under alternating warp threads from one edge of the warp to the other. More complex weaves, such as tapestry, were woven with various colored wefts alternating with the ground warp, starting and stopping as the pattern demanded across the warp. Textiles could also be knitted or felted, rather than woven. In the final stages of production, textile goods such as clothing, household furnishings, or liturgical cloths, to name a few, might additionally be sewn or embroidered.

Weaving, the method by which the majority of early Christian textiles were made, was done by both professional workshops and in the home. Some monasteries, such as the Monastery of Epiphanius in Thebes, supported themselves in part through the production of cloth. Thread could be spun from raw materials or purchased for use on a loom. The virtuous woman weaver shown in a domestic setting, exemplified by the Virgin Mary herself in a Christian context, was a common literary image. The Virgin is depicted in fourth–sixth-century scenes of the Annunciation holding a distaff, spinning thread, such as on the fifth-century dyed linen fragment from the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Archaeology of textiles: the complexities of interpretation

The majority of textiles survive merely in fragments when they survive at all. More often than most media, textiles have succumbed to the elements, been eaten by bugs, and been destroyed by fire. Thus, the archaeological record is spotty and skews toward dry climates, such as Egypt. Most surviving textiles made between 200 and 600, whether Christian or not, were excavated in Egypt, commonly found in burials. Burials are notably difficult to interpret from the perspective of a textile historian for several reasons. The deceased was sometimes buried in clothing but the question of whether these clothes represent typical garments remains open; one could be wearing their most expensive clothes or specially made burial clothing. Bodies were then wrapped in most cases, with the wealthy being wrapped in finer textiles than less affluent persons. It was common to reuse a textile for a wrapping, however, no matter one’s status, so the original purpose for the textile is often unclear. Burials sometimes had extra textiles inserted for padding around a body, or were used to wrap objects inserted into the grave, which similarly are likely re-used textiles originally made to serve another purpose. People of all religions commonly used the same cemeteries and catacombs, making a secure identification of a grave and
its accompanying textiles as belonging to a Christian difficult.\textsuperscript{12} Many excavated corpses, however, rested their heads on small pillows, which often were decorated with clues, such as cross imagery, leading to an identification of the deceased as Christian.

The finds in these Egyptian sites can number in the tens of thousands. For example, the trash heap for a Roman quarry town used between the first–third centuries yielded an estimated 50,000 textiles!\textsuperscript{13} This should not mislead us into thinking that these were all made in Egypt, though Egypt was renowned for its linen and also known for its exceptional curtains.\textsuperscript{14} A large number were also imported into Egypt, either as raw materials or as finished clothing and other textile goods.\textsuperscript{15} Twentieth- and twenty-first-century excavations have turned up late antique textiles in Israel, the Caucasus, Syria, Jordan, Iran, and Ireland to name only some.\textsuperscript{16} The origins of many textiles found in museum collections today are unknown. Some were kept safe in church and monastic treasuries in the West, sometimes finding their way on to the art market when the monastery or church fell out of use, particularly during the French revolution. Many were excavated, without proper care for the context, and scooped up by art dealers for their pretty designs, which has unfortunately left us with only the textile’s material, technique, and iconography, that is, the images on the textiles, as clues as to their original use.

Textiles in the church: the range of uses

Churches employed a variety of textiles from curtains and cushions for clergy, to altar and other liturgical cloths. At the beginning of the early Christian period these textiles were not made with specifically Christian iconography, but were like any other cloth.

