



SYMPOSIUM
April 28 & 29, 2022

Rethinking the Wearable in the Middle Ages

Covering, protecting, and adorning the body count among the most fundamental of human concerns, at once conveying aspects of an individual's persona while also situating a person within a given social context. Wearable adornment encompasses materials fashioned by human hands (like fabric, metalwork, or even animal bones) and modifications to the body itself (such as tattoos, cosmetics, or hairstyles), which beautify the body while simultaneously conveying social, political, and protective functions and meanings. The wearable is thus the most representational and at the same time most intimate product of material culture.

This conference seeks to expand our current understanding of the wearable in the Middle Ages. Current scholarship on the topic in Byzantine, western medieval, Eurasian art, as well as Islamic traditions tends to encompass clothing and jewelry, and is frequently medium-specific, with minimal regard to the interrelatedness of different aspects of appearance. On the one hand, work on medieval textiles has tended to approach questions of identity, consumption, and appearance by comparing textual sources and visual depictions with surviving textiles. The study of medieval jewelry, on the other hand, largely focuses on the classification and attribution of precious metal pieces from excavations and museum collections, as scholars make sense of pieces long removed from the bodies they once adorned. Tattoos, prosthetics, cosmetics and headgear are almost entirely absent in our understandings of medieval dress practices. This separation was not always so, however, and indeed nineteenth-century art historians such as Gottfried Semper integrated all aspects of bodily adornment in their considerations of the nature of ornamentation and surface decoration.

Fragment of a Hanging with Nereids, Egypt, 5th–6th c. Tapestry weave, wool and linen. Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, Washington, DC, Byzantine Collection, BZ19321.



THURSDAY, APRIL 28
1:30–6:15 PM

1:30 pm
Peter N. Miller
Bard Graduate Center
Welcome

Elizabeth Dospel Williams
Dumbarton Oaks Research
Library and Collection
Ittai Weinryb
Bard Graduate Center
Introduction

2 pm
Alicia Walker
Bryn Mawr College
Christian Bodies Clothed in
Pagan Bodies: The Implications
of Greco-Roman Mythological
Imagery on Early Byzantine
Items of Dress and Adornment

Zvezdana Dode
Nasledie Institute
The Robe of Honor and the
Belt of Submission in the
Mongolian Imperial Culture

Q&A and Discussion

3:30 pm
Coffee Break

4 pm
Eiren Shea
Grinnell College
Clothing the Khatun:
Mongol Women's Dress and
Political Power

Juliane von Fircks
Friedrich Schiller University
Jena
To Adorn the Dead Body:
The Representation of the
Deceased Prince in and
outside the Grave (13th–15th
Centuries)

Cecily J. Hilsdale
McGill University
Crowns and the Situating of
Authority

Q&A and Discussion

FRIDAY, APRIL 29
9:30 AM–5 PM

9:30 am
Corinne Mühlemann
University of Copenhagen,
Centre for Textile Research
From Moon To Fish: A Striped
Silk as *Tilasm*

Cynthia Hahn
Hunter College and the
Graduate Center, CUNY
The Medieval "Safety" Pin

Antje Bosselmann-Ruickbie
University of Gießen
Putting the Empress's Neck
on the Line: The Materiality of
Imperial Neck Ornamentation

Q&A and Discussion

12 pm
Lunch Break

1 pm
Sarah Laursen
Harvard Art Museums
Out of Place and Out of Sight:
Ornaments from Medieval
China in American Collections

Meredyth Lynn Winter
Colgate University;
Philadelphia Museum of Art
Dressing for Paradise:
A Consideration of Designs
& Materials Befitting Islamic
Burial Clothing

Q&A and Discussion

2:30 pm
Coffee Break

3 pm
Ashley Elizabeth Jones
University of Florida
Wearable Matter

Ivan Drpić
University of Pennsylvania
The Burdened Body:
Devotional Jewelry and the
Weight of the Sacred

Q&A and Discussion

4:30 pm
Conclusion

5 pm
Reception

Alicia Walker

Christian Bodies Clothed in Pagan Bodies: The Implications of Greco-Roman Mythological Imagery on Early Byzantine Items of Dress and Adornment

Numerous examples of late Roman and early Byzantine garments, jewelry, and grooming tools depict Greco-Roman mythological characters, despite the fact that these items of dress and adornment were likely employed by Christians. This talk explores the spiritual and social implications of dressing Christian bodies in ways that identified them with pagan models. I argue that these strategies of visual juxtaposition and assimilation not only expressed potent messages about the personal attributes that individuals sought to publicly project, but may also have been understood to generate and amplify these desired traits in tangible ways. This paper argues that “wearing” images, materials, and objects on the early Byzantine body was not a casual action, but instead a significant decision that carried considerable social and spiritual implications.

