2 Embroidered Narratives

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For Betty

Abstract
This essay discusses the significance of embroidery in the culture of Early Medieval England. Largely the work of women, such objects have been understudied in the cultural, religious and economical history of the period. The essay argues that this omission is partly based in gender stereotypes which have favored some material culture over these remains. The essay discusses some of the remaining artefacts, as well as the significance of textiles as objects in gift-giving contexts.

Keywords: Women, embroidery, textiles, textile production, opus feminile, gift giving

This essay will argue for the importance of embroidered textiles as artifacts that provide a unique window to the participation of women in Early Medieval England in the political, socio-economic, and intellectual life of the period. Textile gifts played a significant role in the creation of relations, but the study

1 This paper could not have been written without the seminal work of Elizabeth “Betty” Coatsworth, to whom the essay is dedicated. I was her research assistant between 1998 and 2001 on the Manchester Medieval Textiles Project, which she co-directed with Gale Owen-Crocker, and I am grateful that she opened my eyes to this important source. My sincere thanks go to Rebecca, Renee and Robin who allowed me to participate in this project. I am grateful for their work and friendship. A special thank you goes to Dr Alexandra Lester Makin who read a draft of this paper and provided most generous feedback. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer for helpful comments. All mistakes are mine.


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of textiles remains a specialized (and mostly gendered) area of research. This essay will consider the reason for such attitudes. While the surviving textile evidence pales in comparison to what remains of other sources, it is nevertheless a significant resource of female expression and agency.

Early medieval people were careful and snazzy dressers, if we can believe the evidence we get from graves. Tablet-woven borders, embroidery, and jewelry did not just enhance the beauty of costume but were also markers of class and gender.³ Iconography shows changes in fashion (and artistic style) from the rather rigid depictions in eighth-century Lichfield/St Chad Gospel (Litchfield Cathedral, MS Lich. 1) to the billowing style of the eleventh century, evident in depictions, such as Hope and Humility in the Cotton version of the Psychomachia (London, British Library, Cotton Cleopatra C. viii 17r), or the dress of Queen Emma in the manuscript of the New Minster Liber Vitae (London, British Library, Stowe MS 944, fol. 6). All of these items had to be made by a skillful textile worker. It is often assumed that textiles were made in domestic environments by the women of the home, but even there the production of enough clothing for the family and extended kin was a time-consuming and highly skilled occupation. Cloth had to be made by producing yarn from fiber in complex processes of retting (linen) or carding (wool) and then spun into yarn of different thickness and strength. Textiles were woven; at first on the warp-weighted horizontal loom, and from the ninth-century onward on horizontal looms and then the treadle loom, which was (re)introduced around the turn of the millennium.⁴ Weavers used patterning and colors to achieve interesting effects. Garments had to be cut and sown and expensive garments were further adorned with, for example, tablet-woven borders. Evidence from material culture and iconography suggests that textile work was predominantly the domain of women: as makers and commissioners, and as producers of wealth and revenue.⁵ While the twelfth-century Liber Eliensis suggests that by the end of the period men may have been involved in the making of textiles, they

appear to have been the exception even then. Embroidery continued to be a female sphere, even when textile production became a male-dominated occupation in the medieval period.

The contribution that women made to the economies of their time as producers or workers of fabric have often been overlooked, but there has been a welcome reconsideration of *opus feminile* in recent years. This revaluation has led to some consideration of the importance of women’s labor by textile and art historians, but there is still a need to bring this research to a wider attention within research into early medieval England and to give it equal status to other material culture, such as sculpture and metalwork which is regarded as the result of supposedly “masculine” work.

Textiles were not just garments to wear; the genre also includes tablecloths, wall hangings, and other artifacts: items of prestige, given as gifts to kings and saints. As such they are an important currency in the creation of political ties, as well as networks of prayer and commemoration. A good example is that of Bugga, an eighth-century nun, who seeks prayers of intercession for her dead parents from Boniface (also known under his English name, Wynfrid). In exchange she sends him a gift of an altar cloth and money: “Et per eundem portitorem tibi transmitto nunc quinquaginta solidos et pallium altaris” (and for their journey [lit. ferrying (to a heaven)] I send you now fifty solidi and an altar cloth). Gift exchanges of this kind are...

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6 The 1134 inventory lists: “one cope of black purpura, well decorated and star-spangled all over, which Wulfstan first, and later Guthmund worked upon, but Ralph completed…” This is followed by an orphrey made by Prior Thembert; Janet Fairweather ed., *Liber Eliensis: A History of the Isle of Ely from the Seventh Century to the Twelfth, Compiled by a Monk of Ely in the Twelfth Century; Translated from the Latin, with an Introduction, Notes, Appendices and Indices* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005); Bk II, I, chap. 50, 358. I am grateful to a comment made by Dr Lester Makin that perhaps the male contribution to the garment may not be the stitches but the metalwork of the item.

7 Several major research projects in England and especially Scandinavia have delivered important collections of research. Among them are the *Lexis of Cloth and Clothing* under the direction of Gale Owen-Crocker, http://lexisproject.arts.manchester.ac.uk/, accessed February 24, 2022, and the ongoing work of the Copenhagen Centre for Textile Research. The centre has done a significant revaluation of the Birka textiles in Sweden, https://ctr.hum.ku.dk/, accessed February 24, 2022.

8 Among the very significant studies are the Relics of St. Cuthbert, which include significant textile sources and which I discuss further on: C. F. Battiscombe ed., *The Relics of St Cuthbert* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956).


not unusual; Boniface himself liked to create networks with important contemporaries through gifts, including textiles. Thus he sent Bishop Pehthelm a donation of a white coat embroidered with dots (pallium albis stigmatibus variatum) and a “shaggy” (villosam) cloth to dry the feet of his fellow religious in the Maundy service.