\textbf{Curtains in the church}

Like any building in Late Antiquity, churches had curtains for dividing spaces, such as aisle from nave, and for use in doorways to keep out the elements and pests. Curtains could also be used to cordon off the sanctuary from the laity, or separate catechumens in the aisles from the baptized in the nave, thus concretizing the hierarchical nature of access to the divine in Christianity.\textsuperscript{17} A large, fifth-century linen and wool fragment featuring two peacocks facing a central, wreathed cross at the top, today housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, represents an early example of Christianizing decorative motifs (Figure 14.3).\textsuperscript{18} Below the cross, surrounded by an undulating vine, are nine medallions containing fish, a typical early Christian symbol for Christ and for individual Christians,\textsuperscript{19} and stylized flowers, with small floral patterns between each medallion. With the exception of the cross, the motifs on this curtain could have been found on any type of art in the late antique world, but in a Christian context took on Christian associations. For example, peacocks long symbolized immortality in the ancient world but came to be associated with Christ. The design is made in a weft loop, which creates a thick pile on top of the plain weave support, and may have added some warmth in addition to visual interest. We should imagine curtains such as these hanging at some threshold in a church, marking entrance into a sacred space, from outside to inside, narthex or aisle to nave, or perhaps into the sanctuary.

Epiphanius of Salamis, in a fourth-century passage famous for its stance against the use of holy images, describes a door curtain with a more pointedly Christian design. The passage also gives important clues about door curtains:

\begin{quote}
I came to a villa called Anablatha and . . . I went in [to the church there] to pray, and found there a curtain hanging on the doors of the said church, dyed and embroidered. It bore an image either of Christ or of one of the saints; I do not rightly remember
\end{quote}
whose the image was. Seeing this, and being loth that an image of a man should be hung up in Christ’s church contrary to the teaching of the Scriptures, I tore it asunder and advised the custodians of the place to use it as a winding sheet for some poor person. They, however, murmured, and said that if I made up my mind to tear it, it was only fair that I should give them another curtain in its place. Since then there has been some little delay, due to the fact that I have been seeking a curtain of the best quality to give to them instead of the former one, and thought it right to send to Cyprus for one.

First, the curtain is described as hanging on the doors of the church, suggesting that both doors, presumably made of wood, and a curtain were necessary. Locked doors were likely crucial for security, but the curtains could be used to keep out insects and birds, as well as to help regulate the temperature when the door was open. The passage also reveals that the curtain was dyed and embroidered with “an image of Christ or one of the saints.” Epiphanius claims not to remember who was pictured, probably to illustrate his disdain for images rather than the image actually being unrecognizable. Yet, he readily identifies the technique of embroidery in the textile, an observation that may or may not be accurate. After tearing it down in an iconoclastic protest, he notes that the old curtain should be reused as a shroud, which is in keeping with the textiles commonly found in burials, as mentioned previously. Finally, he notes that he will “send to Cyprus” for a new curtain, as opposed to acquiring one in the environs of Jerusalem where the church being discussed was located. Cyprus must have been known for its fine textiles as he was trying to smooth over this scuffle with the bishop to whom he was writing.

Figure 14.3 Fragment, 5th century ce. Wool, linen; plain weave, weft loop weave, 64-15/16 × 50-9/16 in. (165 × 128.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of George F. Baker, 1890, 90.5.808, metmuseum.org.
For altar and sanctuary

A linen fragment in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, nearly two feet long, with designs of geometric and floral motifs in dark and light reds and greens with touches of blue, woven into stripes and single buds in a floating diamond-shaped pattern on a plainly woven background, represents a typical late antique furnishing textile (Figure 14.4). It is not possible to tell if this undyed fabric covered an altar, a table, was used as a curtain, or had some other purpose. I propose, however, that the first furnishing textiles used in churches were ones like this fragment, largely functional and decorative, with the symbolic meanings of the motifs, and the expansion into Christian iconography, developing later in the early Christian period.

Egeria, a pilgrim who wrote a diary of her travels to the Holy Land and the eastern Mediterranean dated to the early fifth century,21 describes the liturgy and decoration of the churches of Jerusalem she visits: the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Anastasis, and the Church of the Holy Cross on Golgotha. The textiles, of which no examples resembling Egeria’s description survive, are resplendent: “You see nothing there but gold and gems and silk. If you look at the hangings, they are made of silk with gold stripes; if you look at the curtains, they are also made of silk with gold stripes.”22 It should not surprise us that these important churches, visited by masses of pilgrims annually, had luxurious silk textiles with gold, but notably they seem to be merely colorful and striped. No specific Christian symbols or figurative motifs are mentioned.