Zvezdana Dode

Honorary Robes and Belts of Submissiveness in Mongol Imperial Culture

The political pragmatics of Mongol imperial expansion are expressed in the remark attributed by Rashid al-Din to Khan Khulagu: “For enemies I am a conqueror, but for the humble I am ruler.” This ideology was visualized by the honorary clothes that the Mongol khans presented to their subjects and ambassadors of foreign states. The main sources for reconstructing the function of honorary clothing are the testimonies of the authors of medieval written texts and, to a lesser extent, miniature paintings.

The objective of the research is to determine the place of honorable garments within the context of Mongol imperial culture. It has been established that the garments of honor were a visual representation of social relations between giver and receiver and therefore can be differentiated from ceremonial dress by both symbolism and function. In the Mongol imperial costume, the robe and belt represent an integrated symbolic system. On the one hand, the robe is part of a group of items making up the set known as “robes of honor” mentioned in written sources with epithets, the connotations of which are associated with the idea of power. The belt, however, is associated with the idea of service and obedience to the ruler. In the Mongol court ceremony of receiving an ambassador, the presentation of a Robe of Honor represented a kind of physical manifestation of policy. And in the more comprehensive sense of cultural traditions, it reflected the stable functioning of the institution—giving out robes of honor.

Eiren Shea

Clothing the Khatun: Mongol Women’s Dress and Political Power

Elite Mongol women possessed an unusual amount of political power, something remarked upon by numerous visitors to the Mongol courts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This paper examines the dress of elite Mongol women to examine how their political and cultural clout was expressed sartorially. In it, the status and dress of elite Mongol women in the Yuan dynasty in China are compared to their predecessors in the Song, Jin, and Liao dynasties to determine how they built upon or departed from prior practices. An analysis of Mongol women’s dress alongside these comparisons illuminates the distinctive role the clothing of courtly Mongol women played in the larger visual culture of the Mongol court.

Juliane von Fircks

**To Adorn the Dead Body: The Representation of the Deceased Prince in and outside the Grave
(13–15th Centuries)**

Art historians usually content themselves with studying the outside of medieval princely tombs whereas archeologists focus on the remains from inside the graves, including textiles and jewelry. Starting with the old custom of the lying-in-state this lecture examines the relationship between hairstyle, clothing, jewelry, and other burial items adorning the dead in the tomb with the sculptural image of the same prince represented outside of the sarcophagus. As shall be demonstrated, the real burial equipment had rather little to do with the artistic representation, the latter not infrequently being executed long before or after the date of the death. Even if there never was a perfect congruence between inside and outside the grave, the dead person with its unique life and merits still remains the crucial link. The aim is to discover some basic patterns behind the different dealing with the corpse and the image. One special focus will be on the question of whether there was criteria other than the representation of status—concerning the uniqueness of the individual—which may have determined the real burial equipment of the last resting place of a prince.

Cecily J. Hilsdale

Crowns and the Situating of Authority

As the definitive emblem of authority across medieval cultures, crowns were worn by sovereigns but also displayed, appropriated, entombed, and dedicated to sanctuaries. We generally understand the wearing of a crown as synonymous with the assumption of power, which explains why its display independent of the ruler's body implies a conception of delegated authority. It is the crown's ability to delegate authority even when not worn that makes it a compelling case for thinking through issues of "wearability" in the Middle Ages. Unlike an image of a ruler, the crown is an attribute of ruling; when worn it confirms authority, and thus bears the potential to endow both spaces and people (usurpers or successors) with that authority. This paper examines distinctive ways that crowns embody authority in the absence of the ruler's body and the spatial environments that they triangulate over time. As its primary case study, it focuses on the most exquisite surviving votive crowns from the Middle Ages: the Visigothic crowns unearthed in Guarrazar outside Toledo in the mid-nineteenth century. Conceived for display and not for wearing, the crowns were nonetheless meant to imply wearing. How do the formal features of the crowns work as surrogates for the absent donor's body? I address this question by exploring the tension between "sightedness" and "sitedness"—the tension between how the crowns' formal configuration constructs a visual environment of commemoration (a sight) while also standing as a permanent installation testifying to the piety and generosity of their donors (a site).