Opus feminile: Woman's Work and Economic Impact

The main focus of this essay is the use of textiles as objects of prestige exchanges, but it should not be forgotten that they could also be paid as taxation (same as food stuffs) and had an important role in medical care. Clearly the labor of spinning, weaving, and manufacture was an important aspect of economy, which raises the question of whether there were specialist workshops, run by women. For example, was the “clean cloth” required in many medical recipes, made at home or by specialist weavers? We know that wide-ranging trade connections in early medieval Europe created access to all kinds of exotic items, but we are less aware if there was still a need to finish raw materials, such as the silk thread which is used for a surgical procedure described in Bald’s Leechbook to close a cleft lip? Our scant knowledge of physicians in early medieval England, with few named persons and even less evidence for surgeries, suggests that practitioners were usually men, but it is possible that the specialized material for their work is dependent on skilled women. While comparisons between dif-
ifferent medieval cultures should always be made with caution, we may nevertheless take a careful look at early medieval Scandinavia. Here female manufacturers produced fine twills and intricate expensive goods in urban workshops which were then carried to all areas of the Viking world, including the British Isles. It is also likely that in the wake of such trade skilled textile workers migrated to other parts in order to start businesses, which subsequently led to changes in the economy of these areas. In the Western Isles of Scotland flax cultivation arrives with the Vikings—and we should assume that this labor-intensive fiber was grown there because conditions were ideal for it. Flax requires a high level of humidity and water for retting and it is thus not inconceivable to consider that the Scandinavian women of the Western Isles arrived not just as an appendage of male settlement, but as entrepreneurs in their own right.

One of the most difficult challenges for the study of textiles is that fact that so little of it has survived, in particularly from the pre-Christian period. While there is a fair amount of surviving textile evidence (albeit much of it in fragments), and while many more textiles only survive as imprints, which means that it is replaced by the metals on which the fiber decayed, examples of embroidery are rare. Penelope Walton Rogers counts only three specimens from early graves: two in women’s graves and one from a male burial. All of them have a demonstrable “high end” context—and one of them is from


17 In fact, Michelle Hayeur Smith claims that women across the North Atlantic Viking diaspora gained stronger roles in households and regional economies: “Some of these more powerful roles appear to have arisen not only from producing cloth, that was vital to the medieval economy but from the very nature of textile work”; The Valkyries’ Loom: The Archaeology of Cloth Production and Female Power across the North Atlantic (Gainsville: University of Florida Press, 2020), 23.

18 Eva Andersson Strand, “Tools and Textiles: Production and Organisation in Birka and Hedeby,” in Viking Settlements and Viking Society: Papers from the Proceedings of the Sixteenth Viking Congress, ed. S. Sigmundsson et al. (Reykjavík: University of Iceland Press, 2011), 13. In order to fulfill the most basic needs for a medium Norse household of ten people, two women would need to perform 325 days of labor each; see Hayeur Smith, Valkyries’ Loom, 101 and Table 5.5. Her work is based on research by Tom McGovern. Even with recycling and a limited set of clothes, this suggests that perhaps not all textiles were made on the farm.


20 Cloth and Clothing, 101.
a so-called “relic box” at Kempston in Bedfordshire. The purpose of these small, cylindrical containers, which are found in seventh-century high status graves, has been much discussed. Ideas have ranged from work boxes to containers for relics, but we tend to think now that these are associated with some form of religious function.\(^{21}\) Prior to the availability of burial in hallowed ground as part of a churchyard, relics may have been used to create sanctified spaces in cemeteries.\(^{22}\) In the period of Conversion such sites will have housed Christians and pagans alike, and while burial is often complex and has many regional variations, there have been suggestions that the so-called “founder graves” contained items which were representative for their kingroup.\(^{23}\) The inclusion of textile “relics” in any such burials suggests that women were seen as mediators of religious and fulfilled an important function of creating links between the various generations of the kingroup.

### Falling Through the Cracks: Disciplines and Discomfort

While the significance of textiles in the economic, political and religious life of early medieval England should be evident from the examples above there are reasons why research into them feature so little in the discussions around culture and identity in early medieval England. Whereas most scholars can comfortably distinguish an early hand from a later script, few would be able to tell the difference between a woman’s costume from the sixth century in contrast to that of the tenth century. At a time when discussions around the “veil” are ubiquitous, we may wish to consider that the way in which people dressed is not always a question of “frivolous” fashion or ethnic


identity, but of individual choice which may reflect personal belief. Textiles do not normally feature in the syllabi of university courses or anthologies on early medieval England. The neglect of this type of evidence occurs for several reasons. To begin with, the study of textiles is a specialist subject and requires expert knowledge, and therefore textile studies are discussed by specialists in separate papers and journals which are not always apparent to other scholars. Many of the practitioners, who are almost all women, are located outside departments which traditionally study early medieval England, such as English, History, or Archaeology, and in many cases they are employed in research institutions outside universities, such as museums. Additionally, many textile historians research as independent scholars, which means that they may not be included in conference calls or invited to participate in other forms of academic dissemination. I would also like to argue that the omission of textile evidence also has a gender bias, since other forms of material culture, such as metalwork or sculpture, which are presumed to have been made by men, are included.24

While reconstructions of dress have played a significant role in the discussion of migration and identity,25 the makers of such dress have not. The textiles from burials have been studied in depth by textile historians, such as mother and daughter Grace and Elizabeth Crowfoot, who have shown that materials and techniques can show cultural connections with other parts of the world as much as the gold and garnets of metalwork, but also that there appear to be ways in which people learned their craft from others. While many archaeological reports contain a report on textile remains, very few include the outcomes in the general discussions unlike considerations of dress accessories, such as brooches or buckles. If textile work is taught by mothers to their daughters, then there will be visible differences in techniques—which again can be used for the study of mobility. There is a wholly untapped area of comparative research.

If spinning and weaving in early medieval England are mentioned at all in scholarly discourse it is often in the context of literature. This is especially evident in the case of the famous peaceweaver, freoðuwebbe, mentioned in the poems Widsið, Beowulf, and Elene—a term that has been discussed much in relation to gender, agency, and social position.26 While the freoðuwebbe

24 The sculpture of early medieval England, unlike in Scandinavia where we have named rune carvers, was made by anonymous craftspeople.
commands on interesting role in these texts, it is restricted to few women who are shown in the context of male politics. Recently Megan Cavell has shown that while weaving and binding are used as a metaphor in many Old English texts, the evidence for “real” textiles is rare. So perhaps the omission of textile work and materials in much of the scholarship of early medieval England is justified by the paucity of mentions in literary works?