While we have no textile that we can definitively say was a liturgical textile or church furnishing belonging to a particular church, inventory and gift lists can give us a relatively clear idea of which textiles were common. Around twenty inventories of churches, in Greek and Coptic, written on papyrus between 400 and 800, are preserved.23 The Liber Pontificalis (Book of Pontiffs) lists papal gifts of textiles and other items to churches of the west, mostly in Rome.

Figure 14.4 Fragment, late 5th century CE. Linen, wool, 58.1 × 44.6 cm. © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC.
Some descriptions of actual churches found in ekphrases, like that of Paul the Silentiary, pilgrim accounts, or imagined ideal churches such as one described in the Testamentum Domini (The Testimony of the Lord) (below) provide still other descriptions of liturgical cloths and soft furnishings of churches.

In some areas, such as Egypt, covering the altar was of primary importance, in part to provide a clean surface on which to prepare the eucharist. The fifth-century Testamentum Domini in its description of the ideal church calls for “the altar [to] have a veil of pure linen, because it is without spot.” While Constantine’s gifts to the Lateran basilica in Rome do not list any textiles for an altar or otherwise, a small church in one Egyptian village had twenty-three linen cloths for its altar in addition to cloths of wool, several hangings, two curtains and cushions. Any linen textile large enough to cover a table, such as the Dumbarton Oaks example, could have protected an altar (Figure 14.4). Altars are described as being covered by more than one cloth at once and finally topped by a white linen one, suggestive of a shroud covering the altar/tomb of Christ.

In Greek, the altar cloths are typically called mappa, in Latin, linteum. But, it is notably difficult to find fixed terminology for altar cloths or indeed any liturgical or furnishing textile as there were many terms used for the same item. Available texts are in Greek, Latin, Coptic and Syriac, and terminology may have implied subtle differences that are no longer evident. The Latin word linteum is related to the term for flax, linum, from which linen is made, which begs the question whether altar cloths made from wool or silk would be called something else. The translator of the Testamentum Domini, from Syriac to Latin, chose to use the term velum, which can mean ‘veil’ or ‘cover’ even more generally.

The Testamentum Domini also calls for the area where the priests stood as well as the baptistery to be “within a veil” (again velum). Here we can imagine a curtain before the altar or sanctuary or baptismal font. The church of St Pshoi at the Red Monastery near Sohag, Egypt, may give us a picture of what the author intended (Figure 14.5). Tucked into a niche on the second registry, just below the image of Christ in the conch, are vibrant fifth-century paintings of curtains, hanging in imitation of real textiles, giving a sense of what was used in a church. The white curtain, with floriated wreaths in green and red in the center, top and bottom registers with red and green stripes, and a band containing a vine-like motif across the top, naturalistically folds as it dangles from rings on a rod, creating the illusion of three-dimensional space. The trompe l’oeil (literally ‘trick of the eye,’ an optical illusion) curtain gives an approximation of a church curtain where none survives and ‘veils’ the space, as the Testamentum Domini requires. While the central motif could be interpreted as cross imagery, importantly, it is not pointedly Christian.

The first mentions of altar cloths designed specifically as such are of the fifth century, but we know of textiles used for this purpose prior to that. Notably in the fourth century, the Byzantine Empress Pulcheria donated her robe to cover an altar that had been dedicated in honor of her virginity. Presumably this textile had no Christian iconography, nor was it specifically white or linen. Later in our period, textiles designed with Christ and other holy persons were made for the altar and silk textiles come into use, as evidenced especially in the gifts listed in the Liber Pontificalis. More than a century after Egeria described the textiles in churches of the Holy Land, Paul the Silentiary wrote about Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in 562, upon its re dedication after the dome was rebuilt. He describes the golden altar table of the great church being covered in a luxuriant purple silk with many colors, “the produce of the foreign worm.” Paul gives a very detailed description of the altar cloth stating that it was embroidered with colored, gold and silver threads and depicted Christ flanked by Peter and Paul. Around the hem there were scenes of the charitable deeds of the Byzantine Emperors interspersed with the miracle stories of Christ.
Smaller *mapparia* are evident in the sources for use on the altar as well, sometimes in wool and often multi-colored. These likely covered vessels. In Paul’s description of Hagia Sophia’s altar, he mentions other textiles in use with images of imperial couples being blessed by Mary and Christ, presumably figured in gold, which may have served as covers for various liturgical implements, “And upon other veils you may see monarchs joined together, here by the hand of Mary, the Mother of God, there by that of Christ, and all is adorned with the sheen of golden thread.”

