

THE SO-CALLED CHASUBLE OF BISHOP JOHN ANGELOPTES: A PROJECT FOR AN EXTRAORDINARY LITURGICAL GARMENT

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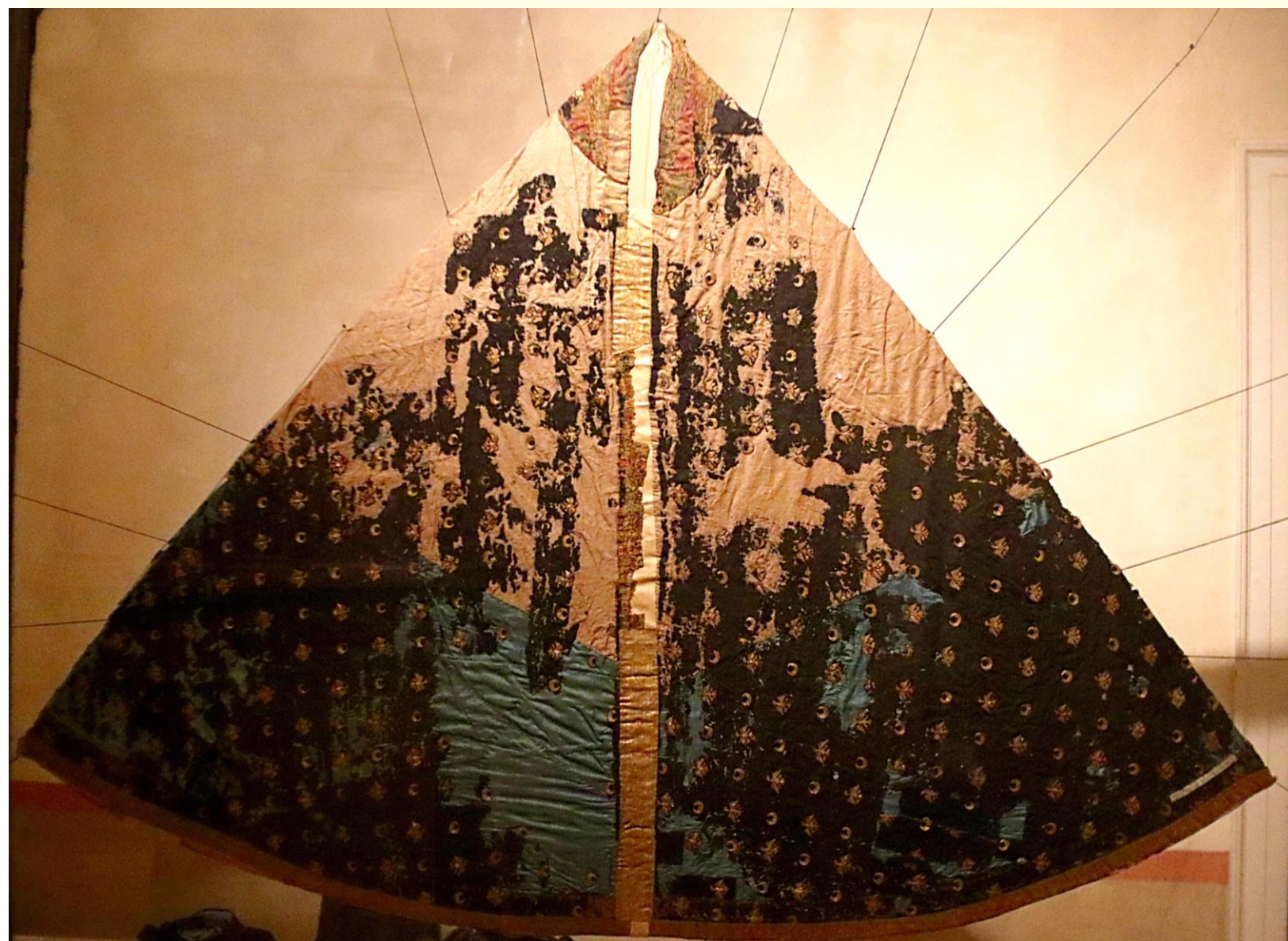


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

For its dimensions and precious materials, the so-called chasuble of John AngeLOPTes stands out among the holdings of the Archiepiscopal Museum in Ravenna. (Fig. 1) Since at least the 17th century it was mentioned among the relics of the Cathedral, thought to have dressed the corpse of the 5th-century Bishop John AngeLOPTes (Pasolini 1689, 208). Scholarship has never paid much attention to the garment. Apart from two short articles (Venturi 1897; Braun 1911) and a few other mentions, the chasuble and its precious textiles are still awaiting a comprehensive study.