It is perhaps because textile production is primarily associated with women that this kind of occupation conjures up uncomfortable connotations of restriction and domesticity in some scholars (to which I will return below). There may also be an assumption that this kind of work was done largely by lay women who had leisure time, and was not an output of women who were participants in cultural discourses, which may be a reason why so much precedence is given to other forms of material culture. Since the 1980s a significant rise in feminist studies of women in early medieval England has produced some extremely fine work, encompassing literary depictions of female characters, historical queens, and religious women. While there have been many efforts to make women of the period visible, most examinations are centered on the context of their place in heroic society, or in relation to male power, male teaching, and exhortation. Studies of medieval women are often done on the normative template of maleness—thus women can only gain recognition on a scale which is dominated by male activities (fighting, ruling, etc.), whereas uniquely female areas of activity, such as child rearing or textile working, are overlooked and sometimes dismissed.

It is worth considering that characteristics which we regard as relating to femaleness or maleness may not the same as those of people in early medieval England, and that it is important to see how gender identities were constructed during this period. The binaries of woman versus man, and a reductionist approach which sees one only in connection with the other, have been queried by Clare Lees and Gillian Overing. While it now is generally agreed that biological gender and gender identity are two different things,
we may want to query what exactly was regarded as uniquely feminine in the society of early medieval England. Lees and Overing remind us that, unlike in later periods, there is no overarching concept of “woman”: “A woman in this culture is a wife, or a queen, or a relative of a man or his family, a lover, but she rarely is ‘woman’ in either the misogynist or existentialist sense of the term.” Just as the period of early medieval England has been constructed through differentiation, in terms such as “Pre-Conquest” and the like, the classification of women through binaries such as “powerless/powerful” limits our understanding.

There may be a reason why researchers are so hesitant to consider traditional forms of female work: as a type of labor which is undoubtedly undertaken by women it became associated with their limitations, because it is associated with domesticity and with it an idea that such work restricted women’s movement outside the home or that it even constrained them to subservient roles away from male halls of power. Evidence is drawn from literary passages, such as Old English Maxims I: “Fæmne æt hyre bordan gerisað, widgongel wif word gespringeð” (A woman should be at her embroidery, a roving woman arises talk; lines 63b–64a). These lines seem to support the idea that textile work was not only reducing women’s ability to move freely, but also limited them to enforced domesticity, especially when we consider that the next lines declare that her looks will deteriorate if she does not follow this advice (lines 64b–65). This seemingly misogynist statement does, however, require some form of contextualization. We need to be very careful not to mistake modern ideas associated with needlework for medieval realities. The notion that embroidery restricts women’s development and freedom can be traced as far back as the eighteenth-century when

30 The seminal work is Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, 10th Anniversary Edition (London: Routledge, 1999) and Toril Moi’s “What is a Woman?” in What is a Woman and Other Essays (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 369–93. Butler’s ideas have been influential in the way we think about gender identities in discussions of medieval burial archaeology: see, for example, Roberta Gilchrist, Gender and Archaeology: Contesting the Past (London: Routledge, 1999).
31 Lees and Overing, "Clerics," 25. There are few texts that centre on the functions of the female body; exceptions are medical texts (of which only few have survived), which focus mostly on fecundity, and Bede’s inclusion of Gregory’s advice to Augustine in which he declares menstruation to be a disease; Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds. and trans, Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), Bk I, 27, p. 92. I’d like to thank the reviewer for pointing me to Bede.
writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft rejected needlework as confining the faculties that women could otherwise employ. It should be remembered that Wollenstonecraft wrote in response to ideas of the Enlightenment expressed in works such as *Emile* by the influential author Jean-Jacques Rousseau. However, the “frivolousness” of needlework only applied to aristocratic women and those of the nascent bourgeoisie; for lower-class women needlework remained as a useful industry which allowed them to earn an independent income. Needlework thus attained a doubly negative association: as a lower class occupation, and therefore not seeming for women who did not need to earn an income, and at the same time as a frivolous pastime which limits the intellectual potential. Thus participation in the intellectual sphere and needlework are posed in opposition, but we need to understand that this perception does not apply to the early Middle Ages. Instead, embroidery is an occupation which is the privilege of powerful women and the produce of this labor can bring about power and connections, as well as one in which they can participate in intellectual discourses.

**Connecting Threads**

Returning to the passage from *Maxims I*, it should be noted that while the term *fæmne* is usually translated as “women.” However, it predominantly occurs in context of virginal women and the Virgin Mary. For example, it glosses *virgo/innupta* “virgin, unmarried woman” in Aldhelm’s glosses and is used for Eve in the Old English *Genesis* poem. Thus the line in *Maxims I* seems to indicate a specific type of woman: unmarried or virginal. The circle of women for whom this advice is intended is therefore restricted: it could be intended for a royal nun, or an unmarried noble woman, or both.
There is ample evidence for such women in historical sources, and a fair few of them are involved in the making of embroideries. For example, according to the eleventh century Liber Eliensis the eleventh-century noblewoman Æðelswið retired to the monastery at Coveney, near Ely. Rather than getting married, she spent her days producing gold embroidery and splendid tapestry at her own expense with her puellulae (group of young girls). Jane Tibbetts Schulenburg offers an impressive catalogue of royal ladies who are either producers or commissioners of such works in early medieval Europe. Such items were “acts of piety and devotion, ... made as special gifts for churchmen, favourite saints, and for the adornment of the ‘supreme spouse’, along with the ‘hall and table of the Lord.’” From Aldhelm’s description of Bucge, daughter of King Centwine of Wessex (679–685) we hear that she was not just the founder of a church, but endowed it with all kinds of objects, including gold-embroidered altar cloths. It is interesting to note in this context that the author of the Liber Eliensis feels compelled to tell us about such splendid objects, which are usually neglected by other authors, such as Bede, for example, who does not mention the splendid stole and maniple that St. Æðelþryð (636–679), founder of the monastery at Ely, produces for St. Cuthbert. These items need to be understood in the context of medieval giftgiving, where the gift entitles the giver to a return. These textiles created bonds of gratitude and obligation between the donor and the recipient, and the most likely returns were intercession and commemoration. It also placed these women at the heart of ceremonies which were traditionally not a female domain, such as the altar. As donors they were “present” in ceremonies normally hidden from sight, such as the preparation of the host.