Corinne Mühlemann

From Moon To Fish: A Striped Silk as Tilasm

Striped silks woven in the lampas technique were produced in the Mamluk and Mongol Empires during the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. Today, most are preserved as liturgical vestments or grave furnishings in European-Christian contexts. However, written and pictorial sources indicate that within the medieval Islamic world striped silks were tailored into garments that could function as robes of honor (*khil'a*, *tashrif*).

In the pattern of the horizontal band of a striped silk, today preserved in Regensburg, a depiction of the cosmos reveals itself. Together with the Arabic inscriptions and the constant repetition of perpetual knots, the iconography of this horizontal band transported an apotropaic meaning. One of the primary functions of clothing is to protect the body from external influences. Garments could not only protect against the whims of nature, but also against evil magic. Talismans (*tilasm*, *tilsam*) appear in medieval Islamic art outside of any specific object or material category. The category of "talismans" includes so-called "talismanic shirts," as well as monumental statues, engraved rings, amulets, and inscribed tablets and rolls. Although the earliest preserved examples of talismanic shirts originate from the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal territories and are made from tabby-weave cotton fabric and inscribed with ink, written sources mention talismanic shirts as early as the thirteenth century. By discussing the iconography of the horizontal band in detail, I will propose that this silk might be an early example of a talismanic garment.

Cynthia Hahn

The Medieval "Safety" Pin

Brooches were the medieval "safety pin," serving a wide range of users as devices to close or secure. They were worn as often by men as by women and could serve as military insignia of rank, or take the form of the episcopal mace or other clasp-like adornments for an ecclesiastic. It is difficult to ascertain whether a brooch was meant for a man or a woman, and to complicate matters, such objects often became gifts, and served as votives given to churches where they might be repurposed for ceremonial wear. The circular shape of the typical ring or annular brooch, alternatively the disk brooch, popular from the sixth century, is a simple but evocative form. Early medieval examples often overlay crosses which "quarter" the shape, pushing the result towards an evocation of the cosmos, an association already resident in symbolism of the cross whose four arms stretch to the four "corners" of the world. Additional stepped ornament, interlace and animal imagery including snakes, boars, and eagles can have many interpretations, although again cosmic aspects are often suggested. Materials used to make the brooches also have significance, from the prestige of gold to the shining of garnets to the use of shells. As with animals, materials connect the brooch to the wider meanings and powers of the world. The silver and niello Anglo-Saxon Fuller Brooch is one object that will be discussed in this talk in a wide-ranging consideration of this jewelry type and its activation of material agency, iconography, and magic in efforts to protect the "safety" of the body.

Antje Bosselmann-Ruickbie

Putting the Empress's Neck on the Line: The Materiality of Imperial Neck Ornamentation in Byzantium

Imperial garments and jewelry in Byzantium were decorated lavishly with pearls and precious stones, as depictions inform us. However, material remains are few. Several pieces of gold jewelry in different collections can be labelled "imperial," among them only two necklaces: the gold necklace with sapphires in Berlin from the so-called Assiut Treasure (sixth or seventh century); and the enamelled necklace from the Preslav Treasure (tenth century).

Garments, however, can be evaluated predominantly through depictions in monumental art and book illumination. The pictorial evidence is more comprehensive, but at the same time ambiguous and complex. As opposed to artifacts, we usually know the wearer, but the reconstruction of the illustrated neck ornamentation is often difficult. Especially the genre of mosaics is not designed to reflect the fine details of goldsmiths' works, not to mention the (often undocumented) restorations over the centuries.

What becomes clear is that most of the illustrations from the eleventh century onwards do not depict a separate necklace, but instead show a sort of collar with gold, pearls, and precious stones, which is usually called *maniakion*. However, it is doubtful that the empress' neck jewelry is related to the Byzantine *maniakia*, which were insignia of military rank. In this paper, I will examine empresses' neck ornamentation to discuss questions of wearability, addressing the unresolved problem of material construction as either a textile or as a piece of jewelry and the terminology.

