

Silk, saints and relics. The medieval fabrics collection at the CDMT¹

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Coptic textiles, Gothic velvets, Valencian, Italian and French silks, oriental embroidery, cashmere shawls, printed textiles, liturgical objects, Modernista fabrics ... the collections of the Textile Museum and Documentation Centre (CDMT) of Terrassa are diverse and varied. This paper showcases one of the CDMT's many collections, its medieval fabrics collection, which contains significant examples from a period in which the objects were valuable and highly prized, appeared in inventories and wills, and were represented in detail in paintings and altarpieces. They are pieces that we must study if we are to understand the society and the cultural period of which they formed a part.

¹ This paper is an updated version of a paper published in the journal *Terme* no. 21 (2006).

² In addition to the Textile Museum and Documentation Centre (CDMT), there are textile collections in the Marès Lace Museum (Arenys de Mar), Textile Printing Museum (Premià de Mar), Design Museum (Barcelona), Episcopal Museum of Vic, Museum of Montserrat, Museo del Traje (Madrid), Museum of Medieval Fabrics (Las Huelgas, Burgos), Museum of Decorative Arts (Madrid), Lázaro Galdiano Museum (Madrid), Valencia de Don Juan Museum (Madrid), Archaeological Museum (Madrid), Museum of León Cathedral, etc.

The consideration of textiles as historical documents in their own right is not a very common practice in our country, despite the complete and representative collections of different cultures, historical periods and geographical areas that are preserved in various centres and museums². For many years, their study, if carried out at all, has been done only in connection with iconographic motifs and has been based on stylistic comparison with other arts. In addition, studies of the written (literary or notarial) sources have found elements for economic and philological evaluation, but they have often proceeded along parallel paths without any connection to the real objects themselves.

The lack of knowledge about centres of production and the individuals who created the objects, together with limited written documentation that would actually permit identification of origins and types, turns any reconstruction of the history of textiles into an enormous, challenging but appealing jigsaw, a task in which no collected information, however little, should be ignored.

Today, the study of historical textiles is approached from a comprehensive, multidisciplinary perspective; iconography, style and written documents are analysed in parallel with the technical aspects of the objects. Attention is paid to elements such as the twisting of threads, the type of material used, the weaves and densities of fabrics, and the colourants and their mordants, because



Fig. 1. *Tejido de las Águilas* of St Bernard of Calvo. CDMT 307. Samite, silk, eleventh century.



Fig. 2. *Tejido de los Grifos*, from the reliquary of Santa Librada. CDMT 6469. Silk, gold thread, twelfth century. [See detail.](#)



3 A good example of these practices can be seen in the projects in which the CDMT has participated: *Caracterización tecnológica y cronológica de las producciones textiles coptas: antecedentes de las manufacturas textiles altomedievales españolas* (HUM2005-04610), a study on colourants in the Mediterranean area carried out by the Leitat Technological Centre in Terrassa; the current project *Caracterización de las producciones textiles de la tardoantigüedad y Edad Media temprana: tejidos coptos, sasánidas, bizantinos e hispanomusulmanes en*

each production area had different working traditions and only by taking a view of the whole can we establish chronologies, geographical origins and routes of technological, commercial and cultural transfer that will be valid and well-substantiated.³

The dispersion of textile heritage is another constant that complicates its study. We find fragments of the textiles catalogued in the CDMT scattered among other collections, national museums, museums abroad, churches and cathedrals. Throughout history, silk fabrics have been considered luxury goods, spoils of war, relics, objects of exchange among collectors and, in the worst-case scenario, items for financial profit derived from cutting them into fragments

las colecciones públicas españolas (HAR2008-04161); or the project called *Tejidos Medievales en Iberia y el Mediterráneo* funded by the Max van Berchem Foundation (Geneva) and the Pasold

Foundation (UK) to complete an epigraphic study of said textile corpus; BORREGO, P., SALADRIGAS, S., ANDRES-TOLEDO, M.A. “Technical and symbolic study of two complete mediaeval cloths

found in Carrión de los Condes, Spain. The textiles of Sant Zoilus”, in: *Actas del V Simposio Internacional Purpureae Vestes*, University of Valencia, 2016.