40 Schulenburg, “Holy Women.”
41 Schulenburg, “Holy Women,” 84.
43 Schulenburg, “Holy Women,” 90–91; Fairweather, Liber Eliensis, 30. It is unclear if the author of the Liber Eliensis is referring to the St. Cuthbert relics here, which of course are much later. The text claims that these objects were made from gold and precious stones and shown to people quite frequently on request. The coffin was opened in 1104 and the twelfth-century Reginald of Durham tells us that Cuthbert’s unruly hair was tended to regularly by a cleric named Alfred, so it is possible that some confusion took place.
and wine for the Eucharist. Schulenburg writes that the value of such gifts is clear since they were recognized by the church as major donations and were carefully recorded on inventories: “They became part of an ecclesiastical memoria and thus provided these women artists and donors with certain immortality.”

These objects are in essence on par with inscriptions in liber vitae. They have the same purpose: to create bonds between the living and dead by acts of donation and memory recreation. In the same way as written records fossilize the name and status of the donor (such as the king, duke, etc.), these objects also retain memories of the status and power of the giver and allow the makers a place in the economies of power. Schulenburg considers the motivations for such donations: “As custodians of memory ... [women] were responsible for the well-being of their own souls and those of their family and friends,” she writes, further underlining that such objects are in the same as inscribed altar crosses, calendars which recovered the names of the nobility to be remembered and prayed for. These very personal gifts create the bonds vital for the spiritual wellbeing of the family—as such they are equal to donations, such as gold crosses which are bequeathed to monasteries as items of piety and with the hope that the saint, who is resident in the institutions through relics or the invocation of their name, will reciprocate these gifts with intercession or healing. In the image of the bequest of a gold cross to the New Minster at Winchester by Queen Emma and Knut (BL Stowe MS 944, fol. 6) mentioned above, the cross is positioned on what appears to be two altar cloths. It is very possible that these two, although not listed among known lists of donations, were also a part of the gift since Emma in particular, is known for her textile donations to Ely and Winchester. Emma’s handiwork of a pall of purpura decorated with gold and precious gems is celebrated in the Liber Eliensis, and she was an astute political mover who wielded significant power and influence in her time.

It is quite possible to read the advice for a woman to stay at her embroidery as a reminder that such items have inherent power: as a royal woman, and

44 “Holy Women,” 84 and 105.
45 “Holy Women,” 105.
47 Fairweather, Liber Eliensis, Bk II, chap. 79, 176. Purpura is the most precious silk cloth in early medieval England, and it can be made in various colours. The Old English term is godweb; Gale Owen-Crocker, Dress in Anglo-Saxon England, 2nd rev. ed (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 211.
perhaps a veiled woman, she wields more influence through the creation of precious gifts than she would in activities such as the king’s circuit or pilgrimage. The passage is framed by instructions for noble men: the earl who must control his troops and the defamed man who must stay in the shadows (lines 63–67), and appears in the context of royal obligation—gift-giving, command, and being liberal. It is therefore possible that the *widongel* (wandering, roving) is not primarily about a woman’s agency and choice to move freely, but centered around the ties that bind this society.

Textiles play a central role in the creation of ties between royal power and spiritual care. They clothed priests and adorned altars and were a visible reminder of the generosity that endowed these institutions. In return for this largesse the donors could secure intercession for themselves and their kin. In many cases, as I will show in some case studies below, these were designed to be worn as close to the holiest as possible: on the body of an archbishop or covering the bodies of saints and their tombs. While chronicles and charters remained unseen for much of the time, these objects were made to be visible at the center of power. In some cases they were embroidered with the names of the donor. Just as some Ottonian princesses joined royal monasteries to collect and write the deeds of their male kin, noblewomen in Early Medieval England created memorable reminders of the power of their families, and by extension their own memory.

**Textiles and Female Literacy: Some Examples**

As we have seen, embroidered textiles are quite rare in the period before Christianization (with a caveat that this may be based on the conditions of survival), this changes post-Conversion. Early embroideries, as far as we can tell from the few extant examples, may have been imported, but the need to furnish Christian ceremonies and buildings leads to creations made from 48  We may consider a letter from Boniface to Bugga in which he recommends that she should defer her pilgrimage because of the considerable dangers ahead; he also thanks Bugga for the gifts and vestments she had sent with her query; Rau, *Briefe*, 94–96.
precious materials, such as silk and gold-covered thread. Inventories, such as the already-mentioned Liber Eliensis, give an idea just how much of it was produced and survived until the post-Conquest period. Most of these have disappeared since even religious clothes are subject to fashions and it is quite possible that theft, reuse, moths, and time were also not conducive to preservation. It is also clear that, unlike in the case of manuscripts, there seems not to have been much call for the collection of whatever may have survived from the early medieval English period.

Among the surviving corpus there are a range of different types of embroidery: (1) embroidered inscriptions, (2) embroidered images, or (3) a mixture of both. I want to specifically consider objects that have some form of inscription. One of the earliest inscriptions, albeit not from an English context, is on a pillow which Alpheidis (born ca. 794), sister of the Frankish king Charles the Bald and abbess of St. Stephen at Reims, made for the translation of the remains of St. Remigius in 852. The embroidery is gold thread on red Persian or Byzantine silk and has a Latin inscription which tells us that the work was composed and executed by Alpheidis at the request of Bishop Hincmar. The inscription around the borders of the pillow would have framed the head of the saint and been visible at the time of deposition. It includes a request for her prayers to be “carried beyond the stars.” It is clear that when Alpheidis was commissioned with this task she wanted to be remembered as not only the maker, but also in the intercession of the saint as a donor of an expensive gift.

Such inscriptions matter to our understanding of female literacy and are a unique female voice from a period where relatively little other evidence has survived. Betty Coatsworth in her seminal article remarks: “Textile inscriptions associated with early medieval England have never been looked at as a significant body of material in their own right, from the point of paleography, language, grammar or punctuation, or their content.