It is not only the Great Church of the capital city where such resplendent textiles could be found. Andreas Angellus, writing in the early ninth century, describes the churches of Ravenna, Italy, in his *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*. He tells of Bishop Theodore (seated 679–693) who had a purple cloth made to cover a casket that sat upon the altar (a reliquary?). This cloth had scenes from the Book of Genesis on it, which he remarks was unusual, “Who has ever seen anything like it?”

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*Figure 14.5* Painted niche with curtains, 5th century ce. Church of Pshoi, Red Monastery, near Sohag, Egypt. Photo by Arnaldo Vescovo, © American Research Center in Egypt.
Though it would become the norm in later Byzantine churches as well as those in the West to have figurative textiles adorning the altar and its implements, in the early Christian period it was still unusual enough to be remarkable. Purple and red are the most commonly mentioned colors, though we should always be cautious that the names of colors do not necessarily correspond to our understanding of them. Some scholars wish to attribute symbolic meaning to colors but these meanings are so mutable as to be worthless; purple is not always imperial but rather only when it is the *murex* purple, made from mollusk shells, and used in an imperial context, for example.

**Holy textiles: relics and icons**

One of the reasons that many textiles, silks especially due to their special qualities discussed earlier, survive today is that they were used to protect relics and placed inside reliquaries. One fifth- or sixth-century example from the Sens Cathedral treasury depicts scenes from the story of Joseph (Genesis 37:13–18) in a yellow silk twill with a purple ground. The story of Joseph was popular with both early Christians and Jews, especially on clothing, which this may indeed be. Attesting to the specialness of this textile, it was wrapped around relics in the Holy Land and carried west. The initial impetus to wrap relics stemmed from the fact that most relics were body parts and therefore the relics were treated as the deceased. In addition, wrapping a relic was thought to deter its theft (Figure 14.6).

Textiles were used to pad and secure relics inside their reliquaries and in addition it was commonly believed that the power of God worked through a textile. Numerous miracle stories found in various writings of the early Christian period have textiles figuring prominently, not because of any intrinsic power of the textile but rather because of their ubiquity in every
setting. For example, in John Moschos’ *Pratum Spirituale* (*The Spiritual Meadow*) written ca. 600, a curtain hanging above an altar in a church “moved of its own volition and overshadowed the pope, the bishop, all the deacons who were in attendance and even the holy altar itself, for three hours.”40 The three-hour shrouding ended when the pope realized that he had imprisoned a bishop who had been falsely accused of eating from the consecrated eucharistic plate. In another story recounted by Moschos, a Christian man in Antioch was giving out clothing to the poor daily, garments that he bought in Egypt with his own money. One beggar, however, returned day after day to get a new garment until the fourth day when the almsgiver finally rebuked him for taking too much. The next night the almsgiver had a vision of Christ wearing all four tunics, ceremoniously removing them one by one, and he praised the almsgiver for his work for the poor.41

Indeed some of the most important and famous relics known in the early Christian and later medieval world were in fact textiles: the mantle of the Virgin, the shroud of Turin (believed to have been the burial wrapping of Christ due to the impression of a crucified figure on it), the Veil of Veronica (*sudarium*), and the Mandylion, to name just a few. The Mandylion was a towel on which Christ wiped his face, permanently imprinting his visage, not unlike Veronica’s Veil, which she used to wipe blood and sweat from Christ’s brow on the road to Calvary.