Fig. 2b. *Tejido de las Águilas*,
from the reliquary of Santa
Librada. CDMT 6470. Lampas,
silk, gold thread, twelfth century.
[See details.](#)



Fig. 3. Saint Nicholas wearing chasuble with *pallia rotata* decoration. Wall painting from Santa Maria de Taüll, MNAC 200414-000.





Fig. 4. *Tejido de las Estrellas*, fragment from the vestments of St Valerius, CDMT 2374. Pseudo-lampas, silk, gold thread, thirteenth century. [See detail](#).

4 CARBONELL, S. “L’inici del col·leccionisme tèxtil a Catalunya i la formació dels museus tèxtils: publicacions, exposicions, col·leccions i col·leccionistes”, in: *El col·leccionisme i l’estudi dels teixits i la indumentària a Catalunya. Segles XVIII-XX*. <http://goo.gl/Uk223b> [consulted on 19/05/2017]; MARTÍN, R.M. “La dispersión de los tejidos medievales: Un patrimonio troceado”, in: *Lambard. Estudios de arte medieval*. [Institute for Catalan Studies] XII, 2000; TORRELLA y NIUBO, F. *El coleccionismo textil en Cataluña. Discurso de ingreso en la Real Academia Catalana de Bellas Artes*. Barcelona, 1988.

and selling them piecemeal. Because of this, it is necessary today to regroup the various related fragments first in order to study them.

For this reason, it is important to have “framework” objects to serve as a point of reference – objects that have a name and surname, so to speak – that have been identified precisely, studied and analysed, thus enabling us to establish groups from which to draw general conclusions.

This is one of the values of the CDMT’s medieval fabrics collection: it features a number of such “star” objects.

The interest in collecting ancient, artistic and exotic textiles first appeared in the late nineteenth century with the resurgence of medieval and Renaissance motifs promoted by the Arts and Crafts movement in England and with the emergence of revivalist styles. Another major contributor was the publicising and dissemination of objects unearthed by archaeological expeditions in Egypt and the Middle East from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. This was the context for the creation of the major collections that would later form part of museum and private collections⁴.

Objects produced in silk with decorative, geometrical or figurative motifs were the most highly prized and, for that reason, it became a common practice



Fig. 5. Cloth from Villalcázar de Sirga, CDMT 300. Taqueté, silk and gold thread, thirteenth century.

5 *Colección Viñas de tejidos antiguos*. Diputació de Barcelona, 1957.

6 CDMT rec no. 307, 310, 3929, 3932.

7 GUDIOL, J. "Lo sepulcre de Sant Bernat Calvó, bisbe de Vic", in: *Primer Congrés d'Història de la Corona d'Aragó*. vol. II, Barcelona, 1913.

to cut them up to preserve or exchange the parts considered interesting. Today this fragmentation makes it difficult to ascertain the original provenance of the fabrics, even when whole works are preserved in collections.

In the case of the CDMT, the medieval objects as a whole come from two of the most important textile collections in the country. The first is the collection of Ignasi Abadal, which was acquired by Josep Biosca and then donated by Biosca to the city of Terrassa to form the basis of the Biosca Textile Museum in 1946, the original core of today's CDMT. The second is the collection of Ricard Viñas Geis, which was sold to the Barcelona Provincial Council between 1951 and 1957.⁵ Most of the fabrics are silk and date from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries. They are representative of various styles or cultural moments within this chronological period and have been attributed geographically to Byzantium, Al-Andalus or Islamic Spain, the Christian kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula, the south of France and Italy.