Description

It was shaped in the form of a large bell chasuble, typical of late antiquity and the middle ages. It was made of a dark-blue patterned silk – perhaps a lampas weave. The pattern displays palmettes and medallions with a flower at the center, each one enclosed by ogival frames with outer borders of flower-like elements staggered in horizontal rows. (Fig. 2) This textile forms the background for superimposed golden embroideries in the form of half-moons and eagles in frontal view that add a sumptuous extra-pattern and a colorful aspect to the whole garment. The base fabric has been variously associated with other patterned silks such as the liturgical garments of St. Willigis (Mainz and Munich) and of pope Benedict XI, but it only vaguely reminds of their pattern. In fact, it could easily be one rare specimen of *tartar cloth* (Watt, Wardell 1997; Jacoby 2016).

Embroideries: Golden eagles and crescents decorate the ground fabric, alternating on regular axes. (Fig.

2) These elements also appear on the mantle of Otto IV of Brunswick (1175-1218) (Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum), where they are symbols from Otto's seals and arms. The design of the eagles is very different from the AngeLOPTes's chasuble, although they similarly pose in a frontal view. In Ravenna eagles are associated solely with crescents, perhaps decorative motives more than a specific reference to a coat of arms.

Golden borders: At least three different kinds of golden bands are sewn upon the chasuble. (Fig. 3-5) The bottom border finds comparisons with a "gold brocade" decorating a chasuble from the Abbey of St. Emmeram at Regensburg, which is thought to have been donated by Emperor Henry to the saint (1002-1024). (fig. 3) In the 19th century the two bands that are now in the chasuble front and neck were superimposed one another forming the arms of a cross. (fig. 4-5) Thus, they could be later additions.

Conservation

The chasuble is in a very poor conditions, partly due to its history through the centuries and partly to the natural ageing of the proteic fibres. The areas once in contact with the decomposing body are now lost or fragmentary and the full understanding of the artefact is altered by the presence of a massive restoration that occurred in 1909-1912. The chasuble was sewn on a brownish linen lining and also in the lower section, throughout a blue silk satin. The first step is a careful study and analysis of all the original materials present in the chasuble (fibres, metallic yarns, textiles) through an accurate diagnostic plan, which include the characterization of the fibres and metallic yarns by optical microscopy and further analyses by SEM-EDS. Furthermore, the investigation of the dyes will be carried out using non invasive (FORS) and invasive (HPLC) techniques as well as radiocarbon dating for those materials that are suspected to be modern (lining).

The results of the investigation will be fundamental in the planning of a future conservation project.

Conclusion: a new project

This extraordinary garment that now appears as a patchwork is at the centre of a major project intended to a comprehensive study, proper conservation, and musealization. Our aim is to restore the character of this liturgical dress, made of lavish materials and a precious symbol of authority for the bishops of Ravenna. Only through a detailed study of the chasuble it will be possible to address the issue of manufacture, trade, and consumption of sumptuous dress and textiles in the Middle Ages.

One of the first questions to be addressed is the identification of the patterned silk, which indeed could be another rare example of tartar cloth, evidence of the eastern trades within the European courts. Another problem concerns its chronology, in particular the date and manufacture of its golden borders, which could have even been reemployed from other garments. Lab analyses of dye and materials will be essential for defining cultural productions.

Only through a detailed research programme of the garment and its components will it be possible to answer these and other questions and reconstruct the chasuble's history. In fact, there is no possible restoration without a detailed study and this rare object calls for serious research, urgent conservation, and proper musealization.

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CURATION AND CONSERVATION: DRESS AND TEXTILES IN MUSEUMS

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