51 Schulenburg, “Holy Women,” 94.
53 Schulenburg, “Holy Women,” 92. In her note Schulenburg writes that while the embroidery has greatly deteriorated it was included in an inventory of 1646.
55 Other examples for female literacy are Aldhelm’s De Laude Virginitate, dedicated to the nuns of Barking, and the so-called “Boniface Correspondence” in which the missionary asks for texts to be made for him.
or relationship to the works from which they form a part, with perhaps the exception of the Bayeux Tapestry. They are not included in lists or surveys of inscriptions.\textsuperscript{56}

In the corpus of the surviving embroideries there is some discussion about the origin and provenance of these portable objects, and for years there have been arguments for or against an early medieval English origin for objects such as the Bayeux Tapestry (which is in fact an embroidery—the images on tapestries are woven in whereas here the images are stitched), are of an English provenance or not. In the context of the lives of early medieval aristocratic women such ethnic definitions may be a red herring: the involvement of women in missionary activities, marriage policies, and the lively gift exchange system means that there is a potentially wide range of items from different geographical backgrounds which become incorporated in such works. This is not the place but there has been a lot of emphasis on “ethnic identity markers” in archaeology, especially burial archaeology, but many graves are assembly casts with objects from many different areas. We can observe that there are different dress styles, but whether the “Kentish veil” was a statement of ethnic identity or simply a marker of rank, or even a fashion statement, needs discussion.\textsuperscript{57} Textiles are generally assigned an origin by their technique (where geographical comparisons can be assigned) and imagery. One such example is the \textit{bursa} of St. Willibrod (Utrecht, Netherlands), which is made from a gold-brocaded tablet-woven band, patterned with a simple vine scroll and possibly made in eighth- or ninth-century England.\textsuperscript{58}

Since royal women were actively involved in the early English missionary movement to the continent, there are a range of embroideries which have a putative English origin. One of the most prominent is the so-called \textit{casula} of Saints Harlindis and Relindis, now in Maaseik, Belgium, which is dated to the ninth century.\textsuperscript{59} These sisters were part of the missionary movement to the continent. As an abbess, Harlind communicated with both Boniface


\textsuperscript{57} A number of high-status burials at Kentish sites such as Sarre were found to have had gold-brocaded headbands, which were interpreted as fillets that held a head veil, and the remains of a long scarf or veil which covered the upper body were found at Mill Hill, Deal in Kent; for a list of references, see Elizabeth Coatsworth and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, \textit{Medieval Textiles of the British Isles AD 450–100: An Annotated Bibliography}, British Archaeological Reports British Series 445 (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2007), 21.

\textsuperscript{58} Coatsworth, “Stitches in Time,” 8.

and Willibrod, whereas Relindis was renowned for her embroidery skills and copying of manuscripts.\textsuperscript{60} The \textit{Vita} of the saints mentions that the sisters were skilled in textile arts, but that the abbey they founded at Aldeneik also hosted other works by their hands, including a richly decorated gospel book and a psalter.\textsuperscript{61} It also mentions decorated textiles described as \textit{palliola} which correspond to the surviving embroidered \textit{casula} and \textit{velamen}. The \textit{casula} contains eight pieces of gold-and-silk embroidered \textit{casula} and \textit{velamen}. The \textit{casula} contains eight pieces of gold-and-silk embroidered strips, and the monograms may have originated from an altar frontal.\textsuperscript{62} The connection with early medieval England has been assigned on the basis of the decoration on the embroideries which were stitched on top of the cloth and the decorative foliate ornaments which are compatible with metalwork and stone carvings from southern England in the early ninth century.\textsuperscript{63} The four corners of the H-shaped centerpiece carry the letters \textit{A} and \textit{O}, alpha and omega.\textsuperscript{64} This is not the only inscription on this item, as Coatsworth describes: “Fragments of red and beige silk tablet woven braid, brocaded in gold thread, edge the strips of embroidery with arcades and roundels, ... and part of that braid carries letters.”\textsuperscript{65} The meaning of the letters “IAVSV” remains unclear but it has been suggested that they are early medieval English display capitals and their setting among arches is compared by Budny and Tweddle to manuscript illustrations.\textsuperscript{66} The connection between textile decoration and other media, such as stonework and manuscripts, shows that the executors of such items were not just acquainted with contemporary art, but used it for their own media. A ninth-century soumak braid or girdle found in the tomb of an archbishop at Sant’Appollinare in Ravenna contains fragmentary sections of Psalm 123.\textsuperscript{67} The letters have an insular appearance, so they may have been made by a female artisan who was trained in the textual culture of Early Medieval England.\textsuperscript{68}


\textsuperscript{61} Budny and Tweddle, “Maaseik Embroideries,” 68.


\textsuperscript{63} Budny and Tweddle, “Maaseik Embroideries,” 66.

\textsuperscript{64} Coatsworth, “Inscriptions,” 76; Budny and Tweddle, “Maaseik Embroideries,” 75–76.

\textsuperscript{65} “Inscriptions,” 78.


\textsuperscript{67} Coatsworth, “Inscriptions,” 74. Soumak is an early medieval weaving technique which uses a technique of wrapping thread around the weft. It is suggested that it is an imitation of Byzantine weaving; Coatsworth, “Inscriptions,” 74.

\textsuperscript{68} Coatsworth, “Inscriptions,” 74.
Even more interesting than the casula is the so-called velamen of St. Harlindis at the same church. A velamen is a type of veil or scarf. This contains the inscription:

Square I: HOC PARVuM Mu/NuS eRLVINuS SV
Square II: SORORE SUA [S]CO PETRO OFFE[R]/RECVRAuIT PRO/ANIMELLIV[S]

transcription: Hoc parvum munus erluinus su Sorore sua [s](an)c(t)o Petro offe[r]/re pro/ anime illiu[s]

(Erluinus at his own ... this small gift ... by [or with] his sister took care to offer St. Peter for his [or her] soul.)

We do not know who Erluinus is, nor his sister, but the inscription is reminiscent of texts associated with other donations, such as Bugga’s altar cloth given to Boniface, which she describes as “parva in speciae” (small to look at).

Coatsworth writes that the display capitals letters are early medieval English or Frankish in a mixture of square capitals and uncials. While the items may not be identified with certainty, the fact that they contain the same type of inscription as known from other media, such as manuscripts is a strong indicator of their origin. Additionally, the association with the relics of a saint of early medieval England, underlines again the importance of such gifts in the creation of ties across the English Channel. In the same way as charters use the formula “for the benefit of my soul,” women used such objects to have their names recorded, to connect themselves with saints and churches on their own authority. The fact that noble women create networks of their own volition alone should place textiles into the center of studies around memory and memoria.