Highlights from the eleventh century include the pontifical vestments of St Bernard of Calvo,⁶ the bishop of Vic from 1233 to 1243. This is one of the few representative examples of the linkage between the historical documentation and the preserved textile remains. Based on the documentation, Father Josep Gudiol⁷ gave a detailed description of the fabrics and of opening a wooden box in 1888 in which the remains or relics of the saint were found. Gudiol wrote: "... we removed the vestments which consisted of a white robe that was still well-preserved and inside, the remains or holy relics shrouded in another garment of badly faded colour and soil, so that it would probably have been the garment in which he was laid to rest in his first tomb. The original fabrics were considered relics, they were cut up and the fragments were distributed among the saint's followers."



Fig. 6. Embroidered fabric from Santa Clara del Astudillo, CDMT 6150, fourteenth century. [See detail.](#)

8 While this type of gilt material has hitherto been called *oro de Chipre* or *oropel*, there is currently a review of the designation as a function of the type of organic substrate involved (e.g., leather, gut or parchment).

Gudiol goes on to explain how, in 1890, a Barcelona collector whose name he does not mention but who was later identified as Francesc Miquel i Badia, “borrowed” a portion of the objects to study them, which he did, although he also sold them to other collectors. One of his buyers was Gaspar Homar, who then sent pieces to Ricard Viñas, who in turn sold them to the Diputació of Barcelona before they ultimately became part of the CDMT.

Of the items preserved in the CDMT, eight fragments of the fabric of the chasuble have been identified. This fabric is known as the “Tejido de las Águilas” or “The Eagle Fabric”. In addition, two fragments have been identified from the decorative band of the amice. The primary decoration of the chasuble is a two-headed eagle, with wings extended, its body facing forward and the two heads turned in profile. In its beak, the eagle holds a ring from a dangling chain and in its talons it clutches a lion. Geometrical and plant elements fill the bodies of the two animals. The motifs are arranged in horizontal bands that repeat the subject, while the bands are separated by incomplete semi-circles and there are rosettes in the interstices. [Fig. 1]

Technically, the garment is a samite with silk threads interwoven in both warp and weft. The colours are red for the background and dark green for the motifs, while the eagle’s talons and the ring it carries in its beak are yellow.

The two fragments of the decorative band are made of silk and organic gold leaf⁸ woven on taffeta using a tapestry technique. They bear an inscription in Arabic calligraphy and different decorative borders.

According to tradition, the “Tejido de las Águilas”, as well as the fabrics making up the two tunics, were spoils of war taken during the conquest