The story of the Mandylion is depicted in the upper right of a tenth-century icon from Mt Sinai (Figure 14.7). The sick King Abgar of Edessa (r. 4 BCE–between 13–50 CE) sent his messenger Ananias with a letter to Christ asking to be healed and Christ pressed his face into a towel, which Abgar holds here. The Mandylion was a true image of Christ and miraculously healed him. The other panels picture St Thaddeus, who converted the king to Christianity, in the upper left, and, below, Saints Paul of Thebes, Anthony, Basil and Ephrem. The textile relic was purchased in Edessa from local Muslims, processed into Constantinople by the Emperor Romanos I Lekapenos in 944,42 a precious *archeipoietos*, meaning an image made miraculously without hands. This icon was perhaps made in Constantinople to commemorate the anniversary of that event.43

While many people will be familiar with icons made on wood panels, less well known are icons woven in tapestry, perhaps due to their rarity, but maybe more likely due to their lack of survival. A notable example is the wool tapestry Icon of the Virgin and Child, flanked by the archangels Michael and Gabriel, with Christ seated above in a mandorla held aloft by angels, from the Cleveland Museum of Art (Figure 14.8). This enormous tapestry is nearly 6 1/2 feet tall and uses twenty different colors in the subtle shading found on the clothing, modeled faces of the figures, and dense flora of the frame, attesting to the complexity of the weave.44 The Virgin sits on a jeweled throne while the archangels, donning blonde curls and blue and gold striated garments, stand at attention between columns befitting a royal throne room, set on a brilliant red background. An abundance of flowers, with medallion busts of apostles between, frame the entire icon, and creep into the fictive space where the Virgin is seated, perhaps symbolizing that she is in the earthly realm. Above, mounted on top of a starry firmament of heavenly space, a bearded, kingly Christ is enthroned in a full body halo. A tapestry icon such as this may have been hung in a church, and perhaps even treated as a miraculous icon, an *archeipoietos*.45 The many mentions of icons rarely describe the medium, so we should not assume that they were all panel paintings. The Cleveland textile is so luxurious that it could have also hung in a home of magnificent wealth, like the famous sixth-century hanging of Hestia Polyolbos, personifying a hearth of many blessings, today housed at Dumbarton Oaks (Figure 14.9).
Christian textiles in the home: blessing and protecting the household

The Hestia hanging with its auspicious design intended to bless the home, seen in the attendants who bring her plaques inscribed with “wealth” and “abundance,” for example, would have fit into an archway niche. An elite Christian home may have been decorated with a hanging like the Cleveland Virgin icon, discussed above, or like the Hestia hanging. As with the tunic front discussed at the opening of this chapter, a single home could be furnished with curtains, pillows, table covers, and hangings that signaled Christian identity alongside identifiers of other religions of the Roman world.
**Figure 14.8** Icon of the Virgin and Child, 500s, slit- and dovetailed-tapestry weave in wool, 70 5/16 × 43 1/2 in. (78.7 × 110.5 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund, 1967.144.

**Figure 14.9** Hanging with Hestia Polyolbos, sixth century. Tapestry weave in wool, 136.5 × 114 cm. Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection: BZ.1929.1, © Dumbarton Oaks, Byzantine Collection, Washington DC.
An individual textile could also be multivalent, as, for example, the fragment of hanging with a pomegranate tree from the Louvre Museum. Such fruit trees were extremely popular subjects for hangings, curtains and other furnishing textiles as evidenced by over twenty extant examples of textiles with a similar motif. The pomegranate textile could have hung in a church or other public space, but garden imagery often appeared in the home, as the fifth-century poet Sidonius Apollinaris describes, “Let the round table be spread with linen purer than snow, and covered with laurel, with ivy and the green growths of the vine . . . Let the sideboard and couch be gay with garlands.” Enclosed, cultivated gardens were popular around the Mediterranean from Antiquity into the Middle Ages and these curtains have been seen by late antique viewers as an extension of those gardens, bringing the natural world indoors.48

This notion of natural imagery as pretty or ornamental suggests that a fruit tree was neutral, without meaning and there for aesthetic enjoyment. However, fruit trees connoted a heavenly Paradise in both Christianity and Islam, as seen, for example, in the famous mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus. Pomegranates in particular had been associated with immortality since Antiquity. I submit that in the home, the pomegranate tree conjured the promise of Paradise to the religious viewer and notions of immortality to all.