It appears that the “propaganda” value of such items was well understood and applied in other areas as well. Not all of the splendid embroideries were aimed to be used in a strictly religious context; we hear of queens who work precious garments for their husbands and in at least one case, for the queen herself. According to Goscelin, Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor, made an alb containing a portrait of herself kissing Christ’s feet, a position usually

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70 Rau, Briefe, 62.
71 “Inscriptions,” 80.
assigned to Mary Magdalene.\textsuperscript{72} The image connects Edith with biblical narrative, and while her depiction as the sinner Mary Magdalene may not seem to be the most flattering comparison for a queen—especially one rumored to have lived in enforced celibacy with her husband—it is the same kind of performative humility which is expressed in written documents, such as letters. It also shows that she is aware of the biblical narrative in which Mary is a companion of Christ (Luke 8:2) and a witness to the resurrection (Mark 16:1) and is thus elevating her own role in the process.

**Hidden in Plain Sight?: The St. Cuthbert Textiles and Political History**

As mentioned above, written inventories, such as the *Liber Eliensis* record a large quantity of embroidered textiles, and they are a testament to female patronship and literacy. While many of these items seem to have been carefully preserved and passed on, there are cases where changes in political power and circumstances may have led to a re-appropriation of named embroideries? One of the most significant embroideries from early medieval England is the so-called “Stole of Cuthbert.” It is one of three textile objects donated to the saint by King Athelstan on his visit to Chester-le-Street in AD 934.\textsuperscript{73} Both of Cuthbert’s *vitae* talk about vestments and a head cloth, which were buried with the saint when he died in AD 687 and which were still intact (“unsoiled”) when the coffin was opened in AD 698.\textsuperscript{74} When St. Cuthbert’s coffin was opened in 1827 and the relics were removed, they found various textiles aside from the maniple and stole. These included silk remains and some Egyptian tabby—by which we denote a type of weave—as well as a soumak braid from the region of modern Uzbekistan, all dated to AD 720–800, so the items must have been deposited after the first opening of the coffin. Since there are no known openings between AD 698 and

\textsuperscript{72} Schunenburg, “Holy Women,” 103. See also Diener, “Sealed,” 4. Gregory the Great, in his Homily 33, fused Mary of Magdala with the unnamed woman who anoints Christ’s feet in Mark 14:3 and Mary of Bethany. He also called her a prostitute, which becomes her predominant attribute; J. M. B. Porter, “Prostitution and Monastic Reform,” *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 41 (1997), 72–79, at 72.

\textsuperscript{73} Elizabeth Coatsworth, “The Embroideries from the Tomb of St Cuthbert,” in *Edward the Elder 899–924*, ed. Nick Higham and David Hill (London: Routledge, 2001), 292–307. The definitive analysis of the artifacts from the burial is still C. E. Battiscombe’s edited volume of *The Relics of St Cuthbert*.

\textsuperscript{74} Colgrave, *Two Lives of St Cuthbert; Anonymous Life*, Chapter XII, 131, and *Bede’s Prose Life* XLII, p. 293.
the translation of the coffin to Chester-le-Street, we can assume that the embroidered textiles known as “stole and maniple” may have been donations by the King Athelstan when he visited the shrine at Chester-le-Street. As previously shown, such donations created personal ties between the donor, the maker and the recipient, but in this case the political history behind these items raises some questions of why they were chosen to be included in what clearly was a gift to an important saint.

The so-called “maniple” of St. Cuthbert,\(^75\) which depicts figures, such as Peter the Deacon, St. John the Evangelist, and John the Baptist, has been made or commissioned by Ælfflæd, second wife of Edward the Elder, which is clear from the embroidered inscription: “ÆLFFLÆD FIERI PRECEPIT” (Ælfflæd had this made). It was clearly intended as a high-status gift to Bishop Friðestan of Winchester by the queen since it carries the inscription: PIO EPISCOPO FRIDESTANO (for the pious bishop Friðestan),\(^76\) but whether the bishop, who was deposed in 931 CE, ever got this gift is debatable. When Edward the Elder died in 924 two of his sons contended for the kingship: Athelstan, son of his first wife Ecgwyn,\(^77\) and Ælfweard, his son by his second wife Ælfflæd. By the time Edward the Elder died, Ælfflæd had been deposed in favor of a Kentish noblewoman, Eadgifu, who also had a son and potential contender with the king: Edmund, who would take the crown in 939 CE. Both women may have speculated on the influential position of dowager queen. Ælfweard died soon after being nominated king in Wessex in 924 and relations between Athelstan and Bishop Friðestan may not have been the most cordial, since he is not recorded as having attended the coronation of Athelstan in 925. Relations between Ælfflæd and her stepson may not have been the best either, since as the mother of the deceased King Ælfweard she must have been supporting his case, but this remains speculation, since we know little about her life at this point. Her second son Edwin may have also been a contender for the throne, but we know very little about him. Edwin drowned in 933, and spurious sources suggest he did so because he rebelled against the king.\(^78\) It is clear that Athelstan’s claim to the throne was supported in Mercia, where he had grown up and was known, but that it took the witan of Wessex over half a year to accept his claim to kingship.

\(^{75}\) A maniple is a long strip of cloth worn over the arm of the priest during the celebration of the Eucharist.

\(^{76}\) Coatsworth, “Embroideries from the Tomb of St Cuthbert,” 296.

\(^{77}\) There is some speculation that Ecgwyn was not a wife, but a concubine.

which may support the idea that there may have been some hesitation in
the choice of Athelstan as king.

The stole has survived in eight fragments and the embroidery shows a
range of prophets from the Old Testament, as well as inscriptions which name
the various figures. Once again Ælfflæd is named as the commissioner/maker
and Friðestan as the recipient. The embroideries are fashioned in various
colors on a background of a couched gold thread on what is presumed to be
silk. The iconography on all of the embroideries is interesting: firmly rooted
in the traditions of the tenth century, such as acanthus leaves and tendrils,
which are recognizable from manuscript illuminations of the period. The
choice of biblical figures where the stole depicts Old Testament prophets,
flanked by St. Thomas and St. James at either end, shows that the designers
who planned and outlined the iconography were literate in biblical narra-
tives and commentary and made choices about inclusion and exclusion of
prophets. The maniple, which is similar in style, is decorated with figures
from the New Testament and Church history, such as St. John the Baptist,
St. Gregory the Great, and Paul the Deacon. In the major examination of
the stole and maniple of St. Cuthbert it was observed that the iconography
is unique since it depicts Old Testament prophets on the stole, rather than
New Testament saints, as well as the choice of the inclusion of St. Thomas,
who was not a popular saint in England before St. Thomas Becket. In a
recent essay Alexandra Lester Makin has pointed out that such objects were
not just transmitting messages of theology, but were designed to enhance
the sensory experience of the congregation:

As the light touched each embroidered figure, it activated that image,
so each was spiritually present: the divine light making the invisible
visible. As the maniple and stole moved, causing light to flicker over the
embroidered faces, the eyes would appear to follow you, to directly engage
with you, creating a bond that was considered a form of touch; they were
blessing you and drawing you towards spiritual enlightenment. This is not
only a visual and metaphysically tactile experience; it is a kinaesthetic
one. The movement of the vestments brings the divine light reflected in

80 Elizabeth Plenderleith, Christopher Hohler, and R. Freyhan, “The Stole and Maniples,” in
The Relics of St Cuthbert, ed. C. F. Battiscombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 375–96,
at 398–99. See also R. Freyhan in the same volume, who looks at the stylistic influences which
are traced back to Sassanian and Byzantine sources: “The Place of the Stole and Maniple in
the gold to life, activates it, if you will; thus the witnessing clergy and congregation also observed the divine through and in motion.\textsuperscript{81}

The inclusion of the textiles in the tomb of St. Cuthbert leaves a range of questions open which concern the position of the dowager queen in the tenth century. Friðestan came into office in 909, and the deposed Queen Ælfflæd may have tried to forge ties with this bishop to secure her position as the future king's mother. Coatsworth writes that the manufacture of the pieces would have taken well over eight months,\textsuperscript{82} which leaves a fairly small window for the dating, since the queen was deposed in 917 or 918. She may have tried to use these items to continue her relations with the bishop even after being put aside, but no longer than AD 924 when her stepson ascended to the throne.

I have always wondered why Athelstan chose to include these items into the coffin of St. Cuthbert—a saint whom he clearly venerated. Athelstan is known as a great benefactor of religious institutions, and yet his bequests were made with purpose. The king was no stranger to using his female kin to suit his own political ambitions. More than any other king in early medieval England Athelstan made use of his existing family relations by marrying his half-sisters (by Ælfflæd) into every significant royal house in Western Europe in an attempt to safeguard alliances.\textsuperscript{83} Given the prestige of embroidered textiles we may consider that the king, who fought in a brutal campaign against the Scots in 934, may have wished for spiritual assistance from northern saints. However, why present the saint with a set of secondhand clothes, albeit very costly ones? Would the monetary value of these items supersede the value of intercession from a now deposed bishop? We know very little about Athelstan's relationship with Ælfflæd, but was he really intending, as Gale Owen-Crocker suggests, to place the queen close to one of England's premier saints by proxy of the textiles?\textsuperscript{84} The king grew up in the household of his aunt Æðelflæd, Lady of the Mercians, and he was thus no stranger to influential women. It is quite possible that

\textsuperscript{81} "Embroidery and its Early Medieval Audience," 308.
\textsuperscript{82} "Embroideries from the Tomb of St Cuthbert," 296.
\textsuperscript{83} Sheila Sharp writes: "Of the countries facing the eastern seaboard of England, the central three—Germany, Flanders and Francia—were all joined to England by marriage in a flurry of dynastic bridal activity unequalled again until Queen Victoria's time." "England, Europe and the Celtic World: King Athelstan’s foreign policy," \textit{Bulletin of the John Rylands Library} 79 (1997): 197–220, at 198.
by AD 934 Ælfflæd had died and that this deposition was undertaken on behest of the queen, or part of a late reconciliation.

Stitching Histories

There is a further group of embroidered narratives that is an interesting window into women’s participation in the production of text and historiography. While gold embroideries were most likely produced to adorn the vestments of clerics and the elites and embroideries were made to adorn churches, tapestries are a form of narrated history, often commemorating important events. Wall-hangings, such as the one bequeathed by Wulfwaru to St. Peter’s in Bath, did not just add “considerable cheerfulness,” they are texts in their own right. They narrate the deeds of their (male) kin and they establish relationships to saints. A famous example is the embroidered or woven hanging that Ælfflæd, widow of Byrhtnoth of the “Battle of Maldon” fame, bequeathed to the monastery at Ely. Liber Eliensis narrates that this hanging depicted her husband’s deeds. Tapestries may have once adorned every nobleman’s hall, but in this case the donation of the tapestry was connected to a large donation of land, as well as a golden torque. This gift was clearly meant to elevate both her husband’s standing (who was already a patron of Ely), as well as her own, and ensured that his deeds, whether on the battlefield or as a benefactor, were remembered by the laity and clergy. In this sense the tapestry is as much a “text” as any other biographical writing. Sadly the object has not survived, unlike the poem of “The Battle of Maldon,” since would be interesting to compare the two texts. What is clear is that Ælfflæd used this donation to continue the memory of her husband, and with it her own.

We do not know how many tapestries depicting secular events were made in early medieval England, but we should consider that tapestries were used as a form of historical document. Our best-known surviving narrative examples is the Bayeux Tapestry, an embroidery which retells the events around 1066 in two media: image and Latin text. Such mixed narratives of text and image are not unusual in manuscripts, for example in the Old English Hexateuch, a mid-eleventh century manuscript which also

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86 Fell, Anglo-Saxon Women, 47.
contains Ælfric’s preface to Æthelweard, or Cotton Junius 11, a tenth-century manuscript with biblical poems. Unlike in manuscripts, the language in the embroideries, including the Bayeux Tapestry, is always Latin. While the choice of language does not necessarily mean that the female embroiderers were Latinate,89 it is to be assumed that they at least understood what they stitched, as the close correlation between the images and texts shows. Further evidence that the female embroiderer knew about different text types can be derived from the choice of stitches they made to perform their task. The letters, as Coatsworth has pointed out, are made in stem, split, and chain stitch, allowing for small stitches which produce a continuous line that works well for lettering. She states that the letters on the embroidery are majuscules, but are not like sections in manuscript texts, rather they resemble inscriptions on metalwork and sculpture.90 It is quite possible that these media not only share common features, but that they also actively emulate them. Stone crosses, such as Bewcastle, Cumbria, have patterns not unlike “tabby” weaves (a weave where the warp is alternately laid over and under the weft threads), and others, such as Ireton, Cumbria, have decorated borders—not unlike the borders in embroidered textiles.91