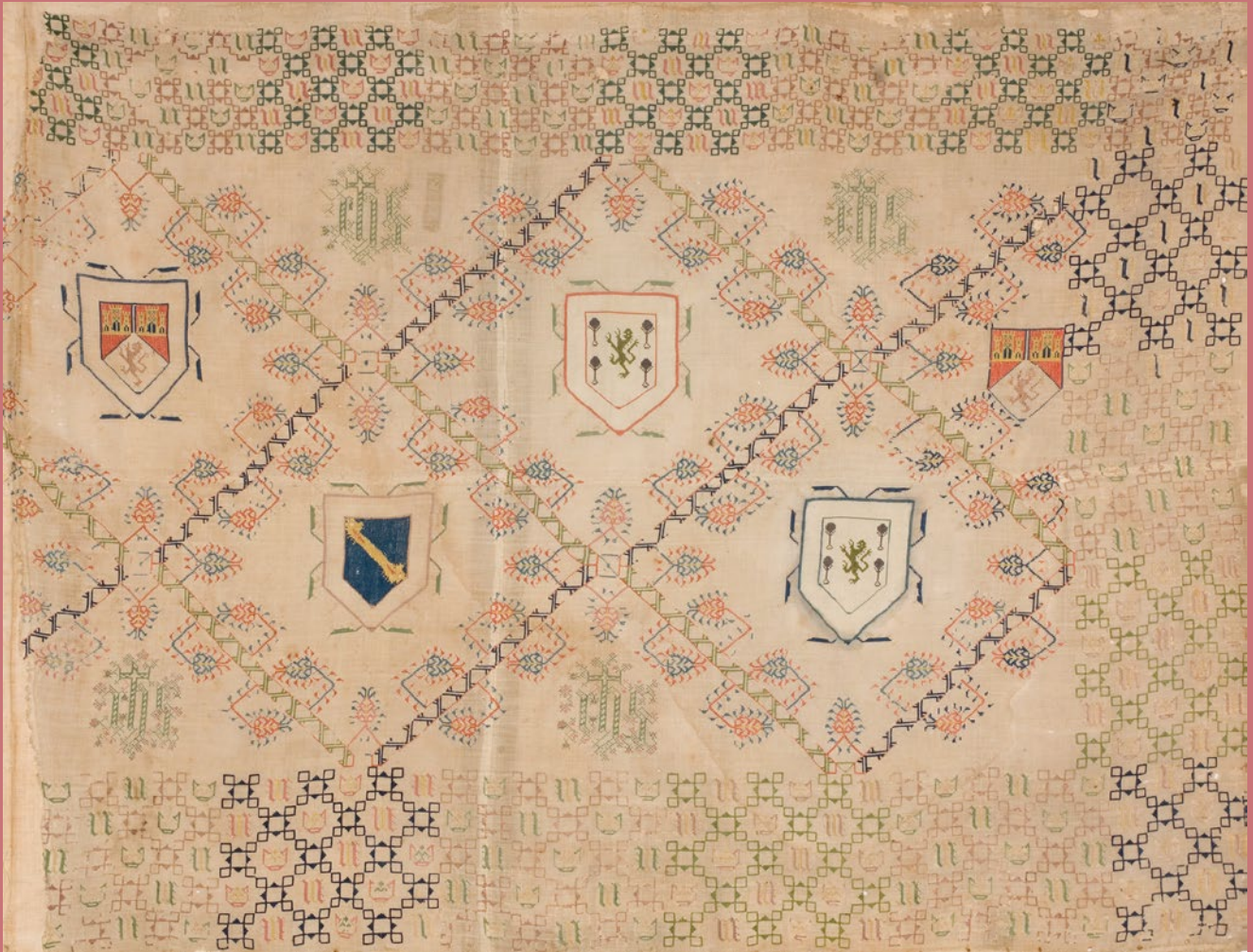


Fig. 7. Embroidered fabric from Santa Clara del Astudillo, CDMT 5844, fourteenth century. [See detail.](#)

9 COULIN WEIBEL, A. *Two Thousand Years of Textiles*. New York. The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1952; FLEMMING, E. *Historia del tejido. Ornamentos textiles y muestras de tejidos desde la Antigüedad hasta comienzos del siglo XIX, incluyéndose el Extremo Oriente y Perú*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, S.A., 1958; *L'Islam i Catalunya*. Lumberg, Museu d'Història de Catalunya, Institut Català de la Mediterrània. Barcelona, 1998. [Exhibition Catalogue]; OTAVSKY, K., MUHAMMAD 'ABBAS MUHAMMAD SALIM. *Mittelalterliche Textilien I Ägypten, Persien und Mesopotamien, Spanien und Nordafrika*. Riggisberg: Abegg-Stiftung, 1955.

10 CDMT reg. 6469, 6470.

of Valencia by King Jaume I (1232–1238), an event in which the bishop Bernard of Calvo took part. From its decoration, colours and technique, some scholars have linked the textile to Byzantine fabrics of the eleventh and twelfth centuries or to Andalusian fabrics from the period of the Taifa Kingdoms (1013–1086).⁹

The textile is a good example of the dispersion phenomenon characterising the objects: beyond the fragments in the CDMT, there are others in the Episcopal Museum of Vic; the Design Museum of Barcelona; the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, both in New York; the Cleveland Museum of Art; the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin; the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris, and the Abegg-Stiftung Museum in Switzerland.