Sarah Laursen

Out of Place and Out of Sight: Ornaments from Medieval China in American Collections

Tucked away in the storerooms of American museums are countless small gold and silver ornaments for the head, body, and clothing that were produced in China beginning around the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). Once part of elaborate funerary assemblages in tombs, these dazzling items were targeted by looters and separated from their wearers, resulting in the loss of the context necessary to understand them. This paper examines a small selection of men's belt and cap ornaments of the Six Dynasties period (220–589 CE) and women's jewelry as well as headdress and clothing ornaments of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) in an effort to tackle the difficult question of how museums should present these fragmentary objects to the public. Although their original context can never be fully reconstructed, the examination of recently excavated tombs, depictions of costume in other media, and contemporaneous texts allows us to interpret them holistically, as their creators intended, rather than in isolation.

Meredyth Winter

Dressing for Paradise: A Consideration of Designs and Materials Befitting Islamic Burial Clothing

In the study of the medieval Islamic world, scholars have largely approached the trends surrounding dress and clothing using written descriptions or painted depictions. Physical remains of garments and textiles generally lack context. Either due to transformation and reuse in Christian treasuries or because early finds from Islamic sites kept only fragments and discarded fabrics that might have yielded information about clothing and shrouds, historical garments have had little utility in discussions surrounding the wearable in the Islamic world. This presentation looks at the textiles recovered archaeologically from two Islamic burials outside the royal city of Rayy, Iran, as a means of nuancing the prevailing evidence and pushing the limits of reconstructions. By tracing the symbolic and material transformation of textile fragments and situating their evolution alongside trends in weaving and design in other media, the presentation posits a flexible approach to the wearable in which effect and allusion were paramount, and a variety of styles and practices were adopted in service of these goals.

Ashley Jones

Wearable Matter

Like any other art form, jewelry is a medium. Yet where a painting, for example, mediates primarily between its creator and an intended recipient, it is just as, if not more, important that jewelry mediate between its wearer and the world. As seductive ornament it can be designed to draw the eye to the body and its potentially eroticized features. As protective amulet it can turn a defensive face against malevolent forces. It is simultaneously public and private, social and intimate. The visual, magical, and symbolic aspects of jewelry can be effected through its placement, form, and iconography, but they are also instantiated and amplified via its materiality. Precious metals and gems reflect and refract the forces of attraction and protection. Late Antique Europe in particular saw a particular fascination with the visual and material qualities of gems. This paper considers the framing of gems in late antiquity—rhetorically, pictorially, and literally. It examines literary descriptions of gems and jewelry, their representation in mosaic, and their often-elaborate frames, whose ornamentation could be hidden to a casual viewer, but was potentially meaningful to a wearer. In all three cases, the color and luster of stones are particularly highlighted in ways, the paper will propose, that may help us draw into question certain fundamental assumptions concerning the place of the jewel as an ornament of the body in the western tradition.

Ivan Drpić

The Burdened Body: Devotional Jewelry and the Weight of the Sacred

In his 1908 essay “The Psychology of Jewelry,” Georg Simmel insists that the main function of jewelry is to magnify what he calls the *Ausstrahlung* of the wearer. The human person does not end at the physical boundary of the flesh. Articles of bodily adornment work to enhance and extend the aura of the wearer by radiating, as it were, their charisma. While Simmel’s account provides a useful framework for thinking about the social and ritual efficacy of medieval devotional jewelry, it offers little in the way of addressing the full psychological impact of this category of personal ornaments. Objects such as pectoral crosses, reliquary rings, rosaries, and prayer nuts were designed not so much to mediate between self and society, but rather to stage and facilitate an encounter of the self with itself. Focusing on Byzantine devotional neck pendants, or *enkolpia*, this paper considers how religiously significant wearables participated in introspective spiritual practices aimed at forming and reforming the Christian subject. The paper, more specifically, attends to the *enkolpion* as an instrument of self-imposed discipline and explores how the corporeal experience of carrying this object and feeling its weight, however minimal, on the body contributed to the wearer’s cultivation of inner vigilance.