The Bayeux Tapestry arguably remains the most studied textile from early medieval England, and there have been plenty of debates about its origin. Most scholars accept that it was commissioned by the new Norman overlords, possibly Bishop Odo, half-brother to William the Conqueror sometime around 1068 CE, but that it was made in England, since the figures resemble those of eleventh-century manuscript illuminations from southern England.92 Readings of the Tapestry have veered between propaganda and subtle subversion, but the dating of it is interesting as well: it falls into a period that is either before or during what has been named “The Harrying of the North,” a savage campaign to quell the rebellion of northern areas against the new Norman overlords who retaliated with utmost brutality by killing and destruction of crops which led to a devastating famine. The Tapestry—which in its final, now lost section, shows the Conquest and coronation of William—may have been seen as a suitable piece of propaganda, made by complicit or forced English women.93

89  See note 6 above.
90  Coatsworth, “Inscriptions,” 90.
91  Betty Coatsworth, pers. comm. The sculptures are, of course, earlier than the Tapestry, but there seems to be a similarity which continues in various media.
93  William’s wife, Mathilda was herself a commissioner and maker of embroideries; Schulenburg, “Holy Women,” 99.
Whoever made the Tapestry had a good understanding of how texts are structured, since it is not dissimilar to those of manuscript illuminations from the eleventh century, such as the *Illustrated Hexateuch*: the text and the illustration form independent narratives, given depth to the central story. Gestures and signs in the illustrations provide the syntax, whereas the ornamentation gives the images semantic depth. What it shows is that both illustrator and embroiderer have to be literate in the two media: text and image. They may not have been made together and they may have been designed at different points. The designer of the Tapestry was clearly Latinate and was intimately familiar with the events leading up to the Norman Conquest. The examples cited here allow us to see glimpses of possible female literacy, and not just of religious women, but also of aristocratic lay women who often commissioned and potentially also made these items.

**Conclusion**

While the gender of the designer(s) of the Bayeux Tapestry may never be known, the fact that women such as Alpheidis and Ælflæd named themselves on other textiles should indicate that textiles were seen as suitable media for expression and networking on their own accord. The evidence from letters, inventories of precious textiles which were subsequently lost, and text sources that show queens and noblewomen creating and commissioning precious items all show the importance of textiles as currencies of a female economy. These objects afforded women agency and power. For this reason alone, the study of textiles deserves to take center stage in a feminist renaissance.

Women created texts in textile. Many of these are now lost, but the small surviving corpus is an important addition to the study of what we know about women in early medieval England: these objects can tell us about the levels of knowledge of biblical and exegetical understanding by the choices made, to the saints they endowed and the religious figures they chose to give prominence to. They can tell us about literacy and networks of power. Textiles give us an indication of the materials available to women, among which are silks from the Far East and Byzantium, gold, and gems. Inventories and wills show that these precious items were a currency in themselves; just as

95 These items may have contained woven images and offered glimpses of places geographically far removed from the world of the woman who was using them.
kings used rings and land to cement friendship, women used textiles to create their own bonds—bonds of intercession, of political alliance and friendship with high-ranking men, and (we should also assume) other women.

While some of the techniques of these objects have been studied, there remains a need to examine other aspects of textiles: the language, imagery and purpose, and provenance. Much of the evidence has decayed, partly because the material is more perishable than metalwork, but also because there was no Matthew Parker of embroideries. While there may have been fewer examples of embroidered texts than manuscripts in the first place, judging from inventories of the period, there still seems to have been a substantial corpus. The fact that they were not collected and cared for in the same way as manuscripts is significant and related to the perception that these items, manufactured and commissioned by women, were not as important as parchments. It would be interesting to have at least part of the embroideries of Queen Emma, wife of two kings, Æthelræd and Cnut, and commissioner of her own legacy in the Encomium Emmae. She seems to have carefully chosen the altars of the saints she endowed (among which are those dedicated to Æðelthryð and Bartholomew). The marriage between Cnut and Emma was a match made in (political) heaven from which both benefitted greatly. The queen was a shrewd operator in the union and the object may give us an idea as to whether or not she chose to include aspects of Scandinavian imagery in such important gifts. Cnut needed Emma to support his reign, and the position of queen gave her opportunities to establish her own legacy. Texts and textiles cemented her reputation. She is still the only woman of her period with two portraits made in her lifetime, a feat which most of her male contemporaries could not manage.

Not all of these textiles were necessarily made by queens or royal women themselves; it is perfectly possible and likely that they oversaw the making of precious embroidery in workshops. The existence of such workshops, as for example, that of Æðelswīð and her circle of young women, indicates that monastic institutions were not just centers of manuscript production, but also centers in which other forms of memory-creation were made. From their workshops came important gifts which created and cemented relations between rulers and religious, between secular and ecclesiastic power, and

96 Schulenburg, “Holy Women,” 98. Karkov suggests that Emma supported Ely because it was also the burial place of the murdered ætheling Alfred, who is presented as a “saint-in-the making” in the Encomium. It allowed the Queen to be the mother of a martyred son, and compare herself with Mary, mother of Christ; “Emma: Image ad Ideology,” 516.
97 Fairweather, Liber Eliensis, 88.
between the living and the dead. The surviving items also demonstrate that those who made them were literate in script and scripture. There is a need to include the relationship between this medium and other forms of text, including art in any discussion of the culture of early medieval England.

In this essay I have argued that the reason why so much of the textile evidence has been neglected is partly because it has fallen foul of modern gender associations with an implication of domesticity, fatuity, and infringement that has been attached to embroidery in the centuries after the Conquest. The significance of such objects in the gift economy, but also, as has been shown, in the innovation of design and assumption of techniques from far outside early medieval England, has been grasped by only a few. While textile work was a woman's domain, perhaps stringent ideas about biological sex and the gendering of such labor are red herrings. The idea that some men were involved in the making of precious garments is a tantalizing suggestion that instead of seeing such items through the lens of sex, they should be seen through a lens of power: commissioned by women and men who had the means to do so, made by women and perhaps men, who had the intellectual training to create complex and multifaceted narratives in this medium. Embroidered textiles distort some of the binaries we have about women in the period: they demonstrate the role of royal and religious women as partners in the propagation of cults and the narration of history and act as important links between memory of their kin and spiritual aid.

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