The fabrics originating from the relics of santa Librada¹⁰ [Fig. 2 and 2b] pose a similar problem: fragments are preserved in the Cathedral of Sigüenza, the Abegg Foundation, the Metropolitan Museum of New York and the Cleveland Museum of Art. They are part of a set of fabrics from the Almohad period (1143–1213) that display a high degree of homogeneity in their decoration and technique.

11 MASDEU, C., MORATA, L. *Las rutas de la seda. Cuaderno de viaje del CDMT*. Terrassa: Centre de Documentació i Museu Tèxtil, 2000.

12 CDMT reg. 5776.

13 CDMT reg. 2959.

14 MAY, F.L. *Silk Textiles of Spain, Eighth to Fifteenth Century*. New York: The Hispanic Society of America, 1957; SHEPHERD, D.G. "Two Hispano-Islamic Silks in Diasper Weave". *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*. 1955.

15 CHALMETA, P. *El señor del Zoco en España*. Madrid: Instituto Hispano-Árabe de Cultura, 1973.

The main decorative element of the two CDMT pieces features large-diameter tangent circles arranged in horizontal registers. On one of the two pieces, the circles contain pairs of opposing griffins with their heads turned to face one another. A schematic depiction of the Tree of Life separates them, while also serving as the axis of symmetry for a mirror repetition of the entire motif. On the second piece, the circles contain an eagle with extended wings that looks alternately right and left. The central motif in both fabrics is complemented by small gazelles, deer, harpies, pearlescent ribbons and, on the fabric with the eagles, Kufic inscriptions that have been translated as Baraka (Benediction).

The colour of the background is beige and the motifs are red. The beaks and talons are made of silk thread braided with gold leaf. Technically, the two pieces are worked on lampas and present a special characteristic in the rhythm of the warp threads and in how the gold threads of the swivel weft are worked. These unique characteristics have also been identified in the fabric of the chasuble of St John the Hermit, which has served as a reference to date and place the others. This chasuble, which is preserved today in the village of Quintanaortuño (Burgos), incorporates a band with Arabic calligraphy in which it is possible to read the name of the Almohad emir Ali ibn Yusuf, who ruled in Al-Andalus and North Africa between 1106 and 1142. This fact justifies attributing the entire set to the late eleventh or early twelfth century.

The CDMT also contains other interesting objects from this group of fabrics.¹¹ One corresponds to the "Tejido del Águila" of Sant Pere Cercada¹² and comes from the cathedral of Barcelona; another is the fragment of the cape of san Pedro de Osma, who died in 1109 (Burgo de Osma, Soria)¹³. On a larger fragment of the same cape that is conserved in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, you can appreciate the composition of the design. Inside large circles appear pairs of opposing harpies, mounted on lions and separated once again by a schematic depiction of the Tree of Life.

Inside the tangent decorations between the circles, there is an inscription that might be translated as "This is of what is made in Baghdad; watch over it, God." The researchers who have studied the object have reached the conclusion that its obvious references to Spanish calligraphy suggest that in reality the inscription is a false attribution intended to drive up the price of the textile, leading to the group becoming known as "imitation Baghdad" fabrics.¹⁴ The confirmation of commercial fraud in general is evident from the "Hisba Treaty" of Al-Saqati (11th-12th cent.), which includes fabrics and refers to fraud in relation to their dyes, the size of pieces and the quality of the materials.¹⁵

The type of decoration and its formal conception, organised in tangent circles arranged in horizontal registers, bear a direct relation to the Sassanid Persian



Fig. 8. Embroidered fabric from Santa Clara del Astudillo, CDMT 5845, fourteenth century. [See detail.](#)