Parsing what is Christian and what is not in the home is difficult, in part because decorating decisions come down to taste, an elusive concept for an historian. Furthermore, Christian art in the home, which included wall paintings, textiles, and mosaics, served many purposes, adding to the complexity of interpreting such material. Kim Bowes elucidates the many possible functions of Christian imagery:

Christian images might be used in ritual contexts, as objects of veneration or as signposts to guide ritual activity. They might serve as protective agents to keep evil forces from penetrating the house and its occupants. And they might simultaneously be part of the elite house’s status apparatus, deployed in the complex interactions between aristocratic peers, or woven into statements about individual identity.

Despite all of these reasons for Christians to have specific Christian imagery in the home, the archaeological records indicate that narrative scenes in the home were rare.

In the home we also witness the melding of Christian ideas with long held cultural and religious practices from antiquity. For example, use of apotropaic (protective) or auspicious motifs was intertwined with the general belief in magic in Late Antiquity. A textile that was probably a pillow cover from Dumbarton Oaks serves as a case in point (Figure 14.10). The cross is represented here in a series of repeating crosses, radiating out from the central cross for greatest effect. The perimeter of the design is guarded with a series of concentric circles, recalling an eye or mirror, thought to deflect evil, a holdover from ancient belief going back at least to the story of Perseus defeating Medusa’s stare that turned men to stone with a mirror. The repetition of the cross motif and the mirror/eye symbol follow a practice common in spells that repeat phrases and actions for the desired effect, in this case protecting the head that rested on this textile.

### Clothing: Christian tenets of modesty and self-identification

The beginning of the early Christian period witnesses a pattern of re-using secular textiles for a specifically Christian use, such as using donated textiles in churches. Clothing, and even vestments for clergy, follow a similar path, in that the wearer often did not don markers to identify him or her as Christian. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (a. 393–a. 460) mentions that the Emperor Constantine donated his own robe to the Bishop of Jerusalem specifically to wear during
baptisms, for example. The archaeological record suggests that not until the sixth century was it common for garments to have Christian images on them, for example the tunic front with the cross pendant discussed earlier (Figures 14.1–2). However, at least one surviving garment fragment from the fourth to fifth century hints at the practice developing earlier. The literary record though points to the wearing of Christian motifs already in the fourth century, as an oft-quoted passage from Bishop Asterius of Amasea attests. In it he complains about enthusiastic, and presumably wealthy, Christians wearing clothing with whole Christian stories on them,

they devise for themselves, their wives and children gay-colored dresses decorated with thousands of figures . . . You may see the wedding of Galilee with the water jars, the paralytic carrying his bed on his shoulders, the blind man healed by means of clay,
the woman with an issue of blood seizing [Christ’s] hem, the sinful woman falling at the feet of Jesus, Lazarus coming back to life from his tomb. In doing this they consider themselves to be religious.54

A few textiles survive hinting at what such clothing may have looked like, such as the Joseph textile that was reused as a relic wrapping discussed previously.

Asterius’ stern criticism is in line with Christian ideals about modesty, played out most prominently in the clothing of monastics who were encouraged to wear plain, coarse clothing, though in practice there is lots of evidence that monks and nuns ornamented their clothing.55 Just as a range of taste explains how we find that a late antique home could be decorated with a rich array of cultural and religious identifiers, so too was the case with clothing, which may or may not have been used to mark a wearer as Christian.

Conclusion

Textiles were a highly valued and yet also a common element in the cultures of the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and Europe between 200 and 600. Early Christian textiles were, at first, those that were part of everyday life, marked as Christian because they were used by and for Christians in ritual, in sacred spaces, and on their bodies and in their homes. Beginning around the fourth century, Christians began to specially mark their textiles as Christian with iconography identifying them as such, though not exclusively, as many textiles survive with ambiguous iconography or iconography that points to multiple religious and cultural traditions at once. Some of the earliest mentions of Gospel stories and figurative images are on luxury clothing, where it is mentioned before use in churches. This may reflect a lack of comfort with figurative imagery in churches in the early Christian period or it may point to the ability and desire on the part of the wealthy to ornament themselves, and identify as Christian, which later trickled into the church proper. As textiles in Late Antiquity signaled status, it comes as no surprise that early Christians used gold thread, silk, a rich array of dyes, the finest linens and the softest wools in performing their rituals, securing relics, and decorating their homes, churches, and themselves.