16 PARTEARROYO, C. "Tejidos andalusies". In: *Artigrama*, no. 22, 2007.
 17 CDMT rec. no. 124, 2374, 2979, 3936, 3937, 3938.
 18 CDMT rec no. 300, 2977.
 19 CDMT rec no. 2974, 6162; *Vestiduras ricas. El Monasterio de las Huelgas y su época 1170-1340*. Lunweg Editores, Patrimonio Nacional, 2005 [Exhibition Catalogue].
 20 CDMT rec no. 5844, 6150, 5845.

tradition and to the sculptural elements of the Caliphate and Almoravid period of Al-Andalus (1086-1143). You can also see similar Islamic-influenced motifs in Romanesque capitals, sculptures and paintings: the tunica manicata of the Batlló Majesty has a design with large circles; eagles and griffins appear in the cloisters of Santa Maria de Ripoll and Sant Pere de Galligants. Numerous paintings and miniatures feature characters and decorative elements that reflect this type of decoration, which is called *pallia rotata* in the documents of the period. [Fig. 3]

After the Almohads rose to power (1147-1161), aesthetic changes occurred in the decorative motifs. Their rigour in the interpretation of Koranic law led to a shift from figurative forms representing animals and people toward much more rigid geometrical compositions.¹⁶

The CDMT also preserves some representative examples from this time. They include the various fragments of the vestments of St Valerius¹⁷ [Fig. 4], fabric from the garments of the Infante Philip of Castile from Villalcázar de Sirga¹⁸ [Fig. 5] and some fragments that can be linked to a set of funerary objects found in the Abbey of Santa María la Real de las Huelgas and dated to the thirteenth century.¹⁹

Also notable for their uniqueness are three embroidered fabrics²⁰ that are attributed to María de Padilla (died 1361) from the Royal Convent of Santa Clara in Astudillo (Palencia). The three fabrics are made of linen embroidered with different types of stitching in polychrome silks of green, blue, pink, yellow, gilt and metallic thread.

The largest piece (128 x 233 cm) [Fig. 6] repeats the monogram IHS in a herringbone pattern inside a crowned form from which emerge small flowers that alternate with stars and the Padilla family's coat of arms three times.

The second-largest piece (113 x 48 cm) [Fig. 7] is not complete. The decoration that draws a frame around the main elements is unfinished on the left side (photo 4). In the central area, geometrical motifs and schematic flowers form

lines that create diamond-shaped spaces, which contain the Padilla family's coat of arms twice, two coats of arms of the Enríquez family and a coat of arms of the Order of the Band. The monogram of Christ repeats four times and the effect of a frame is created by a continuous mesh of small diamond shapes in which alternate the letter "M" and a very schematic eagle. Based on decoration and size, this piece, like the previous one, must have been used as an altar frontal.

The embroidery of the third textile (27 x 81 cm) [Fig. 8] differs from the previous two. The background of the decoration has been done in openwork, leaving the base fabric unworked so that the knotwork forms the decoration. This results in an effect of lacework that is highly attractive. The background fabric is ecru in colour and the embroidered parts are in greens and browns.

The identification of the coats of arms raises some dispute over the dating of the pieces. The Convent of Santa Clara in Astudillo is directly related to King Peter I of Castile and María de Padilla, who was the mother of four of his children but was not officially recognised as his spouse until after her death. The king founded the convent in the mid-fourteenth century as a place of retreat for María de Padilla, while he married several times for reasons of state. The technical features of the piece and its materials and design fit quite well with this story, but the presence of the coats of arms of the Enríquez family and the Order of the Band, in addition to the depiction of the Padilla family's coat of arms, which does not coincide exactly with the coats of arms that have hitherto been found for the Padillas, raises questions about whether the piece is really from the time of María de Padilla or may be from a later time period. This remains an outstanding issue, one of those issues that the fabrics often raise, requiring once more that the history, written documentation, technique and style be combined in the search for answers. ●