Notes


See catalogue no. 112 for an example of this, Lintz and Coudert, Antinoé: momies, textiles, céramiques et autres antiquites: envois de l’Etat et depots du musee du Louvre de 1901 a nos jours, 284.

For more on burials and Christianity, see Eric Rebillard, The Care of the Dead in Late Antiquity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).


The importance of textile archaeology as a specialized field for processing and analyzing such finds cannot be overstated. For more on the field, see John Peter Wild, Textiles in Archaeology (Princes Risborough, Aylesbury, Bucks: Shire Publications, 1988), and Sabine Schrenk, ed., Textiles in Situ: Their Find Spots in Egypt and Neighbouring Countries in the First Millennium CE (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 2006). For an understanding of scientific methods of textile archaeology and the state of the field through the massive finds of Antinoë, Egypt: Lintz and Coudert, Antinoé: momies, textiles, céramiques et autres antiquites: envois de l’Etat et depots du musee du Louvre de 1901 a nos jours.

All finds outside of Egypt cannot be catalogued here, but the following will point the reader to some of the most well-known finds: Eliso Kvavadze and Iulon Gagoshidze, “Fibres of silk, cotton and flax in a weaving from the first century AD palace of Dedoplis Gora, Georgia,” Vebet His Archaeobot 17 (2008): S211–S215 (Republic of Georgia); Alisa Baginski and Amely Tidhar, “A Dated Silk Fragment from ‘Avdat (Eboda),” Israel Exploration Journal 28.1/2 (1978): 113–115 (Israel); Anna A. Ierusalimskaja and Birgitt Borkopp, Von China nach Byzanz: Fruhmittelalterliche Seiden aus der Staatlichen Ermitage Sankt Petersburg (Munich: Bayrisches Nationalmuseum und Staatliche Ermitage, 1996) (The Caucasus); Rodolphe


18 This textile was sold in 1890 by Emil Brugsch-Bey, a German Egyptologist who was curator at the Bulaq Museum in Cairo, to George F Baker, who then donated it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. See “Collection Records,” *The Met*, accessed June 21, 2017, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/444287. While we cannot say for sure that the textile was of Egyptian manufacture, it is highly likely that the cloth was excavated there.

19 The Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, is an acronym for “Jesus Christ, son of God, Saviour” (Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεός Υἱός, Σωτήρ). The fish symbolized Christians more generally as well: “But we, little fishes, after the example of our *Ichthys* Jesus Christ are born in water,” Tertullian, *On Baptism*, 1. Thanks to Mark Ellison for pointing this reference out to me.


22 Egeria, 95.

23 These have been analyzed and compared with temple inventories of the same period by Willy Clarysse, “Textiles and Architecture,” 44.


27 For Paul the Silentiary, see Mango, *Sources*, 88–89.

28 Clarysse and Geens, “Textiles and Architecture.”


32 For Paul the Silentiary, see Mango, *Sources*, 88–89.

33 Clarysse and Geens, “Textiles and Architecture.”
Jennifer L. Ball

Mango, Sources, 131.


This textile, in three fragments, was removed from a reliquary casket of St Calais in 1947 and had remains of several saints inside; see André Bouton, “Le suaire de saint Calais,” Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres 91:3 (1947), 468–699. It has been variously dated between the fifth and sixth century and been attributed generally to the Near East, with a proposal of Antioch by Gary Vikan, Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1977), cat. 413, 462.


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Ibid., 189.


The Abegg-Stiftung Collection has a fragment with scenes of the Virgin Mary on it that may have been part of a tunic, and is dated to the second half of the fourth to middle fifth century (Inv. 3100b) in Sabine Schrenk and Regina Knaller, eds, Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit, (Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 2004), 185–189, cat. no. 62.

PG 40, 165–168. See Mango, Sources 50–51.

Further reading


